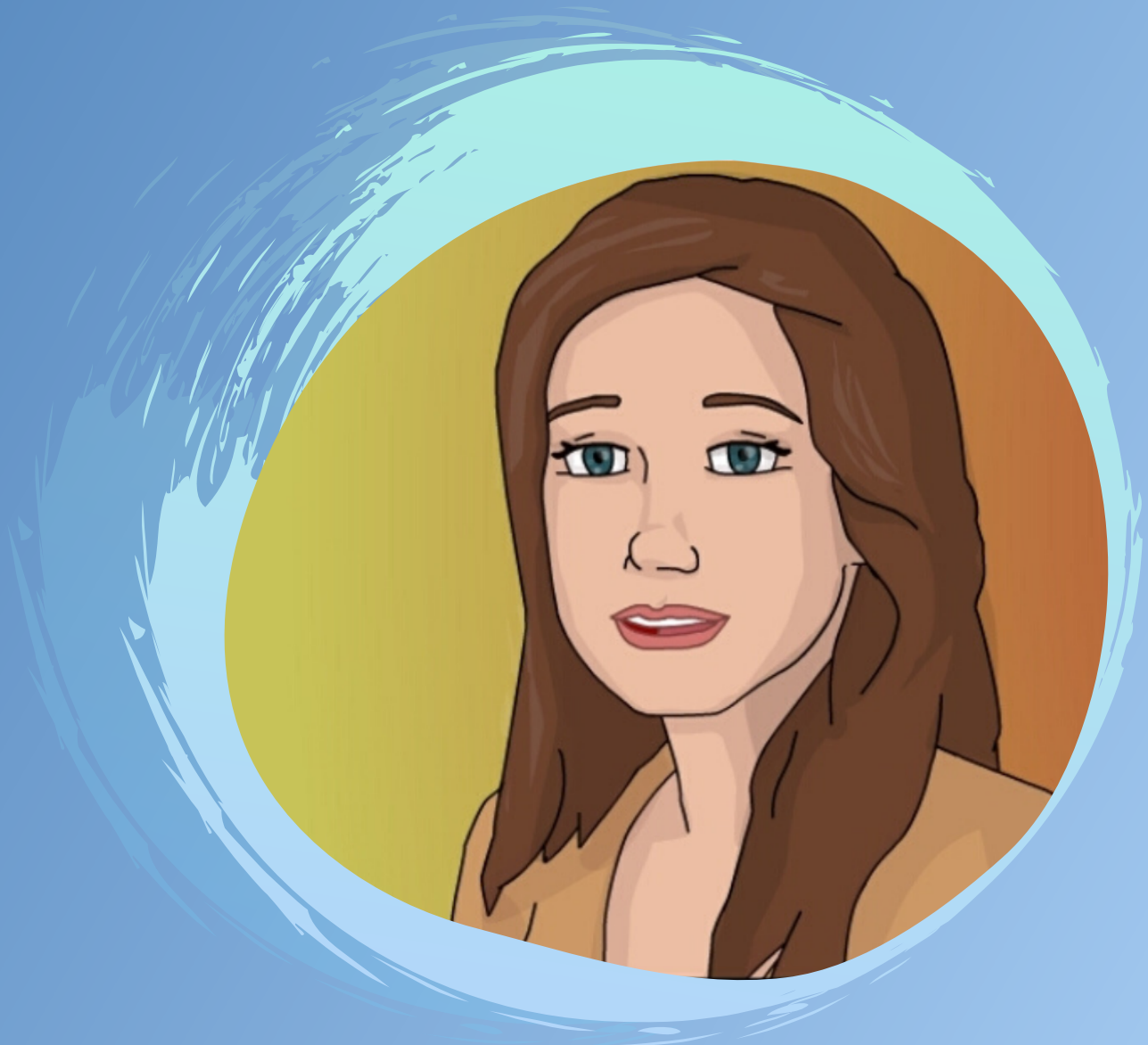# THIS WAY UP ⬆⬆

Helping You Take Care of Your Mental Health

Returning to the Workplace

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Have you been working from home during the COVID-19 crisis and are feeling concerned about returning to your workplace?

Many of us have experienced significant changes to the way we work over the last few months - be it adjusting to working from home, implementing strict safety protocols and procedures, or changing the familiar routines.

If you have been working from home throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, it is understandable that you might feel nervous or unsure about what your workplace will be like post-pandemic.

Here are some very common worries that many people have about returning to work:

- How COVID-19 safe will my work space, environment, and practices be?
- What if I am feeling very anxious about going back to work?
- How can I and my household adjust to a new day-to-day routine yet again?
- What if I am scared of catching COVID-19 while travelling to and from work on public transport?
- How do I deal with colleagues or clients who are less (or more) concerned about COVID-19 than I am?

This guide aims to share some tips and strategies to help you manage feelings of anxiety, stay safe, and make a smooth transition back to your workplace.

