

Returning to Work During the Pandemic: Adjusting Psychologically to the New Normal

As stay-at-home orders are released and societies begin to open up, staff will begin to return to their physical offices. However, at least for the next six to twelve months, things at work are likely to feel quite different than they did before the pandemic. In a very short time, expectations about how we should behave at work and in public have changed significantly.

There has been a wide range of opinions about physical distancing since the beginning of the pandemic, and we will also see a wide range of opinions and experiences during this next phase around returning to work. Some people will be eagerly anticipating returning to the workplace. However, this won't be everyone's experience. For some, returning to work may feel intimidating or downright scary.

Even if you're feeling ready (more than ready!) to emerge from lockdown and return to the workplace, leaving the sanctuary of home and going back out into public spaces is likely to feel strange and stir up some anxiety. Because of this, it will be helpful to know a bit about what to expect in the workplace, what sorts of feelings and reactions we and others may experience, and what we can do to help ourselves and others cope. This resource was written to help you with that.

It is going to look and feel different when we return to work

To ease the transition back to the workplace, many steps have been taken at IRC to protect staff health and safety and to provide clear guidance around how we should interact. In the same way that we have had to change our social practices in public spaces in recent months, we will have to make similar changes when we return to work.

During the last several months, many of us have had to practice physical distancing, spending more time than ever in our homes and with our families. We have begun wearing face masks to decrease spread of the virus, and standing further apart from one another. Using hand sanitizer and washing our hands thoroughly have become regular practices. These new practices, and others, will translate to the workplace.

There will likely be fewer people at work, as we seek to keep offices at 50% or less density. Co-workers may be working on alternative days. Face masks will be common. There will likely be tape marking where people can stand when waiting. There may be temperatures taken to allow office access. Only two people will be allowed in elevators, meaning more waiting to move around inside larger buildings. Desks will need to be cleaned of clutter (including personal

items) to assist in cleaning and decontamination. Conversations at work will likely feel different when standing 6 feet apart to help minimize the spread of the virus. We will all need to do our part to create a safe and healthy workplace. Life will be different in ways that will be impossible to ignore.

What sorts of feelings and reactions may we experience?

When we return to the workplace there will be lots of differences and cues that the world is not as safe as we want it to be right now. It's likely to feel weird, at least initially, and make us feel somewhat unsettled and anxious.

There's lots of good neuroscience behind this. Right now, our brains are reacting to the sense of danger we're feeling, and the parts of our brain responsible for protecting us are sending strong messages (and in some cases, overriding) the parts of our brain in charge of clear thinking, reasoning, and emotion control. We are still on high alert, our bodies are producing extra stress chemicals, and it's going to show up in our feelings and our behavior.

Here are some of the feelings and reactions we may experience when we return to a shared workplace:

- **Extra cautious, vigilant, and anxious:** We may feel more cautious and conscientious of what we're doing to protect our own health and safety, and that of others. We may also feel more threatened and anxious at the thought or experience of being close to other people.
- **Constrained:** We may be used to greeting each other physically (with a hug, kiss on the cheek, pat on the arm, or handshake). However, in the near future we will no longer be permitted to stand close enough to touch each other. Many other things we're used to doing as a matter of course may feel different, too. We may feel restricted and constrained by guidelines around physical distancing, wearing masks, and other practices. We may also feel resentful and annoyed by those constraints.
- **Distractibility, poor concentration and memory, and feeling overloaded:** When we're in threat-response mode, we have less capacity to pay attention to normal tasks. While we're adjusting to being back in the workplace, we may find it difficult to concentrate and focus on work as we normally would. We may also find ourselves feeling overloaded or "maxed out" more quickly than normal.
- **Confusion:** We normally convey a large amount of information to each other nonverbally—particularly through our facial expressions. As most of the muscles we use to convey these emotions and gestures in our face reside below the eyes, wearing masks can partially erase an important avenue of silent communication. You may find yourself looking more intently at a coworker's eyes to gauge a reaction for non-verbal cues, as that will be the only part of the face left exposed to read. And while the muscles around the eyes can certainly convey a lot of emotion, we usually rely on that partial expression coupled with the rest of the face to complete our interpretation of a facial gesture. Losing this non-verbal cueing system or having it diminished significantly may feel jarring, unnerving, and confusing. It may make it

difficult for you to “say” what you normally express through your facial gestures. Likewise, it may make it difficult for you to understand somebody else’s expression or meaning. Misunderstandings are likely to become more common.

