



Working Towards Individual and Group Resiliency: Stress related to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions

The warm and sunny days of summer eventually give way to the cooler temperatures of the fall season, complete with children and young adults alike returning to school, and a general return to routine. This transition is often met with a mix of sadness of the season's end, and excitement for what lies ahead. As the most unique summer in memory unfolds, this transition will overlap with another significant milestone – gradually increased access to the worksite for some federal employees for the first time in half a year.

The return to familiar surroundings will be an entirely foreign experience in many ways. Taken for granted aspects of the work environment will now be understood and acted upon differently – from workstations and common areas, to personal space and the new “etiquette of the office”. This is not confined to the time on-site – the new workday experience may not start with the morning commute, and end when arriving home.

Such uncertainty can be stressful since humans strive for stability, predictability and certainty in life, and COVID-19 has disrupted all of these areas. Increased access to the worksite is an extension of this. The transition from working remotely represents a symbolic “stepping out of the bubble” that many of us have inhabited over the past months, consisting of being surrounded by our loved ones in our personal space, and stepping out only when necessary. Working on-site increases the potential for exposure to risk and, consequently, stress.

This is not the first significant shift in our lives due to COVID-19, it is simply the latest. This ongoing uncertainty creates a “pandemic fatigue” that poses an additional challenge when transitioning from working remotely to working on-site (or continuing to work from home for some).

Successful implementation requires a level of organizational and individual resilience – an ability to recover from adversity. On an individual level, this newsletter dedicated an earlier issue to *Managing Mental Health in Times of Uncertainty*. This issue is for anyone who may need to return to the workplace and aims to address strategies to be implemented in the period leading up to, and in the weeks after the gradual or complete transition back to the worksite, to help mitigate the level of uncertainty and stress that accompanies this unique time.

Remember that this is a collective experience

This is less of a tip and more of an overall reminder of the scale and impact of the pandemic in our collective lives. Every one of us has been touched by this to some degree—from daily exposure in the media, to the significant disruption to routine. Many of us know someone who has been sick with the virus and, sadly, individuals who have lost their lives. This pandemic is not over, nor is there a clear timeline for a return to a semblance of normalcy; and the same risks and concerns remain. Increasing access to the worksite represents the next step towards restoring our regular routines and functioning. This is an important phase for everyone, and brings with it a new level of uncertainty and stress. Maintaining a “we are in this together” focus opens avenues for connection and support from one another, and reinforces a sense of community that serves as a protective factor when facing this transition.

Be informed – Ask questions

Businesses in the community are required to follow the guidelines communicated through local public health authorities to minimize the risk of exposure for staff and customers. Find out what these are. Do you still have questions? Ask. Having a good understanding of the safety protocols in place helps you to visualize and anticipate what to expect as you make your way to and from work and patronize the local services. This helps you to make more informed decisions about your commute.

Similarly, your department will be following the occupational health and safety advice to minimize risk to staff. These may vary from department to department. Safety is a shared responsibility, and your role as an employee is to be familiar with the protocols being implemented. By actively engaging with your leadership, you also help to build on your familiarity and understanding of the new work environment, which serves to minimize the level of uncertainty inherent with the return to your work site.

Be an active advocate for the safety of your workspace

A new office etiquette will emerge out of the increased access to the workspace. Rules and expectations relating to personal space, common areas, communication, and sanitation, to name a few, will initially be unfamiliar and awkward for everyone. Comfortable and familiar actions of old, like handshakes, borrowing a pen, or being in close proximity together as you work on an assignment, were perfectly acceptable in the old work environment. These same actions now pose a potential health risk. Here is where the shared responsibility to reinforce the new work expectations is important. This will take some time to get used to. If small, inadvertent violations occur, how do you gently bring this to the attention of your co-worker? This type of communication is difficult but important. On an individual level, you can create a few phrases prepared for different scenarios, and practice these on your own. Should you need to be assertive with a colleague, these statements will be much easier to deliver.

On a team, or departmental level, the shared responsibility can take the form of an open discussion of “how do we practice and enforce safety protocols in our workspace”. Developing a shared understanding of what is expected of each team member creates a culture of mutual accountability and sets up an environment of a shared ownership of safety, where a gentle challenge is delivered and received in a supportive manner.

Connect with your work supports

You are not alone in navigating the uncertainties of this transition from working remotely to working on-site. Your colleagues may be experiencing the same feelings. Proactively connecting with your colleagues provides a link for support, and reinforces the sense that “we are all in this together”. The usual ways of connecting – over a coffee or lunch in the break room, for example, or an impromptu meeting in your office, may no longer be a safe and viable option. This may require you to be creative in the ways that you reach out and connect. The important part to this is finding different ways to get the usual connection with and support from your colleagues.

Be gentle with yourself

This has been common advice provided throughout the pandemic response, but bears repeating here. While increasing access to the worksite is a positive step, it brings with it new and unique stressors. Be kind to yourself – adjusting to the changes requires additional emotional energy. Allow for yourself to be tired, drained, or initially not at full capacity. Allow for space in your own time to recuperate and rejuvenate. You may notice strong reactions in yourself in the preparation to work on-site; you may notice that these reactions present themselves a few weeks or months into the transition; or you may not have any adverse reactions. All of these are okay, and are normal responses to an abnormal situation. It is important to be kind to yourself regarding how you are feeling. If you have judgements, expectations or rules about your feelings, this can add to the stress that you are already feeling. It is important to note here that, if your reactions are impacting your personal or professional activities, make sure you are reaching out for help. From your personal support network to your Employee Assistance Program, you have access to mental health support at any time. You deserve this.

Increasing access to the worksite is an important next step in the transition back into the post-pandemic world. The responsibility to ensure that this return is as safe and comfortable falls on both the workplace and the returning employees. By actively engaging in the understanding and execution of the new safety protocols, plus attending to your own emotional health and that of your colleagues, you can have a significant role in this important transition.

For additional information related to easing of restrictions, visit:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/covid-19/easing-restrictions/departamental-guidebook/federal-worksites.html>

To access confidential psychological support services,
contact the EAP at 1-800-268-7708
or, for the hard of hearing, at 1-800-567-5803.

www.healthcanada.gc.ca/eas

LifeSpeak, a wellness digital platform, is also available for tips and information on a variety of subjects as well as COVID. The platform is accessible through the website and the app.

For more information contact your internal EAP representative.