

Good mental health in the return to the workplace

This ESA guidance note aims to offer managers and supervisors practical tips to help manage mental health concerns associated with returning to the workplace upon lifting of lockdown restrictions.

Lifting of COVID19 restrictions

England's COVID 19 roadmap currently envisages the lifting of restrictions from 19 July 2021 and from that date there may be a stronger expectation that your people start returning to the workplace.

Some people may well relish a return to the workplace, and with it a sense of normality and a return to a daily routine. However, managers should be aware that the pandemic's impact will likely have fallen unequally across the workforce and with different people affected in different ways. For some, there may be genuine concern and anxiety about a return to the workplace.

Managers should therefore be aware of the potential mental health impact and ensure that planning for good mental health is considered alongside other H&S measures or additional COVID 19 controls adopted to assist with a return to the workplace.

It's ok to be feeling anxious during these unprecedented times

Having adhered to the "stay at home" guidance for over a year there may be genuine concerns and anxiety about returning to the workplace:

- catching the virus at work
- catching the virus on the commute to work
- passing on the virus to (vulnerable) members of the household
- changes to working practices, or changes to the workplace
- a preference for home working (and the need therefore to reconcile work and domestic responsibilities)
- potential workplace tensions with colleagues who have remained at the workplace throughout the pandemic

Points to consider

In many respects the circumstances are similar to that of people returning following maternity leave or a period of extended sickness absence, and communication is of fundamental importance in managing concerns or anxieties. Managers should consider the following:

- show empathy, support and understanding for what might, for some, prove a stressful transition
- open up a dialogue with your people as early as possible, ideally before they return to the workplace. Seek to understand what circumstances might affect someone's ability to return to the workplace

- advise your people of the COVID 19 controls that have been adopted in the workplace. Induction or re-orientation of the workplace might be useful before the first day back
- be a first point of contact, and able to point people towards specialist support or resources where needed (e.g. EAP, occupational health providers etc)
- communicate that both groups of people (those working from home and those in the workplace during the pandemic) played an equally important part in helping the company through the pandemic. Consider means of managing workplace tensions where they do arise
- consider transitional arrangements, gradually adjusting your people to the “new working norm” or changes that have been introduced to the workplace
- be aware of ‘long-COVID’, where symptoms might last weeks or months after infection. This could affect someone’s ability to work or cause them to be absent, further impacting on their mental health.

Suggested further reading

ACAS

<https://www.acas.org.uk/working-safely-coronavirus/returning-to-the-workplace>

Charlie Waller

<https://charliewaller.org/information/coronavirus-mental-health/return-to-work-anxiety>

CIPD

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/emp-law/employees/workplace-guide-returning-after-coronavirus#gref>

MIND

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

SOM

<https://www.som.org.uk/return-to-work/>