

Returning to Life Outside the Home

An Employer's Guide for Managing Mental Health Through the Next Phase of the Coronavirus Pandemic



Introduction

Planning for a return to work during a pandemic is new and uncertain territory for employers and employees alike, and there are many unanswered questions. But, amid all the uncertainty, one thing is becoming clear: The [mental health impacts](#) of this crisis are significant, and [they won't disappear](#) upon returning to the office. As a result, businesses must prioritize workforce mental health as they prepare to bring employees back to their shared workplaces.

Employers looking to shore up their workers' mental health and well-being—and therefore their ability to be productive—have a vital role in ensuring employees' access to care and support during this stressful time. Fortunately, there are highly effective, evidence-based treatments that help people overcome their mental health struggles, and technologies that facilitate virtual care as people stay home. Ensuring access to these resources, as well as communicating regularly with your workforce about the support available to them, can make all the difference for employees in distress.

As you prepare to bring employees back to the workplace, the following guidance from Lyra clinicians can help you better respond to workers' needs during the "new normal" and position you to emerge from this crisis with a healthier, more resilient workforce.

"It's causing a number of employers to really rethink, as we manage the immediate impact of COVID-19, how do we support employees as they return to work, and the longer impact on mental health is going to be a huge and unfortunately ongoing theme in the future."

— Jeff Brodsky, CHRO, Morgan Stanley

Set the right tone from the start

Offer empathy and gratitude

Start return-to-work discussions with a positive tone that conveys compassion as well as thoughtful leadership. To show that you understand the mix of emotions employees are likely feeling, it's important to acknowledge the types of personal and professional challenges people are facing and communicate the efforts you'll make to allow for flexibility during the return-to-work process.

Reinforce this message by letting your team know how much their work is appreciated and valued, while highlighting the shared mission that unites each member of the team. In stressful times, employees need to be reminded that their work is valued and serves a bigger purpose. Over time, you can bolster this message by freely acknowledging and praising employees for excellent work or for meeting goals under difficult circumstances.

Communicate next steps and rationale, early and often

Credible information is a powerful antidote to anxiety. Consistent communication from managers, leadership, and human resources can reduce some of the uncertainty employees may feel during this stressful time. Without concrete information, our minds naturally fill the gaps—often with imagined scenarios that exacerbate anxiety. Even while plans are in development, share regular updates to your workforce across multiple channels (this might include emails, newsletters, talking points for managers, all-hands meetings, and videos from leadership) to ensure that messages are highly visible and reinforced.

In your communications, be sure to:

- Provide clear rationale for business decisions about the return-to-work timeline, policies, and safety protocols. Employees are more likely to accept policy decisions when they understand the underlying process and considerations behind the decisions. Be sure to include any references and sources that helped inform your decisions.
- Offer reassurance from corporate leaders regarding the steps the company is taking to ensure everyone's health and safety. Be empathetic and considerate in your tone. Signal that the company understands the high stakes involved and is proactively prioritizing employee health.
- Include specific guidelines on social distance in the workplace and necessary preventative measures to reduce health risks. Concrete guidance for employees on how they can mitigate the risk of illness at work can boost their sense of control in the situation, which helps reduce worry and anxiety.

Also, if your business has had to make difficult financial decisions affecting your workforce, such as laying off or furloughing employees, be as transparent as possible in communicating the rationale and reality behind these decisions. Use this as an opportunity to tell unaffected employees how much you value them.

Take the pulse of your employees

Your return-to-work plan for your workforce will be more successful and well formed if you can first understand employees' immediate needs and concerns. Consider launching a pulse survey to capture feedback and give people an opportunity to voice their worries. These types of surveys can go a long way toward making your workforce feel heard, especially when they may be feeling disconnected. After collecting feedback, remember to share a summary of the results and information about how the company will address major themes reported in the survey.

50%

of workers are afraid to go to work,
compared to 29% a month ago.

(Source: [Forrester Research](#))

Consider these questions as a starting point for soliciting feedback from your workforce.

