

Mentally Healthy Workplaces and COVID-19: Emerging Issues



Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19

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**THE MENTALLY
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Overview: returning to workplaces



The COVID-19 pandemic has placed many people under pressure, and people have responded differently. People may have mixed feelings and reactions to returning to workplaces.



Returning to the workplace represents another significant change or upheaval for many people, requiring adjustments to work and life routines. There is the potential for conflict if people feel their concerns are not heard or acted upon.



Organisations should adopt a responsive approach that recognises people are at different stages of readiness and have different needs. Practical steps such as engaging with people and providing flexibility can help with this return.

Introduction

Public health restrictions related to COVID-19 meant many workplaces had to quickly pivot to working from home arrangements. For some people this change resulted in feelings of social isolation, disrupted routines, changes in work interactions and challenges navigating new remote team environments and technologies.

As staff physically return to the usual workplace with the easing of restrictions, many people may feel “re-entry anxiety” as they navigate the return and once again face changes to their daily routines and ways of working. People may have conflicted feelings about returning to the workplace – such as optimism about social reconnection with colleagues but concern about navigating crowded public transport.

This guide is designed to help organisations to manage potential challenges employees and others returning to workplaces may face. It also helps show how this transition is one way to start towards creating, or further developing, a mentally healthy workplace.

“Most people didn’t fully reintegrate before they had to be removed from the space again. Our research in extreme environments has shown that if you don’t have the opportunity to fully reintegrate, then your vulnerability to more negative outcomes increase. This is because you haven’t developed that sense of safety, ability and, importantly, predictability.”

Professor Kimberley Norris, School of Psychological Science, University of Tasmania



“While transitioning back to the workplace will be a stressful time for many, there’s an important opportunity for managers to refresh workplace practices and culture and to increase goodwill that arises out of supporting people in a time of need.”

Dr Mary Wyatt, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician, and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM)

About the return to workplaces

The unique combination of extended periods working from home, juggling work and personal responsibilities, and the uncertainties of COVID-19 restrictions, have had various psychological and physical impacts on people. Professor Kimberley Norris of the School of Psychological Sciences at the University of Tasmania says many people experienced challenges with thinking, decision making, attention, concentration and memory during COVID-19.

Increased demands

“Essentially people’s cognitive capacity has been exceeded,” Professor Norris says. “The stress of COVID-19, weathering the impacts of mitigation strategies, anxiety about infection or transmission, the social isolation – those demands add up. That all means increased cognitive load, at the same time people have decreased cognitive capacity.”

Professor Norris is an expert who has studied re-integration following extended periods of isolation, such as when people return from space or Antarctica.

Based on this research, Professor Norris notes there is some good news. “The research consistently shows that once they’ve had a chance to process their experience, most people will report improved functioning as a result. When we are pushed beyond our previous comfort zone, we are forced to develop new ways of thinking, feeling and acting,” she says.¹⁻⁴

Balancing individual and organisation needs

In late 2021, WayAhead Workplaces, a network of individuals and organisations interested in employee health and wellbeing, produced a *Post-Lockdown Guide* to support its members with issues arising with returning to the workplace ([access it here](#)).

Stephanie Thompson, WayAhead Workplaces Lead, says one of the biggest challenges with returning to workplaces is the “completely inconsistent attitudes held by individual team members within an organisation as well as at an executive level.”



“A graduated re-entry to the physical work office is a common reasonable adjustment for people with complex mental health issues, and should be supported by organisations.”

Rachel Green, CEO of SANE Australia



“After two years of lockdowns and restrictions many of us feel socially anxious and nervous about returning to face-to-face work. In many organisations people who have been working virtually together for the past two years have never met in person, so there’s this very normal sense of nervousness and awkwardness. Fatigue and overwhelm are also common as we adjust back to being in the office environment: the commute, the small talk and the hustle and bustle of the workplace. It’s important to recognise and honour these feelings and give people time and space to adjust – just as the teaching staff would for their young students on day one of school.”