Tips for Managing Anxiety About Returning to the Workplace

1. Reassure yourself that feeling some anxiety is normal and there are practical things you can do to make your transition back to work as safe and stress-free as possible.

Feelings associated with stress and anxiety are our body's natural defence mechanism - they alert us to potential danger and help us to plan accordingly. When managed appropriately, some anxiety during a global crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic is helpful, as without it we would be less likely to take the necessary precautions to keep healthy and safe.

There are **two important things you can do to manage the feelings of anxiety** about returning to your workplace and the general easing of COVID-19 restrictions:

▶ Identify practical things you can do to minimise your risk of contracting the virus

▶ Notice when your feelings of anxiety have become excessive and unhelpful, and know what you can do to manage how you feel

Next we will share some tips for how you can do both so you can feel more confident and at ease about returning to work.

2. Anticipate that your workplace may not be the same as it was pre-COVID-19 and discuss these changes with your manager ahead of time.

Safe Work Australia and the NSW Government have released guidelines for creating COVID-safe work places. These are informed by updated health advice from the Australian Government.

Before returning to work, **speak with your manager and the team about what to expect, what are the official safety protocols of your workplace, and what you can personally do within your role** to keep yourself and others safe.

Being informed on what to expect can help you feel more prepared and plan what you may need to do ahead of time.

Here are some other things you can do:

- Know and follow the official guidelines on how to prevent the spread of the virus
- Be willing to ask questions, seek clarification, and discuss the safety measures in place
- Share your concerns, if you have any, and make suggestions about how your workplace or environment could be more COVID-safe if necessary
- Ask for extra support or training to learn new procedures or practices if you need to
- Where possible, try to come up with practical solutions collaboratively with your colloeagues, so you can work well together in this challenging time
- Acknowledge that some things may be outside of your control and focus on doing what you can
- Know who you can speak to if you have significant concerns about the safety of your working environment

It can take some time to adjust to the changes in the physical environment, different ways of working and socialising. This can create unsettling feelings such as discomfort, stress, frustration, impatience or annoyance.

It is also normal to feel a sense of sadness and loss at the fact that some things just aren't the same anymore. **It is OK to experience a wide variety of emotions - make sure to acknowledge how you are feeling and give yourself some time to adjust.** In particular, for those of us who don't like change, you may just need a little longer to accept change and be OK with it.

If you need some help with expressing how you feel and talking about your experience, check out our "Knowing What to Say" guide below or visit https://covid19.thiswayup.org.au/.

Download the 'Knowing What to Say' Guide ⤓

3. Liaise with your workplace if you have special circumstances that place you or someone close to you at higher risk.

You may have a chronic health condition, live with someone who does, or are caring for someone who is more vulnerable to COVID-19. Understandably, many people in this situation will be more cautious about coming back to work.

Here are some things you can do ahead of returning to work:

- Seek medical advice from your doctors, so you are clear on what is safe for you and your personal circumstances.
- Discuss with your workplace any possible modifications or flexible working arrangements that can be made.
- Understand what you can do to minimise and manage your risk.
- Identify your boundaries and anything that you are unwillig to do, and discuss this with your workplace.
- If you need to take extra precautions that other people may not require (e.g., declining after-work social gatherings), practice how you can let others know in a way that feels comfortable.

These conversations can be difficult to have as we can feel vulnerable in disclosing personal information. At the same time, raising awareness will put your managers and colleagues in a better position to devise a safe and workable plan with you.

4. Consider any adjustments to your travel routine that would make it more comfortable and safe for you to travel to and from work.

Some people are comfortable with catching public transport again, whereas others may take extra precautions such as varying their travel timetable to avoid the congested peak-hour, wearing a mask or carrying hand sanitiser. Alternatively, some people may adjust their mode of transport, resulting in changes to travel time, route or expenses.

Work out what options are available to you and what might work best for your lifestyle. Be willing to revise it and experiment with different travel options if you find that the current arrangement isn't really working.

It's important that you **follow the official safety guidelines and do what you need to do to feel reasonably safe** during your daily work commute.

It is also important, however, that you **recognise when any anxiety you feel is becoming excessive** - that is because some behaviours we engage in to feel safe (e.g., carrying hand sanitiser, avoiding crowded places) can become problematic overtime and make the anxiety worse.

5. Recognise that everyone will have a different level of anxiety about COVID-19

Anxiety exists on a continuum, meaning that some may feel a little anxious, some extremely anxious and others anywhere in between. Other people's reactions to workplace changes will differ from yours and there may be a range of reasons why you may feel others are overreacting or underreacting.

Here are some things you can do to work collaboratively with others to adapt to change and maintain a sense of solidarity in the workplace:

▶ **Be mindful and respectful of individual differences.**

This includes being compassionate with yourself if you feel like you are experiencing higher levels of anxiety than your friends or colleagues, as well as recognising and accepting that others may feel differently and respecting their feelings.