For employees:

- *How do you feel, personally, about returning to the office, on a scale from 1 (not eager) to 10 (very eager)? What actions would you like to see us take before you're comfortable returning to the office?*
- *Are there conditions that are unique to you that we should be aware of, regarding returning to the office?*
- *How effective do you feel you have been at working remotely, on a scale from 1 (not very) to 10 (very)?*
- *If given the option, how would you feel, personally, about continuing to work from home, on a scale from 1 (not eager) to 10 (very eager)?*
- *Concerning equipment, support, and conditions, how well prepared are you to work from home?*
- *What are your top concerns if returning to the workplace?*
- *What are your top concerns if continuing to work from home?*

For managers:

- *How has working from home impacted your team's effectiveness, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (very much)?*
- *What are your top concerns for your team if they return to the workplace?*
- *What are your top concerns for your team if they continue to work from home?*

Offer benefits that can ease the return-to-work transition

If your company does not already offer benefits tailored to working parents, caregivers, and commuters, there's never been a better time to start. With all the stressors your employees are experiencing right now, providing supportive benefits can make a big difference in their ability to return to the workplace. In addition to common benefit programs such as paid time off (PTO), child care, and commuter benefits, considering flexible work arrangements is more crucial than ever to accommodate workers as they adapt to life amid a pandemic.

“For many, the transition to shelter-in-place has been isolating, but we can’t underestimate the additional strain of readjusting to going back to work. A crisis of this magnitude has far-reaching implications on our collective mental health, and the impact of economic recession on depression, anxiety, and substance abuse has been well established.

It’s important that companies consider programs with demonstrated benefits in addressing these areas, which have long been stigmatized. Thankfully, we’re seeing many companies prioritize behavioral health, and we’re happy to partner with companies that continue to push this space forward.”

– Dr. Sanjay Basu, Director of Research and Population Health at Collective Health

Remove practical barriers to returning to work

In addition to following safety protocols advised by [OSHA](#) related to creating a safe and healthy physical environment, consider these additional benefits to help employees ease into a new routine.

- **Child care and PTO benefits**—Working parents may not have access to the child care support they relied on pre-pandemic. Consider offering child care benefits, flexible schedules, and more paid time off.
- **Commuter benefits**—Employees may depend on public transportation to commute to work and now feel uncomfortable with the potential risk. Consider offering a stipend to cover the cost of more private transportation, such as ridesharing.
- **Return-to-work programs and disability insurance**—For some, returning to work may be challenging if job modifications aren’t available and an employee needs to take extended leave. Disability insurance is another way companies can help alleviate increased financial stressors for employees.

Offer flexibility for vulnerable employees, parents, and caregivers

While there are specific roles and functions that may be required to return to a physical workplace, for many others, it may be less clear when it’s the right time to return. If you’re developing a phased approach, offer specific guidelines for these populations requiring special considerations.

Vulnerable populations

People who have certain chronic health conditions, are immunocompromised, are 65 or older, or live with or care for people in these groups have a heightened risk of contracting the coronavirus and therefore may not be advised to return to work. Consider additional precautions and flexible work schedules to accommodate these employees.

Parents and caregivers

[Working parents and caregivers](#) may face additional challenges in managing returning to work and maintaining their caregiving responsibilities without the usual support systems. It may feel overwhelming to imagine how they can make this transition logistically—especially amid worries about their health and that of their loved ones.

Managers

There may be circumstances when in-person meetings are more efficient and productive than virtual ones. Provide managers with specific guidance on the appropriateness of in-person meetings and how to conduct them safely, if necessary.

Encourage employees to take time off

Without the usual time off for summer vacations, employees will still need a break, without the usual cue to take one. Encourage employees to schedule time off and consider formulating policies around how PTO requests can be managed to minimize disruption. Some companies are also offering “COVID-19 leave days” as an additional benefit to support people with limited PTO.

For employees who may need extended leave, consult your disability insurance provider to ensure the coverage you are providing is appropriate for these unprecedented times. They can also offer guidance and programs that can help employees return to work sooner.

