

Coping With COVID-19 Re-entry

Returning To The Office Or Going Out In Public After Lockdown

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to progress, stay-at-home orders and restrictions are being relaxed in some locations. As a result, some staff who have been working remotely are beginning to return to their physical offices, and (in some places) people are cautiously beginning to resume some of their pre-pandemic activities and routines.

Even so, in most places around the world, things are very far from “going back to normal.” Since the pandemic hit, expectations about how we should behave at work and in public have changed significantly. Even if you are feeling ready (more than ready!) to emerge from lockdown or return to a workplace, leaving the sanctuary of home and going back out into public spaces is likely to feel strange and stir up some anxiety.

For most of us, life outside our homes feels different now in ways that are impossible to ignore, and we are faced with a lot of cues that the world is not as safe as we want it to be right now. This is a season of re-entry—many of us are trying to negotiate emerging from stay-at-home orders, judge what parts of our normal life routine we can and want to resume and return to a shared workplace. And, just like the reverse culture shock that we often experience when we return “home” after living abroad for a period, it can feel unexpectedly stressful and confusing.

As such, it can be helpful to know a bit about what sorts of feelings and reactions we and others may be experiencing during this “COVID-19 re-entry” phase, and what we can do to help ourselves and others cope.

Common “COVID-19 re-entry” reactions

Here are some common feelings and reactions you may experience during this season:

- **Extra cautious, vigilant, and anxious:** You may feel more cautious and conscientious of what you are doing to protect your own health and safety, and that of others. You may also feel more threatened and anxious at the thought or experience of being close to other people.
- **Constrained and awkward:** You may be used to greeting others physically (with a hug, kiss on the cheek, pat on the arm, or handshake). However, wisdom currently dictates that we do not even stand close enough to touch each other. Many other things may feel different, too. You may feel restricted and constrained by guidelines around physical distancing, wearing masks, and other practices. You may also feel resentful and annoyed by those constraints.
- **Overloaded, distractible, and forgetful:** When we are in threat-response mode, we have less capacity to pay attention to normal tasks. While you are adjusting to being back in a shared workspace or moving around the community, you may find it difficult to concentrate and focus as you normally would. You may also find yourself feeling overloaded or “maxed out” quicker than normal.

- **Confused:** We normally convey a large amount of information to each other nonverbally—particularly through our facial expressions. As most of the muscles we use to convey these emotions and gestures in our face reside below the eyes, wearing masks can partially erase an important avenue of silent communication. You may find yourself looking more intently at a coworker’s eyes to gauge a reaction for non-verbal cues, as that will be the only part of the face left exposed to read. And while the muscles around the eyes can certainly convey a lot of emotion, we usually rely on that partial expression coupled with the rest of the face to complete our interpretation of a facial gesture. Losing this non-verbal cueing system or having it diminished significantly may feel jarring, unnerving, and confusing. It may make it difficult for you to “say” what you normally express through your facial gestures. Likewise, it may make it difficult for you to understand somebody else’s expression or meaning. Misunderstandings are likely to become more common.
- **Reactive and irritable:** When we are feeling unsettled, stressed, and anxious, we become more reactive. In practice, this often means we become more irritable in the face of challenges, constraints, and misunderstandings more quickly.
- **Sadness and a sense of loss:** Sadness and a sense of loss are to be expected during this season. It is very natural to miss human contact as we know it and to grieve the loss of our “normal routines.” For those who are affectionate, gregarious, or naturally inclined towards social touching, some of the new restrictions and guidelines will be especially hard.

What can help you cope?

Having a healthy perspective and realistic expectations (of situations and ourselves) is critical when it comes to coping well. Here are some things we can **expect** and **remember** that foster this sort of helpful perspective:

- **Expect things to look and feel different:** It sounds obvious but reminding ourselves that things *are* going to look and feel different is important. A lot of frustration and anxiety arises in that gap between how we *expect* things to be and how they actually *are*. We cannot ever completely erase that gap when we are moving into the unknown (like emerging from stay-at-home restrictions during an ongoing global pandemic). However, that gap is going to be smaller if we remind ourselves that things are going to look and feel different.
- **Expect to see anxiety at work in yourself and others:** Along these same lines, expect to feel unsettled and anxious, and expect that to show up in behavior (yours and others’). If we *expect* to see an uptick in distractibility, irritability, impatience and reactivity, we will not be caught by surprise when we notice colleagues (or ourselves) having reactions that seem disproportionate to the situation, or seeming more irritable and less friendly. And if we predict and assume we are facing coworkers who are feeling stressed and vulnerable (rather than coworkers who are shirking their work or trying to make our lives difficult), we will have more understanding, empathy, compassion and patience in challenging moments.
- **Remember that some of the current restrictions will be temporary:** During times like these, it can be easy to focus only on the hassle and discomfort of a more controlled lifestyle. However, remember that this period of hypervigilance and restriction is necessary but *temporary*. The

painstaking efforts that we make now to maintain distance from each other, don masks, and stagger work schedules will help us to move through the pandemic as safely as possible. By taking these sorts of actions, we are helping to keep patient loads at local hospitals more manageable, our doctors and nurses more sane, and our communities safer.