Be assertive in communicating your own needs, preferences and concerns, while also being open to hearing and understanding others. Navigating changes in the workplace involves finding a balance between following reasonable safety protocols and managing our own feelings of unease.

▶ **Don't let COVID-19 dominate your workplace interactions.**

COVID-19 has significantly changed our lives, so it's natural that it's become a hot topic of conversation. While some people may want to talk about COVID-19, its effects and implications at length, others may wish to focus on something else. While it is helpful to give and receive social support through debriefing about our experiences, it is also important to have balance and focus on things that lift the workplace morale.

Some people can find it exhausting when COVID-19 dominates the conversation - if this is you, let others know how you feel or politely excuse yourself from the conversation (if you can).

▶ **Look out for your colleagues who may be struggling.**

You may be coping well, but you may notice a colleague is struggling. They may be more stressed, irritable, preoccupied, down or have difficulties concentrating. Or, you may sense something else about them that tells you they're not their usual self. Often colleagues are in a good position to pick up changes in one another, because we see each other often.

If you are concerned for a colleague, you could consider gently approaching them and ask how they're doing. If they are willing to share, offer an empathic, supportive ear so they know they're not alone. If needed, you could gently encourage them to approach your manager for extra workplace support or to seek professional help during this stressful time.

6. Make a transition plan for your household with your family, partner or flatmates

Similarly to the way you may have needed to make adjustments if you transitioned to working from home, it'd be helpful to make a plan and discuss any adjustments that need to be made as you return to work.

You may need to consider giving yourself extra travel time to get to and from work, and have any additional safety routines for when you return home (e.g., changing your clothes and showering if you work in a high-risk workplace like a hospital).

Making a collaborative plan ahead of time can ensure that everyone in your household is on the same page and minimise any additional stress related to sharing resources and responsibilities.

If you have children, be clear about anticipated changes to have as much predictability as possible. It will take time to adjust, so try to be patient with one another in the process!

7. Create a healthy self-care routine to increase your resilience to workplace stress

Anytime you experience a rise in your stress levels, it is important to amp-up your self-care routine so that you try to prevent burn-out.

This includes making sure you are eating well, getting enough exercise and social interaction, engaging in relaxing and enjoyable activities when you can, and having a wind-down routine to help you maintain good sleep.

It also includes seeking medical help if you are unwell rather than pushing on. All these strategies can help lower your stress levels and help you make the transition more easily.

8. Challenge any unhelpful thoughts and use self-soothing strategies to calm any difficult emotions

It is important to maintain perspective and to remind yourself that relatively simple precautionary measures, like social distancing and hand hygiene, are reasonably effective in reducing your risk of contracting the virus.

So if you find yourself continuing to worry, **it's helpful to examine your thoughts and use some practical strategies to calm your emotions**. We've put together a guide to help you do just that - click below to get your copy or visit https://covid19.thiswayup.org.au/.

Download the 'Calming Your Emotions' Guide ⬇

9. Give yourself time to adjust and get used to a new way of doing things

Be mindful of the expectations you place on yourself and others, and try to be patient with the ongoing uncertainty and change related to COVID-19.

Things may need to look different to what you're used to for a while and it's normal to feel stressed, annoyed, and frustrated. **Here are some things you can do as you continue to adapt:**

- Acknowledge that changes to our way of life are essential to containing the spread of COVID-19.
- Remind yourself that this is a transition period and things won't be like this forever.
- Be kind and gentle with yourself - your physical and mental health are more important than ever.
- Try not to rush through your day and have regular, grounding breaks.
- Take it day-by-day, and adjust what you do and how you do it as you go.
- Have regular check-ins with ohers and try to create a positive and supportive work environment.

10. Recognise when anxiety is getting out of hand and get extra support

Being informed, having a plan and an open line of communication within the workplace, and taking reasonable precautions to manage the risk of contracting the virus will ease anxiety for many people. While some level of stress is expected as you return to work and adjust to yet another change in your routine, it should subside as you settle into a new pace.

If however, you continue to find yourself feeling worried, anxious, or stressed despite implementing some (or all) of our suggestions above, it may be a sign that you may benefit from addressing your anxiety directly.

Here is what you can do if you feel like your anxiety is starting to take a toll:

- Check your levels of stress by taking our free and anonymous online test here:
  https://covid19.thiswayup.org.au

- Make a time to see your GP to discuss how you've been feeling - your GP may suggest some simple things to try, order some tests to rule out any physical cause, or make a referral to a mental health professional.

- Consider doing an online self-help course to learn practical strategies for dealing with anxiety - you can find a range of scientifically-supported courses here: https://thiswayup.org.au/courses/

- Contact the Employee Assistance Program and find out what support options are available through your workplace.

- Schedule a few sessions with a mental health clinician (like a psychologist) who can help you understand why you're feeling the way you are what you can do to start feeling better.

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To access additional tools for coping with stress and anxiety during the coronavirus outbreak, please visit our website.

www.thiswayup.org.au/coronavirus

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