Offer support for coping with anxiety as shelter-in-place orders lift

Coping with uncertainty means accepting that there is so much outside of our control. Even as we take swift and needed action societally to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, we can only do so much to control the behavior of those who don't take the situation seriously. This is a scary reality, but denying it doesn't help. In fact, [research shows](#) that simply acknowledging how difficult uncertainty is can make it easier to bear. Ultimately, though, that energy is best focused on the things you *can* control, including how you support employees who may be experiencing emotional distress at work.

Be on the lookout for mental health symptoms

[Preliminary data](#) suggest that the prevalence and severity of depression and anxiety have surged since the spread of COVID-19 began in the United States. Meanwhile, experts are concerned about greater stress and isolation leading to increased substance use. With the return to shared workspaces, managers will be well positioned to spot signs of emotional distress or behavioral problems that were less visible while working from home or if the employee was on leave. It's also important to note that [mental health problems](#) may become more common across your workforce as the pandemic and its disruption to daily life continues. Review [our guidance](#) for how to identify signs of concern in the workplace and talk with employees about wellness and appropriate support resources.

33%

increase in percentage of individuals who indicate thoughts of self harm or suicide in March, when shelter-in-place orders began to go into effect, compared to January.

(Source: [Lyra Health](#))

Be proactive about checking in

In addition to responding to signs of concern, managers should consider strategies that make employees more comfortable with speaking up if they're facing challenges.

- **Individually:** Check in casually with team members throughout the week about how they're doing, how they're managing their work, and what support you can offer. This demonstrates your care and concern, while providing opportunities for them to share unseen struggles.
- **For team meetings:** Consider using the first five to 10 minutes for a "wellness check" by asking people to share how they are feeling and what they're doing to support themselves and one another in these difficult times. You can start with something like, "What's something you've tried this week for self-care?"

Be mindful of thinking traps

Worry and fear are expected reactions in the COVID-19 era, but that doesn't mean you can't take steps toward developing more useful thoughts and de-escalating distress. Common patterns of thinking, also called **thinking traps**, are frequent causes of anxiety because they distort our perceptions of situations and our ability to cope. **Catastrophizing**, for example, is a thinking trap that leads to vividly imagining worst-case scenarios and treating them as inevitable. Another trap, called **black-and-white thinking**, views situations in extremes—for example, interpreting the news about COVID-19 either in terms of doom and gloom or unrealistic positivity.

You can spot thinking traps by tuning into the thoughts you have when you notice your anxiety or stress rising, or your mood dipping. In those moments, you'll likely find that an unhelpful thought preceded that shift. Awareness of thinking traps can promote a healthier reaction to COVID-19-related news by shifting thinking from unrealistic and unhelpful to healthier and more balanced.

When employees seem to be caught in thinking traps, validate their feelings ("I can understand why you'd feel that way"), but try offering a more realistic perspective when appropriate. For example, if an employee expresses a catastrophic thought like, "This situation is hopeless," try responding with validation and an alternative viewpoint such as, "I can understand how it can feel hopeless, but there are still things within our control that we can do to help the situation." More information about identifying and countering thinking traps can be found [here](#).

Be a steady leader even while under stress

Returning to work means a period of readjustment for everyone involved, even in less exceptional circumstances. Meanwhile, as you support your team members with this transition, you are dealing with your own stress behind the scenes. People leaders are not immune to the cumulative effects of the pandemic that can erode patience and intensify emotions. But managers can help ease the impact of those emotions on their management style by using the following four strategies.

56%

of Americans reported that worry or stress related to the outbreak has led to at least one negative mental health effect.

(Source: [Kaiser Family Foundation](#))

- 1. Check the stress levels.** Instead of focusing on managing conflict, first try to lower the risk of it occurring unnecessarily. Before meetings with your team, try to assess three things:
 - Your own stress level
 - The stress levels of others involved
 - The level of stress you expect the situation to provoke

If the stress level in two or more of those areas is high, consider the pros and cons of rescheduling until cooler heads prevail, or changing the scope or amount of content discussed in that moment. You don't want to avoid difficult conversations altogether, but it's better to engage when you're emotionally equipped to handle the situation and you have a plan to help minimize the stress that could follow.