Dr Zena Burgess, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society

“Many leaders are keen to get as many people back in person in the office as possible while others acknowledge that hybrid work and choice for the employee is essential,” says Ms Thompson.

“Navigating the balance between what is best for the individuals as well as what is best for the organisation is incredibly complex especially when we have all been working remotely for two years - for the most part retaining productivity,” says Ms Thompson.

In addition, navigating new issues around COVID safety, vaccinations, mask wearing and air ventilation quality when returning to the workplace are other challenges, she says.

Impacts of isolation

Professor Norris says many people have been on an “emotional rollercoaster” throughout the pandemic. How much people’s mood fluctuates depends on factors such as their wellbeing levels before isolation, their experiences during isolation and their strategies to cope and reintegrate.

The switch to working from home meant people had to effectively re-establish their “psychological contract” – that is, their expectations of what is required of them and their relationship with the workplace, according to Professor Norris.

“With the push to return to the physical work environment we’re seeing another violation of the psychological contract, and that’s why we’re seeing a lot of pushback from people. They’re saying, ‘you can’t guarantee my safety, what’s the incentive to return?’” she says.

As a result, Professor Norris says people may commonly display irritability, hostility, defensiveness and aggression due to the combination of increased cognitive load and decreased feelings of psychological and physical safety. “We’re seeing increased risk of confrontation and conflict, particularly between the workplace and individual, because of this sense of threat and lack of psychological safety,” says Professor Norris.

In addition, many people are now returning to the usual workplace for the second or third time, which Professor Norris says has potential implications for how they adjust.

“Most people didn’t fully reintegrate before they had to be removed from the space again. Our research in extreme environments has shown that if you don’t have the opportunity to fully reintegrate, then your vulnerability to more negative outcomes increase. This is because you haven’t developed that sense of safety, ability and, importantly, predictability,” Professor Norris says.

How organisations can respond

1. Communicating and consulting

Organisations have specific legal requirements to consult workers and their representatives about changes that may impact their health and safety. Benefits of consulting your people and being transparent about potential changes also include people feeling more empowered, respected and accepting of any change. Safe Work Australia has a *Model Code of Practice on Work Health and Safety Consultation, Cooperation and Coordination* ([access it here](#)).

Recognising that people are already feeling depleted, it's important to present some options and seek feedback, rather than asking people to generate new ideas, according to Professor Norris.

2. Creating a flexible framework

Organisations cannot take a one size fits all approach to supporting the return to the workplace, according to Professor Norris.

"We must recognise that different employees will be at different stages of adaptation and therefore have different levels of readiness to engage within that workplace. It's about creating a framework that accommodates people to move both forwards and sideways in the reintegration process.

"It's about creating space where people feel their experiences are validated and responded to. We need to avoid the risk that people feel treated as a number or that there's a level of dismissiveness," she says.

"Managers will have a much higher workload around providing access to support for people. They have a responsibility to know where to direct people. And managers themselves have not been unaffected," she says.

Flexibility is important and organisations should consider their core needs and where there is room to support people who need additional space or time, according to Professor Norris.

Similarly, the WayAhead Workplaces' guide highlights the importance of flexible approaches, checking in with people regularly and encouraging people to set healthy boundaries.

Suggested actions for organisations

- **Checking legal requirements** regarding consultation with workers on transitioning back to workplaces (e.g. [see this guidance from Safe Work Australia](#)).
- **Developing a plan** for how you will manage risks and ensure compliance.
- **Supporting people** to have "check-in" conversations if they notice changes in mood or behaviour (see tips from [RU OK?](#) and [Heads up](#))
- **Aiming to resolve any conflict** between colleagues early through open and collaborative approaches.
- **Challenging inappropriate behaviour** to foster a respectful culture.
- **Exploring resources** for managers who will be supporting teams.
- **Ensuring managers are aware of support** options and resources available.
- Exploring whether the workplace has a **flexible work policy**, or an established but informal process, for managing flexible work requests.
- **Considering potential industrial relations** issues or implications.
- **Looking at sources of inspiration** (e.g. accessing the resources listed below).
- Exploring a **graduated return to the workplace** and implications for those who have been working from home.

