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Anxious returning to work? You are not alone

As we carefully and safely move through the phases of reintroducing staff back to the workplace, this period of transition can activate feelings of worry and fear. As news of a pandemic swept in, the overwhelming message was isolation for safety. Health officials and leaders have taken significant and effective measures to reduce transmission and flatten the curve, but we are not out of the woods yet. It makes sense that we may be apprehensive about returning to the workplace and having more contact with people. We want to resume our routines and connections, amidst public health and safety restrictions. How can we address the emotional impact of this important transition?

Assessment:

First, take some time to explore the realities of your worries. Often, we sit with a vague or nagging discomfort that we don't take the time to clarify for ourselves. Sitting down and writing out what exactly is contributing to those uncomfortable feelings gives us some feedback about how to move forward. For example, the overwhelming concern might be, "I'm going to get the virus and give it to my whole family, and it will be devastating." That is a very heavy internal burden that would make any of us emotionally dysregulated. While our first reaction is to push that away, this is the time, in a safe and reflecting way, to explore the realities of that thought. For example, ask yourself more about this fear "How do I think I will get the virus?" "How am I going to spread it?" Get clear about what your concerns really are.

Problem Solving:

When you are clear about the source of your anxiety, you can address it. We aren't returning to "business as usual." Many steps are being taken to address safety in your workplace. Familiarize yourself with those changes and discuss with your manager or departmental HR Manager what this will mean for the way you do your work. Uncertainty and unpredictability can contribute to unhealthy amounts of fear and stress. Planning and information will reduce that stress.

Unhooking from Anxiety:

After you have confronted your anxiety, it's time to unhook from it. Sometimes anxiety puts our planning into overdrive, and we get stuck in the "what ifs" and planning for every potential future outcome. Make your problem solving relevant to the here and now. Sometimes we think our worrying makes us vigilant and that it protects us. The reality is that most of our worrying

won't come true anyway, and it robs us of peace and joy in the present moment. We give much of our time and energy, focusing on things that will not happen. One strategy to address this is to actively identify it, "This is a moment of anxiety" or say, "That is my anxiety talking, but I don't have to respond to it." When we call it out for what it is, a feeling of anxiety, rather than a fact, we reduce the intensity and its power over us.

Moving Forward:

Some anxiety and fear are normal in this process. If you are feeling this way, no doubt your team members are also experiencing their own worries in this process. Support and validate each other through this changing work situation. However, we don't want to keep activating each other and intensifying an environment of fear. Instead of dwelling in the intensity of anxiousness, move to take care of our emotions and each other. Work towards recognizing and validating other's concerns, and work at exploring options together. We can feel worried AND move forward simultaneously.

Support:

Sometimes, we have other things contributing to the complexity of our situation. For example, pre-existing depression or anxiety, or our own grief or loss, which may make it more difficult to cope. When the intensity of the emotional experience is impacting our functioning, and you notice yourself struggling to cope, reach out to EAP.

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For Further Information:

- <https://stewartmckelvey.com/thought-leadership/returning-to-work-covid-19-and-mental-health-considerations/>
- <https://cmha.ca/news/6-tips-to-respond-to-employee-anxiety-about-covid-19>
- <https://www.apa.org/topics/covid-19/employee-mental-health>

Contact Information:

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