- 2. De-escalate your own emotions.** When you tune into your own stress levels, try to notice what you're feeling in that moment. The first step to de-escalating your own reaction is to acknowledge and label your emotion (for example, "I'm feeling anxious right now"). Then, think through some ways to feel calm or more positive in that moment. Options could include taking a walk for a change of scenery, a pleasant distraction such as reading something funny or inspirational, or a relaxation technique such as [deep breathing](#). Whatever strategy you choose, the goal should be to shift your attention away from your stressors toward something more enjoyable to give yourself a momentary break.

3. Take an “empathy first” approach. Everyone views situations through their own unique lenses. Our perspectives are colored by our prior experiences, personality characteristics, cultural points of view, and even our mood. Disagreement, disappointment, or frustration with colleagues often occurs when we don’t try to see the situation through someone else’s eyes. When discussing difficult topics, or during tense moments, step back and try to empathize so you don’t take it personally when others are upset. You can practice empathy with your employees through the following steps:

- Focus on what you know about this person and the challenges they face. Think about their circumstances and what resources they have to handle them. Consider that this person is likely trying to do their best.
- Ask open-ended questions to show that you’re curious and willing to learn more.
- Reflect back what they’ve shared by summarizing what you heard and asking if it’s accurate. This shows that you’re invested in understanding their point of view.
- If you get frustrated with the person, consider some alternative explanations for why they’re behaving in a way that bothers you. This can prevent you from taking the situation personally when it likely has more to do with factors unrelated to you.

4. Respond intentionally. When responding to someone during challenging moments, think beyond what will make you feel good in the moment and instead, think long-term. Remember, being right isn’t everything. Whenever possible, respond to an employee in a way that promotes preserving the relationship and encouraging their best work. This can include reminding the employee of your shared goals, letting them know what you can do to support them toward those goals, and clarifying their role in next steps.

You can increase your employee’s sense of professional effectiveness by reiterating their skills and strengths that will help them in those next steps. In especially tense situations, the best course may be pausing the conversation if it’s unproductive and revisiting it in the near future. Regardless of how upset you are, always avoid blaming, name-calling, or dismissiveness, which will undermine your authority and foster mistrust and resentment.

“Across our industry, given the greater likelihood of depression, anxiety, stress, and substance abuse, employers must do more to help our employees manage their mental health.”

***– Sandi Stein, Senior Vice President, Human Resources
& Global Head of Benefits, Brown Brothers Harriman***

Offer a decision-making framework in the face of uncertainty

Even if many of your employees continue working remotely for some time, their communities will begin to reopen. As local and state officials update previous guidelines, it will take time to interpret and apply the new rules to each person's situation, balancing personal risk tolerance, the need for human connection, and addressing basic necessities. A framework for making these decisions can help people ease their anxiety, cope with uncertainty, and manage their discomfort.

Help simplify tough decisions

During this pandemic, daily routines now bear significant health implications, which can quickly lead to decision fatigue. Something as simple as ordering takeout from a restaurant now involves abstract tradeoffs of risk and reward. When faced with difficult decisions, our minds may become preoccupied with making the "right" choice. It's helpful just to recognize that there is no perfect way to make these decisions, and there will be risk involved regardless.

Given the pace of life and varied responsibilities we all balance, there's not time to scrutinize every choice. Investing the time to proactively develop a personalized framework for making these decisions—and sharing it with your family—could help avoid a lot of stress and potential conflicts with others who have a different perspective. Rather than treating each decision in isolation, you can rely on your framework for guidance while being willing to update your thinking if the situation changes.

Let your values be a compass

Everyone's overall risk tolerance varies. Each person will weigh tradeoffs differently according to their values and particular circumstances. For example, some will return to church as soon as possible because spirituality or community is deeply meaningful to them, whereas others who are passionate about nutrition or supporting local agriculture may venture out to get organic produce from the farmer's market. Rooting our decisions in values, or the things that give our lives a sense of meaning or purpose, helps us prioritize what we care about most and cope with the discomfort we may encounter along the way.

