Making a comeback to the workplace

With the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, workplaces are slowly starting to re-open and employees are making their way back to working in the physical workplace.

Anticipating the return to the workplace can be experienced differently by everyone. For some, having spent many months at home can mean excitement and a sense of eagerness at the prospect of returning to the workplace. For others, the idea of leaving the comfort (and perceived safety) of their home can result in mixed feelings about transitioning back into the work environment.

Useful strategies to manage during this transitional period include:

Take it one day at a time

It's normal to seek certainty and answers to the unknown. Remember that this process is new to everyone. Try to remain present and set short task-oriented goals for the day ahead. Try not to think too much into the future, as doing so can lead to increased anxiety and disappointment when these goals are unmet. Expect that your feelings may change rapidly as you adjust to the new normal. Taking each day as it comes can assist you to embrace the better days and learn to cope with the difficult days.

Maintain positive changes developed during lockdown

As we transition into the workplace, the normal day-to-day busyness of life pre-lockdown continues. Consider maintaining things that you found had a positive impact during periods of lockdown, such as more time with family, rest, going for walks, and connecting with people in new ways.

Understand that it is normal to experience 'separation anxiety' from home and loved ones

It is normal to become attached to not only people and pets, but also to places too, especially those that foster feelings of security and safety. Attachment to places is a normal experience for many, and has been described as the bond we create with specific places such as our home, parks, or a city. During lockdown many of us have spent prolonged periods of time in our home, and for many our homes have become symbolic of a safe haven during a time of increasing uncertainty. 'Place anxiety' may apply at the workplace and other instances when people are out of the house for extended periods of time. Some factors to consider in managing separation anxiety from our home and families include:

- Translate similarities between what makes you feel safe and home into the workplace. Perhaps there is a scent that reminds you of home, or photos that you can print and place on your desk to remind you of home.
- Continue strategies and routines implemented at home during lockdown. This might include going for a walk at lunchtime or calling a friend during the day.
- Make contact with your loved ones during the course of the day, this can be something as simple as a short text message to let your loved one know you are thinking about them and look forward to seeing them when you return from work.

Manage your expectations

In a time of increasing change and uncertainty, it is important to consider the expectations when returning to the workplace. In the initial stages of adjustment, consider that you may not be meeting demands and achieving tasks in the same time/manner in which you did so prior to the pandemic. Processes that were once automated and seamless may require increased effort, attention, and time; or they might have changed. Give yourself time to readjust back into the workplace. Be kind to yourself and be realistic about your own personal expectations.

Focus on what is in your control, rather than factors outside of your control

Thinking too far into the future increases our focus on external factors that are outside our control. Thinking in this way brings our awareness to questions that cannot be answered and increases feelings of stress, anxiety and uncertainty. Our thoughts are strongly connected to the way we feel, and therefore how we behave. Bring your awareness to times where you find yourself becoming stuck in this style of thinking. Consider factors that are in your control, (e.g. how much time you spend at your desk, how regularly you stand up and stretch, how you maintain your physical health), rather than factors outside of your control (e.g. when COVID-19 restrictions will end or how many case numbers were reported today).

Remember to move your body

Moving your body is great for both physical and mental health. With the return to the workplace, and increased demands (e.g. travelling to and from work) it is easy to put opportunities to be physically active on the back burner. Consider reasonable and achievable goals to prioritise movement. This could be as simple as increasing incidental exercise in the office, or perhaps going for a walk with a colleague during your lunch break.

Take time to breathe and self-regulate

Returning to the workplace can be overwhelming. As such, it is important to self-regulate and take control of times when we feel overwhelmed, rather than ignoring our emotions. Consider your first signs of stress/overwhelm: signs of stress can be psychological (e.g. reduced concentration, preoccupied thinking), emotional (e.g. feeling anxious), as well as physical (e.g. muscle tightness). Here are a couple of tips to assist you in regulating your emotions during these times:

1. Take a short break. Stop what you are doing, stand up from your desk and walk into another room.
2. Pause and remember to breathe. When we become stressed, our breathing often becomes shorter, and faster, increasing anxiety and distress. Slowing down our breathing decreases stress and increases feelings of calmness by increasing oxygen in the blood. Start by taking 4 breaths in, hold for two seconds, and breathe out for 6 seconds. Repeat this 4 to 6 times.
3. Know what makes you feel happy, calm, and joy. Integrate at least one of these activities into your daily routine. This can be as simple as having a cup of coffee in the sun, listening to music, going on a short walk or chatting with a friend.

Ask for help

Don't forget that it is okay to ask for help. While it's normal to feel uncertain and anxious during this time of change, some individuals might benefit from support to assist them in adjusting to returning to the office. Consider your organisation's Employee Assistance Program for tailored support.