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Introduction

Returning to the workplace after working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic may impact people differently. Some workers may look forward to returning to the workplace, while others may feel stressed or experience '[return anxiety](#)'.

Preparing for a healthy and safe return to the workplace can help reduce anxiety and stress and prevent a loss of productivity. Employers who are flexible and understanding can help ease the transition.

This tip sheet is for employers who are preparing to return to the workplace. It may also be helpful for workers, health and safety committee members or representatives, and mental health first aid team members.

Recognizing Psychological Hazards

Employers must take all reasonable precautions to protect the health and safety of their workers, including their mental health and well being.

Return anxiety can be caused or made worse by a combination of [psychological hazards](#).

By identifying psychological hazards, employers can act to control the risk to mental health when planning a return to the workplace.

Key Psychological Hazards

Psychological hazards can exist due to significant external stressors (such as a global pandemic), as well as when key [organizational factors](#) are lacking or dysfunctional.

Key psychological hazards to look for include:

- **Response to the COVID-19 pandemic:**

Fear of becoming ill, questions about public health and workplace control measures, frequent changes as the pandemic evolves, lockdown fatigue, and personal factors.

- **Poor communication:**

Lack of leadership, inadequate training, no feedback or responses, unclear task instructions, and frequent misunderstandings.

- **Management of policies and role:**

Inappropriate and unfair decisions around work policies and rules, lack of opportunities for training or professional growth, uncertainty about the individual's role, little or no participation in decision making, and inadequate pay for the work being done.

- **Pace of work:**

Too fast to safely keep up, rushing or skipping steps, and chaotic urgency.



- **Working alone:**

Concerns about communication methods, and fear for safety.

- **Social isolation:**

Being excluded, minimal socialization, and dysfunctional team interactions.

- **Work environment:**

Interruptions, poor ergonomic set up, indoor air quality, noise, temperature conditions, etc.

- **Conflicting demands:**

Too many or constantly changing priorities or reporting to more than one manager.

- **Hours of work:**

Frequent overtime (paid or unpaid), working through breaks or on the weekend, scheduling issues, and not getting enough rest hours between shifts.

- **Conflict with others:**

Bullying and harassment, violence, and verbal disagreements.

- **Workload:**

Too many tasks to complete in the time allowed, or not enough engaging work to remain mentally stimulated.

Effects of Psychological Hazards

The potential effects of psychological hazards can be physical, mental, emotional, and financial. Employers can watch for signs at both the workplace and individual level.

Workplace

- Increased staff turnover
- Loss of productivity
- Increased costs
- Unhealthy workplace culture
- Worker and union grievances
- Increased rate of incidents and injuries

Individual

- Stress and anxiety
- Depression
- Loneliness
- Fatigue and burnout
- Headaches and musculoskeletal pain
- Irritability, anger, and crying
- Memory issues
- Presenteeism and absenteeism
- Withdrawing
- Verbal complaints

Individual Responses

When preparing a return to the workplace plan, anticipate that the transition may be easier for some individuals than others. People may respond differently during the return to the workplace due to personal factors.

Addressing Return Anxiety



Some may experience **relief** returning because they:

- Feel alone or isolated when working remotely.
- Feel less productive or have difficulties focusing on work duties.
- Face increased physical or mental abuse at home.
- Have difficulties with virtual communications, such as a slow or intermittent home internet connection, or being uncomfortable with digital-only communications.
- Require access to workplace equipment such as photocopiers and printers.
- Miss in-person interactions.
- Miss their dedicated, ergonomic workspaces.

Others may experience heightened **anxiety** or **dread** about returning because they:

- Are afraid of interacting with others, including people who may not be vaccinated or are not respecting public health measures.
- Are ineligible for the COVID-19 vaccine due to a valid exemption.
- Are afraid of bringing COVID-19 home to others.
- Have underlying health conditions that could lead to severe outcomes if infected with COVID-19.
- Believe their lifestyles are more compatible with remote work.
- Feel more productive and less stressed while working remotely.
- Have social anxiety.
- Use public transit to get to work and are concerned about interactions with others.

Ways to Address Return Anxiety

Return anxiety can be addressed before, during, and after the return-to-work transition.

After identifying workplace psychological hazards and anticipating individuals' responses, employers can act to control the risk to mental health when planning a return to the workplace.

There are **several ways** employers can address return anxiety, and foster a psychologically healthy and safe workplace:

Identify, monitor, and control workplace stressors

During the return-to-work planning stages, perform an assessment of the workplace to identify potential psychological hazards.

Consider establishing a "return to the workplace" or COVID-19 safety committee to help with this assessment. The assessment team should include a health and safety committee member or representative.

Address as many hazards as possible before the transition period begins.

Once the transition has begun, monitor for the effects of psychological hazards and return anxiety.

Workplace inspection walk-throughs are often used to identify physical hazards and unsafe acts that may cause harm; however, psychological health and safety hazards may be more difficult to recognize.

Some hazards may not become obvious until after people return to work. If workers begin to report excessive stress or anxiety, consider pausing or modifying the planned return schedule, or use the other support tools presented in this tip sheet.

Continue to monitor and review the psychological health of the workplace. Evaluate if the return-to-work plan was successful, and act to resolve any new problems or concerns as they arise.

Seek feedback

Seek feedback before, during, and after the return-to-work transition. Ask for input from workers about their fears and concerns related to their return. Include this feedback within the return-to-work plan and consider all options to ease the transition.

Continue to evaluate how well the transition is going. Ask workers about the process to determine what is working and what is not.



Some workers may fear stigma or be uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics with their manager. Provide anonymous feedback options such as a suggestion box, online survey, or speaking with health and safety committee or union representatives.