Hold space for contradictory truths

Our minds prefer things to be black and white to make decisions easier and reduce cognitive dissonance. COVID-19 is a serious illness, and the best way to avoid contracting it is to stay home and avoid physical contact with others. Yet, staying home indefinitely carries psychological, social, and economic consequences. Both these statements are true, and we don't have to pick one or the other. Holding these truths together can help us make more thoughtful decisions and recognize that our discomfort in making them is a natural response to this difficult situation.

Remember that your decisions affect others too

This pandemic has shown how dependent we all are on one another. Our health depends on the choices of many individuals. It's easy to focus on how our choices will impact us individually, such as weighing the probability of contracting the virus. Now, more than ever, it's important to also consider your potential impact on others, especially since it is possible to [asymptomatically carry](#) COVID-19 and spread it to others. If you are in a position of influence—for example, as a parent, community leader, or manager—consider how others may look at your behavior as a model. It's imperative to recognize our interdependence as we strive to get through this crisis together.

Support employee resilience

Whether your employees are heading back to the workplace with enthusiasm or apprehension, your leadership can motivate and help them navigate the inevitable stressors that will arise. Modeling an optimistic attitude and promoting self-compassion and self-care are all impactful ways to support workforce mental health during this period of readjustment.

“We work in a competitive, high-pressure industry. Doing the right thing for our people means arming them with the technologies, tools, and human support needed to thrive amid workplace and personal pressures.”

— Deb Olsen, Principal Benefits Manager, Genentech

Harness the power of optimism

When tough times require us to adapt, attitude matters. When we're facing adversity, an optimistic mindset becomes a potent tool to promote positive emotions and buffer against mental health symptoms. But please note that optimism isn't about seeing the world through rose-colored glasses. It actually entails thinking more realistically and productively by focusing on what's possible through our own efforts. You can inspire employees to bounce back from return-to-work challenges by helping them shift how they make meaning of those challenges using the “3Ps” of optimism: **personalization**, **pervasiveness**, and **permanence**.

Personalization is about whether we take more responsibility for life's setbacks than we should. For example, if employees berate themselves for missing details on a project, even though they're working under extraordinary circumstances, they risk becoming demoralized by overlooking the distractions that make detail-oriented work harder right now. In contrast, taking an optimistic attitude can help employees recognize that their talents are still valuable even when their efforts fall short. Optimism can also help someone acknowledge all the factors that contributed to a mistake rather than chalking it up to character flaws. Rather than shirking personal responsibility, it's about not becoming defeated by excessive self-criticism. Next time a team member is experiencing a work setback, try noting the strengths they possess that will help them make needed improvements, while also nudging them to develop a bigger-picture explanation for what happened.

Pervasiveness refers to our ability to view a setback as a disappointment in one area of life, versus an overwhelming problem permeating everything in life. Someone with an optimistic perspective about a disappointing performance review would consider it a stumble to recover from, while recalling bright spots in their career as evidence that they're capable of good work. Conversely, a pessimistic attitude leads to framing a setback as evidence of being a failure in one's career or, even more broadly, in life. Remind your employees that the obstacles they face do not determine their worth, and help them remember that their career is bigger than this one moment. This can motivate them to bounce back.

Permanence refers to whether we view hardships and the factors behind them as lasting or temporary. This is a tricky concept right now, given that we don't know how long this pandemic will last or how COVID-19 will unfold. One thing we can be sure of? The situation will evolve over time, meaning it's not permanent, and there are things we can do to cope in the meantime. For example, if an employee expresses discouragement about working in a reconfigured space and needing to take extra precautions, it's important to recall that the readjustment is temporary and will change with time. It's also useful to focus on what can be done to make the transition easier. This doesn't mean future challenges won't arise and new circumstances won't require more adjustment, but it's a reminder to take things one day at a time and focus on what is within our ability to change.

