

Helping Our Teams Cope with Return-to-Campus Anxiety

After working virtually for more than a year and seeing co-workers/students only on the screen, the thought of coming back to campus and having in-person interactions can feel overwhelming.

Anxiety is a feeling of worry and nervousness about future events and outcomes that seem uncertain/unknown. It usually arises when we begin to focus/think about what “could or may” happen which we usually tie to the worst possible scenario that we can imagine.

Some of your team members may be experiencing various degrees of anxiety, just as they did back in March 2020 when the University moved to an essential services model and employees had to quickly adjust to working remotely. Given the length of time that individuals have been away from the physical office, many have adapted to their new normal. As employees transition back to working on campus, they will experience an adjustment process and may feel anxious about returning to routines that were once comfortable but have now become unfamiliar. The greatest adjustment will be around boundaries and physical distancing. Going from a 2-dimensional (virtual) to a 3-dimensional (in-person) work environment and going from using primarily 2 senses to using all your senses can also be overwhelming for some individuals.

Re-acclimatizing to in-person activities can bring various degrees of fear and anxiety. Easing into these in-person experiences is the key. It is important to remember that having these feelings is normal.

Why some individuals may be anxious about returning to campus

There are many reasons why individuals may be feeling anxious. The following are some examples:

- Transitions typically increase our levels of anxiety. We feel safer in situations that are familiar and predictable. The minute we move into unfamiliar/unpredictable situations/environment, we typically feel more on edge and are in the lookout for “dangers/potential threats”. This reaction can be very exhausting.
- Whenever you have avoided something for a period of time, you will feel more anxious about returning to it even though it was once normal. Throughout the pandemic we have been told by public health officials to avoid in-person interactions, to keep our distance, to minimize outings, etc. As we return to campus, it is normal to feel anticipatory anxiety about doing things that we routinely did before the pandemic.

How to cope with feelings of anxiety

The following are some strategies that can help ease the anxiety. We encourage you to share these with your team.

- Plan ahead to gain a sense of control over a future that is uncertain. For example, schedule your commute time back into your day to help ease into a normal routine, look for new lunch-to-go recipes, prepare your office wardrobe, have a plan in place to address caregiving responsibilities.
- Take the time to reflect on your boundaries so you can anticipate how you may respond to different situations at work, such as greeting a co-worker or having lunch. Also, practice what you would say and what you would do in these situations.
- Focus on the positives about returning to work to boost your hope and optimism. Think about the co-workers that you have missed and old routines that will be a welcome relief. Also think about the new habits/routines that you have developed which you would like to maintain.

- Explore challenging and engaging activities that can absorb your attention. This can help stop negative feelings.
- Accept that things will be different and get the support needed from friends, family, and professionals to help you get through the period of adjustment.
- Remember that all thoughts are not facts. Seek the information needed to help ease some of your feelings and negative thoughts.
- When you are feeling anxious, stop what you are doing, take a pause, breathe, and recenter yourself.
- Reach out for help if you feel that the anxiety associated with the transition is becoming too much to manage. The Employee and Family Assistance Program can assist you. Go to <https://www.uwindsor.ca/humanresources/EFAP> for more information.

How people leaders can help

While the strategies listed above apply to everyone, as a people leader, you can help ease the anxiety team members may be feeling.

- Clearly communicate safety and return to work plans and expectations. Remind your team that as we continue planning there may be periods of ambiguity and be honest about what you know and what you do not know.
- Let employees know that their safety is a top priority.
- Be patient as people adjust to new realities; remain flexible and welcome suggestions to address emerging challenges and concerns.
- Acknowledge and validate the emotions that employees may be feeling and challenges that they may be experiencing. Remind your team about the importance of empathy, patience, and compassion and find ways to create safe spaces for people to process their emotions and feelings.
- Check-in with individual employees regularly and address their concerns in a timely manner.
- Provide opportunities for employees to connect, catch-up and re-build relationships/connections.
- Share information and updates in a timely manner. Ensure clarity and understanding of institution-wide communications and remind employees that health and safety protocols may continue to change as the pandemic evolves but reinforce your commitment to keep them informed.
- Provide as much consistency, predictability, and structure as possible.
- Do not ignore signs of distress. Ensure employees know how to access [mental health supports](#). Remind them of the resources available through the [Employee and Family Assistance Program](#).

Resources Consulted

Cleveland Clinic. Returning to Work Soon? Here Are Some Ways to Make the Process Easier (May 2021). Retrieved from: <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/>

Eden Health. How to Cope with Return-to-Work Anxiety (May 2021). Retrieved from: <https://edenhealth.com>.

Forbes. Return to Work Anxiety? You're Not Alone, (March 2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com>

Harvard Business Review. Why You're So Anxious About Going Back to the office (July 2021). Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org>

University of California. Anxious About Returning to Work? Psychologists Offer Insight and Tips, (May 2021). Retrieved from: <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu>.



Putting the COVID-19 Employee Pulse Check Survey into Action

This initiative has been designed to address the areas of focus and key actions emerging from the survey results.