

## Tip Sheet - Supporting a mentally healthy transition back to work after COVID-19

After a period of working remotely, many people will be soon be returning to traditional workplaces and there are likely to be varying reactions. Some may be looking forward to the prospect or reconnecting with friends and colleagues. Many will be faced with stress and anxiety. Job losses, fluid family dynamics, and of course, the potential reappearance of the virus, will all contribute to mixed feelings about returning.

It is important that employers and people leaders recognise the range of emotions that people will be feeling as they return to a more traditional way of working after this period of significant disruption. Central to a supportive transition back to traditional work environment is keeping employee health, safety and wellbeing should be front and centre of mind.

Workplaces have a duty of care to ensure risks are controlled and that workplaces are safe from a physical and psychological perspective. This means just as under normal working conditions, identifying and assessing risks should be a starting point followed by implementation of an action plan to control or minimise these risks.

Whilst much of the focus has been on keeping employees physically safe, it is important to consider the psychological safety of staff as we plan for a return to work. From a workplace mental health perspective, it is important to understand some of the factors that may be causing staff to feel anxious or stressed around returning to work. These may include:

- Concern about the risk of being exposed to the virus at work or travelling to and from work
- Taking care of personal and family needs while working
- Managing a different workload and prioritising catchup activity if some tasks could not be completed through COVID isolation
- Uncertainty about the future of the workplace and/or employment
- Adapting to a different workspace, structure or work schedule

Individual differences may mean that some workers are more susceptible to harm from the hazard, for example a worker with a disability or illness, or those with additional non-work responsibilities. Recognising and responding to differences in individual responses assists in meeting employer's responsibility to minimise exposure to work-related hazards.

Below is a list of some ways to support a mentally healthy transition as we all prepare to back to traditional workplaces.

1. **Acknowledge how people may be feeling.** Employees have been through significant change and disruption already, and many will have invested mentally and emotionally in adapting to the current situation. Adding another change, even a positive one, can be exhausting.
2. **Recognise that every situation is different.** Many aspects of our lives have changed due to COVID -19: employees may be dealing with family or financial issues that impact their ability to cope with uncertainty and change. Some may have health conditions that heighten concerns with returning to work. Recognise this and offer support through your EAP and resources available from organisations like SuperFriend.
3. **Involve employees in decision-making.** Where possible, involved employees in the decision around timing of return to work and frequency. Employee awareness of, and involvement in, decision making is not only a legal requirement under workplace health and safety legislation. Research shows that consultation is more likely to assist workplaces in dealing with change and reducing resistance.
4. **Communicate early and often.** Give plenty of notice and allow people time to plan. If faced with the 'goldilocks dilemma' (too much, too little, or just right?), err on the side of over-communicating the steps leading up to physical return to work.
5. **Be flexible.** A phased and flexible return to work, with clear milestones mapped out in advance, is likely to get the best out of each individual. Some will want to come racing back to work, others will take longer. If the workplace can accommodate it, a flexible and gradual return supports better return-to-work outcomes.
6. **Take the wins.** Some individuals and workplaces have reported increased productivity through this period of remote working. Every role is different, but it may be that improved flexibility – where it leads to greater productivity and improved workplace wellbeing – becomes the 'new normal'. Give teams the opportunity to reflect on the experience and learn from it, while emphasizing both the positives from remote work and the potential for improved social connection from the workplace.

## Supporting Resources

[Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace: Supporting Employee Success: A Tool to Plan Accommodations](#)