

The Challenges of Change: Returning to Work Amid a Pandemic

Workplace transitions are never easy. Add a pandemic to the mix, and things get even more complicated. Learn how to cope with change and transition as well as manage stress and anxiety as you prepare to head back to the office.

The psychological process of change

Along with any change comes a transition period. Although change and transition are often used interchangeably, there is a key difference: *change is an external shift* in your environment, while *transition is the psychological process* you go through in response to that external shift.

Coping with change can be challenging because we often overlook how the change might make us feel and tend to focus instead on the concrete change itself. Sometimes this is because we can't necessarily predict how we'll feel until we're feeling it. As a result, you may be caught off guard by your behavior or reactions, which is a signal to address how you believe the change is affecting you. For instance, maybe the thought of commuting with others on a train makes you tremble, and you realize that you're feeling anxious about being around others, so you arrange to carpool with a friend.

Know that while you may not be able to control the changes, you can take control of how you prepare for, process, and adapt to them. Understand that transition takes time and remember to bring awareness to how you're feeling before, during, and after the process. This is vital to lessening stress and building your resiliency as you get ready to head back to work or continue getting acquainted with being in the office.

Tips for managing stress and anxiety

Ask questions

Sometimes the biggest source of stress and anxiety stems from the unknown, so getting some answers ahead of time can greatly ease your mind. Prepare a few questions related to any concerns you may have about returning to the office and pose them to your supervisor to start chipping away at your worry.

Pivot to the positive

One thing that weighs heavily on some people about returning to the office is mourning the loss of the comforts that working from home allows. While it is difficult having to part with the flexibility, try to find a few things to look forward to about being an office. Perhaps the ability to better separate work and family time, socializing with coworkers, or the alone time you'll get during your commute.

Adjust at your own speed

It may seem as though your officemates are handling things much better or worse or faster or slower than you, causing you to possibly judge them or measure your progress against theirs. Keep in mind that everyone's experience of readapting to office life will be different and that there's no right or wrong tempo to maintain. Take each thing as it comes and give yourself permission to work through it at your own pace.

Have compassion

Be kind to yourself, and to others. You, your coworkers, and even your leadership are all acclimating to a return to the office together. Instead of letting the challenges feed your stress, try to stay in the mindset that you're all doing the best you can and have confidence that things will even out eventually. You got through it when the pandemic first disrupted everything, and in time you'll adapt once again.

Take care of yourself

Most of all, take time to check in with yourself regularly and notice when you're feeling too stressed or anxious. Set boundaries as needed, particularly if your values or needs have changed after having worked from home for some time. Vow to maintain work/life balance, especially if you've gained a newfound appreciation of

teleworking. Reach out for help from colleagues, friends, or professionals any time you feel overwhelmed, defeated, or unable to take care of things like you once did.

No matter the worries or questions you may have, your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is always here to help with your unique situation and can provide additional guidance on coping with change, transition, and stress.

The EAP is a voluntary and confidential employee benefit available to eligible federal employees at no cost.

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