- **Sadness and a sense of loss:** Sadness and a sense of loss are to be expected, especially in the initial weeks back at work. It is very natural to miss human contact as we know it and to grieve the loss of our “normal routines.” For those who are affectionate, gregarious, or naturally inclined towards social touching, some of the new restrictions and guidelines will be especially challenging.
- **General reactivity, annoyance, and irritability:** When we’re feeling unsettled, stressed, and anxious, we become more reactive. In practice, this often means we become more irritable in the face of challenges, constraints, and misunderstandings more quickly.

What can we do to help ourselves and others cope with returning to work?

Here are some strategies that can help us cope more effectively as we return to work during this season:

- **Expect anxiety to rear its head in interesting ways, and harness compassion:** This unprecedented time is going to be stressful for all of us. If we *expect* to see an uptick in distractibility, irritability, impatience and reactivity, we won’t be caught by surprise when we notice colleagues (or ourselves) having reactions that seem disproportionate to the situation or seeming more irritable and less friendly. And if we predict and assume we are facing coworkers who are feeling stressed and vulnerable rather than coworkers who are shirking their work or trying to make our lives difficult, we will have more understanding, empathy, compassion and patience in challenging moments.
- **Remember the big picture:** During times like these it can be easy to focus only on the hassle of a more controlled lifestyle. For example, while wearing masks is voluntary in some regions, in areas of community transmission it will not be optional at IRC. This may be an adjustment for some. Remember that this period of hypervigilance and restriction is necessary but *temporary*. Make sure to remember that the painstaking efforts that we make now to maintain distance from each other, don masks, and stagger work schedules will help us to move through the pandemic as safely as possible. By our actions at work, we are helping to keep patient loads at local hospitals manageable, our doctors and nurses sane, and our communities safer.
- **Remember that we will adapt to the new guidelines and restrictions:** During the very first days back, it may be jarring to see so many people with half of their face covered by masks, for example. However, you will likely get accustomed to it, just as we have become accustomed to seeing people wear masks in the community.
- **Be patient (with yourself and others) when things feel awkward and people get too close:** During this season when norms about how we act and interact have suddenly changed, there will be moments when we forget. For example, greeting habits are hard to break, and

there may be instances in which we automatically move to greet someone physically, only to remember that we can no longer do that safely. Should this happen, simply back track as soon as you remember and apologize. We will all work to remind each other of these new physically distancing rules by using a simple hand gesture and putting our hand up, palm facing out, as a gentle reminder about the importance of physical distancing and not getting too close to one another. There may well be some awkward interactions initially as we all adjust to these new ways of greeting and meeting in the office space, so try your best not to feel ashamed or take it personally if someone raises their palm towards you.

