

# RETURNING TO WORK AFTER COVID-19

As state regulations and shelter-in-place guidelines are changing, many companies and organizations are returning employees to the workplace. For some people this might be a relief and for others this might be anxiety provoking. Below are some ways you can manage different emotions during this transition.

**It is normal to have a wide range of emotions during a transition.** Every adjustment in life can provoke emotions. Adjustments require us to transition to a new normal. It is not uncommon to experience a sense of uncertainty, which can lead to anxiety. Sometimes adjustments bring a sense of excitement and a sense of anxiety at the same time. Our feelings about change are not always consistent and that is ok. The key is to find ways of managing our feelings as they happen.

**Focus on what you can control.** There are some things we are not in control of and cannot change. This alone can create a sense of anxiety. When we experience a lack of control in an area of our life, we can be hyper focused on this area and forget about other parts of our life that we can still control. As you transition back to work focus on things you can control, like what precautions you take. Washing hands regularly, cleaning high-touch areas, wearing a face mask, maintaining distance from others when possible, and staying home when not feeling well are examples of areas you have some control over.

**Seek out information on workplace policies and procedures.** When feeling anxious or fearful about returning to work, it can be helpful to review safety procedures in place and expectations for the workplace. Talk to your supervisor or Human Resources about any questions or concerns you may have, particularly around safety.

**Take your breaks.** Taking breaks during the day is helpful in coping with stress and anxiety. Skipping breaks or lunch might not seem like a big deal; however, this is time where you can think about other things besides work and regroup. If you can, move away from your workstation and go outside for some fresh air. Designate your break(s) as 'me time.'

**Move in some way each day.** Whether it is walking, running, cycling, or yoga, exercise is helpful in reducing anxiety. Develop a daily routine you can manage and stick to. Research shows that exercise can be extremely beneficial in managing and lowering anxiety. Exercise can help calm our thoughts and allow us to control the way we think about stressful situations.


**Get a good night's sleep.** Lack of sleep can increase anxiety making it difficult to fall and stay asleep. Develop a nightly routine that encourages calmness. Reading a book, listening to music, and meditation are ways to encourage better sleep. You can find different meditations online and other applications. It can be helpful to not watch the news or use your devices for 1-2 hours prior to bed to help you transition into restful sleep. Find a routine that works for you.

**Breathe.** When anxiety arises, it can increase your heart rate as well as blood pressure and suppress the immune system. By practicing intentional breathing, you can calm the central nervous system. When your body is calm, it's easier to get back into logical thinking. One breathing exercise you can do daily is called abdominal breathing. You

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can do this standing, sitting, or lying down. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. You can keep your eyes open or closed and imagine your abdomen is like a balloon. As you inhale, feel the hand on your abdomen rise and feel your abdomen expand. You can really exaggerate the movement by pushing your abdomen out as you inhale. Feel your chest rise and notice that the hand on your chest also raises. Now slowly, and with control, exhale. Focus on your abdomen contracting and noticing your chest releasing and lowering. Continue to practice this flow of breathing a few times until you feel your body relax.

**Practice Gratitude.** Keep a notepad next to your coffee maker or your toothbrush or bedside. Every day create a list of 3-5 things for which you are grateful. You might decide to review your lists at the end of each week to see that there really is still a lot of good in our lives despite our difficult circumstances. Research shows keeping a list like this for 30 days can reduce anxiety and increase feelings of positivity.

**Mindfulness.** Whenever we experience anxiety it can be helpful to bring yourself out of thought and into this very moment. Being aware of what is present in this very moment is called mindfulness. One quick exercise you can do engages all five senses. Identify 5 things you can see right now. Identify 4 things you can feel. It could be the pressure of the floor on your feet, temperature on your skin, etc. Now identify 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste (like putting a piece of gum in your mouth or taking a sip of water).

**Talk to people you trust.** It can be helpful to talk to friends, family, or even co-workers about the way you are feeling. Often, we think we are going through unique emotional challenges and we don't realize that others we know are going through very similar experiences. Openly talking about your feelings often reduces the intensity of those emotions.

**Self-compassion.** Be patient with yourself. Again, it is normal to have different emotions during this transition. When we judge our emotions or resist them, they usually intensify. Try accepting the emotion despite how uncomfortable it is. The feeling will pass; feelings always pass.

**Know when to ask for help.** Sometimes we benefit from talking to a professional. Signs that indicate it could be time to seek professional help include difficulty focusing, easily irritable or reactive, difficulty getting quality sleep, or others have noticed changes in your functioning or emotional state. You can speak with a counselor 24/7 by calling the EAP, in addition individual counseling sessions are available by telephone or by video-enabled technology.

## Sources

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