Promote self-compassion

As employees return to work, they may face unanticipated obstacles that lead to more frustration. People may be surprised if they don't immediately bounce back to 100 percent productivity once they're back in the workplace. Ordinary decisions such as determining the best way to commute to work safely, or finding child care arrangements, may now be major sources of stress. When readjustment hurdles arise, offer yourself much-needed compassion and encourage others to do the same, using these steps:

1. Acknowledge your situation and feelings

Disappointments and stressors are hard to face. Take a moment to recognize what you're feeling without judging it. It could be as simple as tuning in and noticing, "I'm feeling frustrated right now."

2. Recall your common humanity

You're not alone. Remind yourself that setbacks and difficult emotions are universal parts of the human experience. There's nothing abnormal about falling short or feeling discouraged. Many others are likely feeling the same way at this moment.

3. Give yourself kindness

Too often, we respond to adversity with self-blame, which can demotivate us and worsen our mood. We can't control our feelings, but we can control how we respond to them. Try offering yourself a kind gesture, like doing something enjoyable or relaxing, in the same way you would encourage a loved one to do during a tough time.

Reinforce self-care to employees

While it's tempting to shirk self-care in favor of extra work hours to increase productivity, we're less efficient and less effective when we neglect our own well-being. We need to take proper care of ourselves, partly, so we can better tend to what matters most to us.

Before returning to work, certain self-care activities may become even more vital, such as resuming a regular sleep schedule to ease the transition back into the typical workweek routine. Seeing friends more often, or exercising more consistently, can also make the difference in employees' ability to cope with returning to work. The list below highlights several self-care essentials to promote:

- Getting sufficient sleep
- Eating nutritious, well-balanced meals
- Socializing (virtually, unless it is safe to do so in person and health precautions are followed)
- Maintaining regular physical activity
- Taking breaks at work
- Limiting use of alcohol and illicit substances
- Engaging in valued hobbies and interests
- Seeking emotional support from people you trust

You can advocate the importance of self-care in your interactions with employees. Consider the following suggestions for talking about mental wellness during 1:1 and team meetings:

- Share examples of how you've been challenged during this time, how those challenges affect your emotions or stress level, and how you're coping.
- Be mindful of how much information you disclose and that your intention is not to solicit support for yourself, but to let team members know that mental wellness is important.
- Emphasize efforts you've taken to ensure good self-care, including setting boundaries around work hours and taking regular breaks during the workday.

Learn more: [The Self-Care Essentials You Need to Cope with Coronavirus Stress](#)

56%

of Lyra providers reported that their clients have noticed unexpected positives during this period, including greater perspective, gaining more time with their families, appreciating their jobs, and feeling supported by their companies.

(Source: [Lyra Health](#))

Moving forward together

We are all doing our best to adapt during these extraordinary times. The [mental health implications](#) of the coronavirus pandemic are real and can impact employees' chances of making a successful return to work. However, by recognizing the hardships your employees face and taking action to address them, you can provide the support they need to thrive as they readjust to a new normal.

When your teams need more support

Make sure to work with and promote your employee assistance program (EAP) to connect employees to available mental health care services. If your company offers the Lyra benefit, employees can register for care and find a provider that's right for their needs today.

"Investing in mental health for your employees is good for them, but it's also good for our business. So, if people feel first that they're supported, I think that they'll feel more inspired to do their best work."

– Jacquelyn Ainsley, Benefits Manager, Pinterest

Additional resources for employees

The National Domestic Violence Hotline

Call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or visit www.thehotline.org

National Parent Helpline

Call 1-855-427-2736 or visit www.nationalparenthelpline.org

The National Alliance for Caregiving

Visit www.caregiving.org/resources/

Lyra

About Lyra

[Lyra Health](#) helps leading companies improve access to effective, high-quality mental health care for their employees and their families. With their innovative digital care platform and elite provider network, members receive the best care and feel better, faster. Lyra has raised more than \$170 million and works with large employers, such as Starbucks, uber, Amgen, eBay, and other Fortune 500 companies to deliver care to their employees and families nationwide.



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