TIPS FOR TRANSITIONING BACK TO WORK

Office of Employee and Organization Development
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We are all creatures of habit, quick to attach to the routines and structures of our lives. And then, comes change, and we are pushed out of our comfort zones. It was over a year ago that we abruptly left our cubicles and offices, co-workers, and tech support, for the safety of sheltering at home. Dining room and kitchen tables became home offices and family rooms were converted into classrooms.

> Buddhist teachers say the only thing permanent in life is change.

We know the inevitable change is upon us and soon we will be asked to return to work. You might have some angst or trepidation about the thought of doing this. Know you are not alone. Here are some handy tips to keep in mind as you make the transition back to the office.

1. **Identify Your Feelings.** Do a regular check-in with yourself and identify what you are feeling. It is perfectly normal to feel some anxiety, fear, or even a sense of loss. There is a comfort and flexibility that working from home can provide. Extra time in the mornings, a supply of foods and snacks you like, and more family time are a few of the perks you might have grown accustomed to. When you name the inner feeling, you can then find a strategy to cope with it.

2. **Mentally Rehearse Returning to The Office**. Mental rehearsal helps us to prepare for the future. Being caught off guard with unexpected situations or interactions can generate anxiety. Think of some scenarios that you might find yourself in upon your return. For example, how will you interact with a co-worker who holds different beliefs about Covid and Covid vaccinations than you do? How will it feel to be in the company of co-workers when you have grown accustomed to working solo? What will it feel like to be away from your children for longer stretches?

3. **Establish a Routine that Supports Returning to Work.** Begin to establish a routine like the one you had pre-Covid. Many have found themselves going to bed later and sleeping in. Some have grown accustomed to going to the gym at noon instead of the early morning. Try recreating the routine that supported your pre-Covid work life several weeks before re-entering the workplace. Get up early and work the same hours you would work in the office. This will help make the transition back less abrupt and stressful.

4. **Think About What You Will Need To Feel Comfortable and Safe.** This might be wearing a mask or social distancing even when others are not. Purchase the supplies you need for your office return such as masks and hand sanitizer. Mentally rehearse how to kindly ask co-workers to respect your physical space.

5. **Practice Tolerance and Kindness.** People have different beliefs, perspectives, and practices which you may agree or disagree with. The nature of the mind is that it judges and compares constantly. It is good to notice this and observe your own thinking with compassion and curiosity. Notice what becomes activated in you when someone holds a different belief, particularly one that your mind judges to be wrong. Do you experience anger or stress? Notice how you want to behave and what story you are telling yourself. Seek to minimize reactionary behaviors.

6. **Develop an Inner Pause Button**. Stop what you are doing at least 3 times a day and take a breath break. Ten breaths are enough to take you off autopilot and reset your nervous system. The inner pause is the way to bring the relaxation response back on line.

7. **Expect to Feel a Bit Weird for the First Few Weeks.** Work at home schedules are generally more flexible and comfortable. You can sip your morning coffee and answer emails in your pajamas. Now, your schedule will be tighter and the demands of office life will be back. Take frequent breaks to clear your mind and ease back into this new lifestyle.

8. **Check in With Your Team and Manager Before Returning**. Express any concerns or thoughts you might have about the transition and safety protocols that will be in place.

9. **Be Flexible.** Covid has been a new experience for everyone and has affected everyone differently. Some have lost loved ones to the virus and are still grieving. Others have felt a new level of vulnerability because of preexisting health conditions. The best way to transition back is one step at a time. Remember, neither your coworkers or management team has done this before and we are all learning as we go. Give people the benefit of the doubt.

10. **Talk and Connect**. You are not alone. Many of your co-workers are going to be feeling slightly anxious or uncertain about what this phase of Covid life will look like. The virus has not gone away and we will need to continue to take safety precautions and support each other.

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