

Easing “Return-to-Work” Anxiety

When COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic in 2020, building closures and event cancellations began in an effort to stop the spread. This included sporting events, concerts, holiday celebrations, birthday parties, weddings, graduations, in-person school, and much more. For many, this also included the closure of office buildings. Employers around the globe adjusted to a new “work from home” world that took many employees time to adjust to – one that eventually became our “new normal.”

Now, more than two years later and with the development of safe and effective vaccines and COVID cases slowly decreasing, organizations have begun returning to in-person, almost pre-pandemic, work environments. Especially with the recent lifting of mask mandates in most work settings, this return-to-work process may cause an increase in anxiety as people across the country have grown accustomed to their pandemic work environments.

“People are having a hard time transitioning. Some people do get set in their place being at home and have that difficult time, teetering from anxious about being home all the time and then anxious about going back in the work place and being around people they haven’t been around for over a year now,” says Ashley Lisek, an OSF HealthCare family medicine APRN.

With nearly 220 million people fully vaccinated in the United States, which is more than 65% of the population, an end to this pandemic seems closer than it has since it began. However, we aren’t out of the woods yet, and the fear of COVID-19 is still very real.

Throughout the pandemic, many Americans did not venture outside of their homes very frequently other than for essential errands. In fact, at-home office spaces became a popular “DIY” project. So how can you prepare for returning to your pre-pandemic work space?

“My number one advice to getting back into it is maybe start doing your routines now the best you can. Start laying out how you would incorporate those routines because the people who have been doing this for the last year have been very set in their ways about what they are doing – so it may help by getting back into that role,” advises Lisek.

She continues, “Maybe a week out, start waking up at the same time and do your normal routine and try to get out of the house for more extended periods of time. Try to ease yourself into getting into environments that you haven’t been in for so long, which may help put you at ease a little.”

Additionally, take short breaks in your day to get some fresh air outside, go for a brisk walk, and make sure you are getting the proper nutrients, drinking plenty of water, and getting a sleep schedule in place in order to stay healthy as you get back into the swing of things.

Most importantly, Lisek reminds us to not let our guards down completely, as COVID-19 is still prevalent. And if you feel more comfortable continuing to wear your COVID-19 face mask even if there is no longer a mandate in place, bring that with you when you head into the office.

If after returning to work your anxiety is still high and you are not able to adjust, Lisek recommends talking to someone you trust about how you are feeling, or perhaps seeking professional help.

“If you get to a point where this is happening more frequently and you feel like it is something that is impacting your day to where you physically cannot go about your day to day life, I recommend trying to seek help – whether that be your primary care or an emergency room setting,” advises Lisek.

If you or a loved one is experiencing mental health struggles caused by the pandemic, OSF HealthCare offers free [behavioral health navigation services](#) to help understand all resources available in your area.