

## Going Back to Work after COVID

### How to ease yourself out of lockdown

After months of staying inside and working from home it is natural to feel nervous about going back into the workplace. You may be feeling anxious about facing other people in a social/work context after only having interacted through a screen for so long. Maybe you are fearful of 'contamination' on your ride into work or in the public office spaces.

As lockdown slowly eases some will look forward to chatting with work colleagues, getting on a train, or sitting in a coffee shop. However, others will experience anxiety at the thought of resuming these 'normal' activities.

It is natural to feel anxious. Maybe isolation was hard going, but emerging from isolation has its challenges too.

People talk about a grand return to 'normal' after lockdown but nothing is waiting for you exactly as you left it; and that's OK. Things change. People and workplaces adapt, the new 'normal' may even be better than before. We must remember that we cannot predict what it will be like, we can only be prepared by using these techniques.

#### Facing 'real' people again

- Take the first step and ask your work colleagues, "how was lockdown for you?" There will be many different answers; some will have struggled with juggling work and home-schooling, some will have been isolated and lonely, whereas others will have enjoyed daily walks and home improvement projects when not in front of their laptops for work.
- You will show empathy listening to their replies, and they will try to do the same when you explain that for you returning to the office is also a bit daunting.

By focusing on others' experience first you will take the spotlight off you and reduce feelings of self-consciousness. Use the mindfulness apps and breathing technique (mentioned below) to stay calm.

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**1300 130 130 (AU)**

#### Stay Positive and Balanced

Wherever possible maintain the self-care routines that were helpful at home during lockdown and install some new ones.

- Resist the temptation to work frenetically to 'catch up' on outstanding tasks or meetings. The work/leisure balance is as important as ever in these times when routines have repeatedly been disrupted by physical distancing, home-working and gradual re-entry.
- Now that the office is back, don't lose sight of how important it is to socialize with friends and family.
- Take daily exercise – a walk before or after work or a stroll at lunchtime.
- Practice mindfulness using apps such as 'Calm' or 'Headspace'. (Just 10 minutes a day is all you need)
- Organise your time so that you can still do a little bit of the things you love; baking, reading, puzzles, Lego, gardening, knitting (the list is endless) – Any kind of activity where you're fully absorbed, you don't see the time fly by and you have a sense of accomplishment at the end of it.
- Remember your lockdown experience and reflect on what made you feel good and calm. Learn from it and preserve the 'better', balanced you.



#### 'Reasonable' fears about catching COVID-19

The government is sending us back to work because it deems the risks of infection to be very low. Compared to many other Western countries Australia has dealt very well with this pandemic. Lockdown was strict and swift, people were generally very happy to stick to the rules.

Your employer will be responsible about thorough, regular cleaning of the office space and physical distancing of employees.

You, and your colleagues, will be sensible about hand washing and respectful of other people's safety.



### How to combat feelings of panic and anxiety

- ‘Catastrophising’ means that you are jumping straight to the worst-case scenario. Counter these thoughts with the ‘reasonable’ arguments, mentioned above, about why the government is asking us to go back to work now.
- Counter negative thoughts through positive self-talk; I *can* get through this, I *have* adapted and I *am* resilient.
- To help calm your racing thoughts practise deep ‘ujayi’ breathing
- Explain to your work colleagues why you are anxious about hygiene (even if you are having to tell a little white lie). For instance, you could say “I know you think it’s weird me using up so much sanitizer around my workspace, but I’m worried about taking germs back to my elderly parents”. It is important to signal to your colleagues about your anxieties so that they do not have to second guess. Most importantly, do not try to hide your anxieties as this will only make them worse.
- Remember, it is ok to not be ok. Be bravely honest about your anxieties and this way other people have a chance to show you respect and compassion, rather than inadvertently distressing you.
- If some work colleagues are not taking the reasonable, prescribed precautions, then this is something for you to quietly bring to the attention of your supervisor.

### It is okay to not be OKAY

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting everyone differently. Many people have not dealt with this level of stress before. If you are not feeling ok (and that is ok!), speak to your GP or ask for some counselling sessions through your EAP provider.

### Social Distancing vs. Physical Distancing

It was only in the mid-2000s that the phrase “social distancing” was adopted for pandemic measures, but the term is potentially alienating: we are not actually advised to distance our social selves, only our bodies. So perhaps we should use the clearer alternative preferred by, among others, the Irish government: “physical distancing”.

### How to practise Ujayi Breath

‘Ujayi’ means ‘Victory’ – “ujayi breath for victory over worry and wandering mind”.

To practise ujjayi breath; breath in deeply, hold for 3 beats, then have a long, slow outbreath. Repeat for a few minutes. This will calm the heart rate and, by focusing on the breath, divert awareness away from racing negative thoughts.



**To arrange an appointment today  
please call us on**

**1300 130 130 (AU)**

**+61 444 563 823**

**0800 SELFHELP (NZ)**

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**If you need advice on helping employees on the transition back to the workplace, please reach out to EAP.**