- **Remember that we will adapt:** We will adapt fairly quickly to the new public normal. For example, during the very first days out or back at the office, it may be jarring to see so many people with half of their face covered by masks. However, you will likely get accustomed to it, just as many of us have become accustomed to seeing people wear masks in the community.
- **Remember that misunderstandings will become more common:** Especially during this time when most of us will already be feeling stressed and many people are wearing masks, misunderstandings will become more common. To help address this, work hard to communicate clearly, and ask questions and repeat things back to others to help clarify and make sure you understand their meaning.
- **Remember that the anxiety will ease:** Remember that the anxiety you are feeling about going out in public, going back to the office etc., will almost certainly ease in time (and that if the anxiety does not go away, support is available.)

Things you can do

Here are some additional things you can do to help yourself cope during this season:

- **Channel anxiety into action and focus on what you can control:** It will help to focus on what is under your control. Doing things like identifying sensible risk-management precautions and taking active steps to look after your mental health will do a lot to help you feel safer, more in control, and happier.
- **Change your “information diet” to reduce your intake of COVID-19:** Spending time reading alarming “human interest stories” of the horrors and heartbreak of COVID-19 will almost certainly increase your anxiety, not reduce it. You are unlikely to learn things that will actually help you by reading these sorts of stories, so limit your intake of this sort of information and focus instead on other things that take your mind off your fears.
- **Take a step-by-step approach:** If you can, slowly ease back into doing things you used to do. Take a step-by-step approach—doing one activity at a time, so you feel safe while slowly building up your confidence.
- **Be patient and gracious (with yourself and others):** Be patient when things feel awkward or people get too close. During this season when norms about how we act and interact have suddenly changed, there will be moments when we forget. For example, greeting habits are hard to break, and there may be instances in which we automatically move to greet someone physically, only to remember that we can no longer do that safely. Should this happen, simply back track as soon as you remember and apologize. And try your best not to feel ashamed if you forget to keep your distance or take it personally if someone backs away from you. Remember, everyone makes mistakes. Being unnecessarily hard on yourself or others will only add to the stress.

- **Compensate for missing non-verbal cues:** During this season of wearing masks, you may want to compensate for some of the missing non-verbal cues by adding more words to make sure that people understand your thoughts and intentions. For example, we will need to tap into our creativity and find different, less physical ways of saying hello and goodbye. We may rely on our words more than usual to convey how we feel about seeing someone.
- **Break down work into smaller chunks:** Especially if you are feeling distracted or overwhelmed and unsure of where to start, make a list of the work you have to do and break it down into smaller and more manageable tasks. Make clear to-do lists and use other strategies to help you focus and map out a clear pathway to tackling your work responsibilities.
- **Practice good personal stress management:** During any season when we are under extra stress, it becomes even more important that we are mindful about doing things to take care of our own wellbeing.
- **Talk to a professional:** If you feel like your anxiety is extremely high and/or not going away, try an evidence-based online program for health anxiety, seek advice from your physician, or a psychologist who specializes in anxiety.

Tips for managers

Research shows that uncertainty leads to stress and anxiety. If you are a manager, now is the time to be as transparent as possible, providing very clear information about what will be happening. Here are a couple of areas to be especially mindful of as you seek to support your staff:

- **Communicate steps that are being taken to protect health and safety:** Know what steps are being taken to protect health and safety and what new regulations are in play (e.g., around cleaning, physical distancing, masks, flow of traffic around the office space). Communicate those clearly and calmly to staff.
- **Provide clear vision and direction (and communicate about what IS changing and what IS NOT changing):** Help employees understand what the future work state (at least in the short to medium term) will look like. Tell staff that there are some anticipated changes and be very clear about what you know IS changing, and what you know IS NOT changing. Reassure staff as much as possible with regards to job security and their ability to meet future work demands and adjust to changes. Also, let staff know how you plan to continue communicating and consulting with them about any future changes.
- **Invite staff to share ideas about how to make it work well:** Staff will have different needs and desires regarding future work locations and schedules. As much as possible, consult staff about decisions that will impact them. Some organizations are conducting pulse surveys as often as once a week that are designed to check in with staff with how they are feeling and gather input.
- **Model responsible and respectful behavior:** Managers are instrumental in setting the tone during times of change and upheaval. It will be helpful for managers to follow the organizational guidelines and model responsible and respectful behavior in the workplace. Staff who do not observe

managers putting health-promoting behaviors into practice will have less motivation (and feel less able) to do so themselves.

- **Proactively check in with staff about what they are experiencing and create time to discuss adaptation to the “new normal” (both individually and in meetings):** Managers may want to create time in meetings to discuss adapting to this “new normal” at work and invite staff to share ideas about how to make the transition flow smoothly. For example, just as it was a major adjustment to shift to isolation, it will be a major adjustment to return to a shared workspace. Staff will benefit from being able to talk about these changes with each other. It can also help staff feel supported and connected if managers check in on how they are adapting during this unusual time. Here are some questions managers can ask:
 - How are you doing today?
 - What has the return to work been like for you? What have you found easy about it? What about difficult?
 - What has it been like to wear a mask?
 - Is there anything that I can do to help?

Discuss this further...

Why not discuss this further with colleagues and friends? Share this resource with them and use our companion resource *Discussion Guide On COVID-19 Re-entry* to discuss your experiences.