

EAPs Can Ease the Transition Back to Work



Across the globe, governments are wrestling with the need to balance public health concerns with the urgent need to rebuild the economy. In the U.S., some states have loosened their restrictions on business operations and social distancing. This has led to more conversations about returning to the workplace—and many reactions and opinions.

For example, many remote workers have realized that working from home is not for them, and they miss seeing their co-workers on a regular basis. They may prefer to return to the workplace before their organizations are ready for them.

At the other end of the spectrum, about 25 percent of the workforce enjoy working remotely and would like to continue doing so at least some of the time. For many, this preference is influenced by childcare, financial hardships, living situations or transportation. For people facing these challenges, their employee assistance program, or EAP, can be a valuable resource for information and referrals.

Facing fears

Still, many people are understandably concerned about returning to the workplace. Fear is a natural consequence of change, especially this sudden change, where workplaces went from “business as usual” to places where only essential workers are allowed.

This pandemic is different from a fire drill, where someone sounds the “all clear” signal and everyone returns to what they were doing. As the pandemic evolves, we’re entering a new period—a “new normal.”

Work-life challenges in the new normal

Because many questions remain about how long the virus can be transmitted and by whom, people are concerned for their safety, which exacerbates their stress and anxiety. If you find yourself worried about returning to work, it’s helpful to discuss your concerns.

For example, you may want to ask your manager about:

- **Specific plans for returning to work.** Many companies are phasing in small groups of workers at a time, bringing in the most essential first.

- **Continued social distancing practices.** Some organizations are adjusting workdays, hours or physical spaces to accommodate social distancing.
- **Enhanced cleaning and disinfections practices.** If your workplace has been unoccupied for seven or more days, it will need only need routine cleaning. The COVID-19 virus does not survive on surfaces longer than that.
- **Your unique or individual concerns.** If you or a family member is at an increased risk due to pre-existing health conditions, make your situation known. Talk with your manager or human resources department about ways to minimize your exposure. Perhaps you could continue working remotely, work in a more isolated area of the workplace or use personal protective equipment like masks and gloves.

Although employers haven't been through a pandemic either and shouldn't be expected to have all the answers, it's important they stay connected and engaged in these conversations.

Also, don't be too hard on yourself or have unrealistic expectations that everything will return to normal quickly. Even if you're looking forward to returning to the workplace, it's important to understand there are likely to be readjustments.

Understanding behaviors

When people have been quarantined, it's very common for them to show signs of detachment, isolation, hopelessness, depression or agitation. They may also have been consuming or abusing alcohol or other substances, and more likely to show increased avoidance behaviors for weeks or months afterward. These concerns are likely to be more pronounced in people who have had direct exposure to the illness or suffered additional trauma like the loss of a friend or loved one.

For those who are coping with devastating loss, their experiences are often compounded by being unable to observe traditional funeral or memorial services. If you've experienced such a loss, it may take longer to fully recover.

As more people return to the workplace, the frustration, boredom and other psychological effects of social isolation and the loss of routine will diminish. However, the stress and fear of infection are likely to escalate, dramatically for some people. They may find themselves reluctant to be around co-workers, especially those who were exposed to or had COVID-19. However, it's important to separate the person from the illness and avoid stigmatizing people.

All workers must look after their own health and safety as well as their co-workers' by wearing masks when social distancing cannot be fully observed. Remember, we are facing a common threat, and probably far more of us have already been exposed to this virus than we know.

While evidence is inconclusive, some studies indicate that people who have recovered from a COVID-19 infection are likely to have at least some defense against it. Given that some people can be carrying the virus and show no symptoms at all, they may be more of a risk than those who've already recovered from the illness.

Despite reasonable precautions, some people may decide that they simply cannot return to their previous worksite. Before making such an important decision, it's vital to discuss your concerns with management and human resources. It may be possible to make accommodations that can help you feel safe and keep working.

You can use your EAP to address these concerns confidentially. It can also be a rich source of information and referrals for family care. Some EAPs can also help you with financial or legal concerns.

How can your EAP Help?

There will be multiple stages to returning to work, and it might be a long time—if ever—before things feel like they're back to "normal." You can use your EAP for support at every step of the way: confidential counseling to address stress, anxiety or depression; support for grief due to the loss of friends or family members; difficulty adjusting to new ways of working; or even individual support as you come to terms with everything that has changed. The EAP can also be a rich source of information and referrals for things like elder care and childcare and may offer help with financial or legal concerns.

These are challenging times for everyone, and FEI is here to support businesses, who, in turn, can support their employees with an EAP. When we all work together, we grow stronger and more resilient. Let us take good care of each other. Just reach out to us—we're here to help.