3. Learning from others

Ms Thompson says many organisations are keen to learn from each other, with many of WayAhead Workplaces' members asking for relevant case studies, such as effective hybrid work policies. This highlights the importance of people in leadership roles connecting with peers and learning from industry bodies.

Organisations may also want to consult the companion guide in this series, *Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19* ([access it here](#)).

4. Adopting a process

When planning return, research shows that when there has been a single period of isolation it can take up to 12 months for people to fully reintegrate, according to Professor Norris.⁵⁻⁷ "We need to understand that reintegration to the workplace is a process, and we need to maintain strategies that support the process for as long as required," she says.

These strategies can include opportunities, but not mandates, to reconnect, such as morning teas and lunches. These strategies should be repeated at various points to capture new people at various stages, according to Professor Norris.



Leaders – whether in formal positions or those who have influence in the workplace – play a key role in demonstrating important behaviours, such as setting achievable goals and prioritising self-care, according to Professor Norris.

Other practical actions for organisations to take include:

- encouraging people to take their leave, as this will provide an opportunity to process their experiences during COVID-19,
- supplementing meetings and conversations with written notes to help reduce the memory load on people.

Preparing the workplace

In addition to supporting people, organisations will need to ensure the usual workplace is equipped for people's return. This includes considerations for:

- **health and safety** – e.g. ensure compliance with laws, establish protocols and environmental safety (see [Safe Work Australia](#)).
- **types of work** – e.g. identify jobs that require in-person contact and those that can be re-integrated gradually.
- **equipment and technology** – e.g. ensure people have the necessary equipment back in the workplace, and whether new supports are needed if flexible or hybrid work will be the new normal.
- **workspaces** – e.g. consider ways to support physical distancing at the workplace (e.g. changes to workstations, meeting room capacity).
- **policies and procedures** – e.g. reviewing and adapting where needed.

Where organisations can get support



[Way Ahead Workplaces, Post Lockdown Workplace Guide](#)

[University of Tasmania, The path back from social isolation: a guide by Associate Professor Kimberley Norris](#)

[Comcare, Transitioning to usual workplaces as restrictions ease](#)

[Comcare, COVID-19 – Navigating a new normal \(webinar\)](#)

[Beyond Blue, Strategies for transitioning back into the workplace after Coronavirus](#)

[Safe Work Australia, National guide for safe workplaces – COVID-19](#)

[Safe Work Australia, Managing health and safety](#)

[Safe Work Australia, Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination Code of Practice](#)

[Australian Unions, COVID-aware workplaces](#)

[Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Find a consultant](#)

[SANE Australia, Mental illness & the workplace](#)

[Centre for Work Health and Safety, A best practice guide for flexible and work-from-home arrangements](#)

[Centre for Work + Wellbeing, Enhancing Workplace Mental Health During and Post-Covid-19](#)

[Diversity Council Australia, Future-Flex](#)

[Family Friendly Workplaces](#)

[NSW Public Service Commission, Flexible working](#)

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About this guide

This guide is part of the *Mentally Healthy Workplaces during COVID-19: Emerging Issues* series, created by the National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

The series explores key issues workplaces are facing due to the challenges created by COVID-19. Each guide provides a summary of the issue, expert guidance on actions organisations can take and links to further resources.

This guide has been developed in association with:

- **Professor Kimberley Norris**, School of Psychological Science, the University of Tasmania
- **Stephanie Thompson**, WayAhead Workplaces Lead, WayAhead – Mental Health Association NSW

Read more

- The guides in this series include:
 - Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19
 - Strategies to support wellbeing of decision makers through periods of sustained pressure
 - Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19
 - The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep
 - Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19
 - Responding to COVID-19 concerns in the workplace
 - Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to download the series.



National Workplace Initiative

- The National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance are developing the National Workplace Initiative to create a national approach to mentally healthy workplaces.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to learn more about the National Workplace Initiative.

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