- **Be gentle with yourself and others when mistakes are made:** Everyone makes mistakes. Being unnecessarily hard on yourself or others will only add to stresses. Try not to feel ashamed in moments you forget to keep your distance, for example. If you've been shaking people's hands all your life, it's understandable that you may naturally go to shake someone's hand.
- **Remember that misunderstandings will likely become more common:** Especially during this time when most of us will already be feeling stressed and wearing masks, misunderstandings will become more common. To help address this, work hard to communicate clearly yourself, and ask questions and repeat things back to others to help clarify and make sure you understand their meaning.
- **Compensate for the missing non-verbal cues:** During this season of wearing masks, you may want to compensate for some of the missing non-verbal cues by adding more words to verbalize the non-verbal cues that others can no longer see and make sure that people understand your thoughts and feelings. For example, we will need to tap into our creativity and find different, less physical ways of saying hello and goodbye. We may rely on our words or hand gestures more than usual to convey how we feel about seeing someone.
- **Break down work into smaller chunks:** Especially if you're feeling distracted or overwhelmed and unsure of where to start, make a list of the work you have to do and break it down into smaller and more manageable tasks. Make clear to-do lists, and use other strategies to help you focus and map out a clear pathway to tackling your work responsibilities.
- **Practice good personal stress management:** During any season when we're under extra stress, it becomes even more important that we are mindful about doing things to take care of our own wellbeing. Here are a couple of stress management strategies you may want to try during this season:
 - **Start each day by taking several deep breaths:** Breathing slowly and deeply helps our minds and bodies to stay calm. Count to 3 slowly as you inhale, count to 4 slowly as you exhale. Slowing down the breath slows down our minds.
 - **Get your morning off to a strong start:** Eat a good breakfast of whole foods. Whole foods are foods that have just one ingredient: itself. Try starting the day with fruits, nuts, vegetable slices, eggs. When we eat foods that are unprocessed, it can help our bodies to feel calm.

- **Bring headphones to listen to music:** When you get frustrated or stressed at work, it can be hard to shake the feeling. Plugging headphones into a computer can allow you to listen to soothing music to help to shift out of the unpleasant feeling state.
- **Take the stairs when you can, and get exercise in other ways, too:** If there is an option to use stairs, this can save you time and frustration from waiting for an elevator and get your heart rate going at the same time. Make sure to build in some time for exercise to help use up the stress chemicals we're all producing more of!
- **Stay connected to your social communities:** Many of us have instituted virtual calls with our favorite friends, colleagues, and family. Keep these going while you return to work. Our relationships are critical to our general health and happiness.
- **Keep a journal:** It can be very helpful to keep a record of feelings and thoughts, particularly if you're feeling very burdened or overwhelmed. There is a therapeutic effect that comes when we translate our thoughts into written words.
- **Speak with a counselor:** Whether reacting to new stress or proactively seeking tips on how to build your resilience, [the counselors available through the EARP](#) can be a helpful support during this new phase. Consider setting up a free, confidential appointment.

A note for managers

Managers will be instrumental in setting the tone for returning to work and helping staff to adjust well. It will be helpful for managers to model responsible and respectful behavior in the workplace, and they should serve as role models for following the new guidelines for health and safety. Staff who do not observe managers putting health-promoting behaviors into practice will have less motivation to do so themselves.

Additionally, managers may want to create time in meetings to discuss adaptation to this "new normal" at work and invite staff to share ideas about how to make the transition flow smoothly. Just as it was a major adjustment to shift to isolation, it will be a major adjustment to return to work. Staff will benefit from being able to talk about these changes with each other.

Times like these can provoke fear, but how we manage our fear can make a significant difference in how much emotional distress we experience. Some of us are prone to excessive worry even without a pandemic. It helps for teams to share openly about how they are adapting during this unusual time. In one-on-one and team meetings, it may help to start meetings with a brief check-in that may include the following questions:

- How are you doing today?

- What has the return to work been like for you?
- Are you coping okay?
- What is feeling the most different to you this week?
- Is there anything that I can do to help?

Together, we can create a culture of caring, and forge stronger work-community relationships. When we are able to share our thoughts, feelings, and reactions openly, it helps these emotions to move through us and dissipate. When we hide or inhibit our natural responses, we can develop unpleasant stress-related symptoms. For example, people who are not comfortable sharing about their feelings tend to develop more physical signs of stress including headaches, stomach-aches, and general body tension. As managers, please do your best to create an environment of dialogue and care, and remember to refer staff to supportive resources like the [Duty of Care website](#), the [counseling options available through the EARP](#), and IRC's [Staff Health Advisor](#) if they have any questions related to health and safety during the pandemic.

There is unfortunately no way to make the pandemic a stress free period, but if we do our best to take care of our needs and be compassionate to others we will be able to get through this together and be stronger for it. Thank you all for everything that you do to make the IRC a caring workplace.