Use aggregate data from Employee Assistance Program (EAP) service provider reports to see if staff are reaching out for mental health and other supports. This information can help shape your workplace initiatives and interventions.

If workers have unaddressed fears or concerns, work together to determine possible solutions. If a solution is not possible, make sure to explain the reasons.

Communicate changes in advance

Acknowledge that public health guidance may change often as the pandemic evolves. Commit to open communication and frequent updates. Be honest with workers if you do not know the answers to their questions.

Communicate your COVID-19 safety measures before returning to the workplace. Review updated work policies and procedures and explain how each safety measure works.

Outline any disciplinary measures for those who do not follow procedures.

Provide reasonable accommodations as required.

Train and educate leaders

Provide leaders with the tools and resources to foster a psychologically safe and healthy workplace. Make sure that managers and supervisors know how to recognize psychological hazards and address return anxiety.

Consider investing in leadership training and education. Choose courses or programs that will help them support the mental health and well being of their teams. Some suggestions include [mental health first aid](#) training, or training on active listening and de-escalation techniques.

Check in with workers

Explain to managers and supervisors the importance of checking in with their team. Having frequent check-ins can increase positivity, foster trust, and boost psychological safety. These check-ins will in turn support workers' mental health and workplace well being.

Use observational, conversational, and listening skills to identify potential psychological hazards and signs of return anxiety. For example, it may be appropriate to ask workers about the stressors they experience at work. Ask specific questions about how workers are coping with the transition and how it is affecting their work-life balance.

Note and follow-up on worker concerns or complaints. Be compassionate and understand that workers may be stressed or feel anxious. Acknowledge challenges and discuss specific strategies that will help them experience a smooth transition. The process should be confidential whenever possible, and no diagnosis about a person's state of mental health should be made.

Ease back into the workplace

Moving too fast may be stressful for some workers. Plan a gradual return to the workplace to ease anxiety.

Slowly increase the time workers are required to be at the workplace so they can adjust.

Acknowledge that productivity might be reduced as workers get used to the new routine. Clarify priorities and provide guidance on which projects or tasks to focus on, and those that can be postponed. Be aware that it may take time to get comfortable working together in person again after working independently for an extended period.

Provide mental health support

Workers may seek mental health resources as they return to the workplace. Make sure workers know how to access supports, such as an [Employee Assistance Program](#). Post contact information for local and national mental health support groups, organizations, and programs.

If you have concerns that someone is experiencing a mental health crisis or domestic abuse, call 911 and/or refer to [Crisis Services Canada](#) for guidance.

Employers can also provide support by encouraging self-care and sharing resources to cope with stressors. Self-care might include exercise, reading, movies, meditation, or anything else that helps a person be well and to take care of themselves.

Promote work-life balance

Allow and encourage workers to take their breaks, work at a reasonable pace, and avoid overtime as much as possible.

Be aware of personal demands on employees such as childcare, eldercare, or family members with health issues. Discuss potential [caregiver resources](#) or solutions that can help promote work-life balance.

Addressing Return Anxiety



Provide guidance on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle outside of work and the [importance of disconnecting from work](#).

Explore alternatives

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown many employers that it is possible to maintain or improve productivity with a remote workforce. Consider asking workers about their work preferences. There may be benefit to ongoing remote work or the setting up a [hybrid workplace](#).

Resources

It is important to be compassionate and consider worker mental health when planning a return to the workplace. Learn more about addressing return anxiety and promoting a psychologically safe and healthy workplace:

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS)

- [Topics - Mental Health](#)
- [Mental Health in the Workplace \(Infographic\)](#)
- [Mental Health - Recognizing Psychological Health and Safety Hazards](#)
- [Mental Health - Psychosocial Risk Factors in the Workplace](#)
- [COVID-19 Burnout](#)
- [The Importance of Disconnecting from Work](#)
- [Returning to the Workplace After Easing of COVID-19 Restrictions](#)
- [Returning to the Workplace - Preparing Workers](#)
- [Returning to the Workplace - Hybrid Workplaces](#)
- [Return to Work During COVID-19: Addressing Return Anxiety \(e-course\)](#)

Government of Canada

- [Stop Family Violence](#)

Guarding Minds at Work

- [Documents and Resources](#)

Canadian Mental Health Association

- [Return to The Workplace: A psychological toolkit for heading back to work](#) (pdf)

Crisis Services Canada

- [Local Resources and Support](#)

Mental Health Commission of Canada

- [Mental Health First Aid \(MHFA\)](#)

Workplace Strategies for Mental Health

- [Back-to-Workplace Checklist](#)
- [Hybrid Teams](#)

Simon Fraser University - Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health & Addiction (CARMHA)

- [Psychological Health and Safety: An Action Guide for Employers](#)

Canadian Standards Association (CSA)

- CSA Z1003-13 (R2018) [Psychological health and safety in the workplace - Prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation](#)



If you or someone you know is in crisis, please contact your local hospital, call 911 immediately, or contact a [Crisis Centre in your area](#).



It is important that mental health resources and support are provided to all workers, including access to an employee assistance program, if available.

For further information on COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#).

Note that this guidance is just some of the adjustments organizations can make during a pandemic. Adapt this list by adding your own good practices and policies to meet your organization's specific needs.

For further information on respiratory infectious diseases, including COVID-19, refer to the [Public Health Agency of Canada](#).

Disclaimer: As public and occupational health and safety information may continue to change, local public health authorities should be consulted for specific, regional guidance. This information is not intended to replace medical advice or legislated health and safety obligations. Although every effort is made to ensure the accuracy, currency, and completeness of the information, CCOHS does not guarantee, warrant, represent or undertake that the information provided is correct, accurate or current. CCOHS is not liable for any loss, claim, or demand arising directly or indirectly from any use or reliance upon the information.