



Well@Work Podcast

Episode 22: Transitioning Back to the Workplace

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky's Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode of the podcast, Emily Smith discusses strategies for transitioning back to the workplace. And now, Emily Smith.

Hi, my name is Emily Smith with University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. Today I'd like to share some tips on returning to work after COVID-19. Many of us have spent much of the past year working at home, attempting to have meetings across the dining room table from our kids or housemate. It can be challenging to rearrange your life and schedule. We have fought through low morale, lack of space, and many distractions. But we've also benefited: the commute is amazing, we have plenty of time with our pets, and everyone is more flexible.

Thanks to great home internet, creative solutions, and a tiny backyard my friend has thrived working from home. Eduardo is a therapist, he used to see patients in a shared office but now sees them via video conferencing at home. In May, Eduardo and his partner welcomed a third child into their home, a very sweet newborn. Over a summer staying healthy at home, the older kids played in the tiny backyard while Eduardo and the infant saw clients from the living room. Eduardo and his partner, a nurse in the NICU, worked hard to manage distance learning through the Fall; a shift change at the NICU, teletherapy with noise-cancelling headphones, and virtual check-ins with a supervisor have made it possible. As we prepare to return to office life, here are some things to consider for Eduardo and the rest of us.

Returning to work after COVID-19 will look different for every organization and it seems clear that our work lives are forever changed. Organizations are implementing safety measures suggested by local health departments and considering employee concerns as they plan for a return to the office. Hopefully your organization has created a team to update policies and procedures which are clearly communicated to the staff. If not, you may want to contact your supervisor. And that's my first tip: ask your supervisor for a clear, transparent plan for returning to the office. Expect information about cleaning schedules, office spacing, vaccination requirements, and break room policies. Volunteer to be a part of the solution and provide input into the transition plan so that your needs and perspectives are considered.

After months of reduced in-person contact, social interactions may become more frequent, and you may find yourself less productive than you were when you were working from home. My next tip is to learn to manage social interactions without losing focus on your work. Give yourself time to catch up

and reconnect with your team, but don't let it dominate your workday. If you are struggling with the social aspects of your work day, consider creating a short period where you touch base with colleagues outside of work hours, during lunch time or on breaks, before returning your focus to clients and projects that need your attention. Clinic meetings, rounds, or team planning sessions may run longer than expected initially because social interactions dominate; make adjustments if you find this challenging.

Tip 3, know how to safely manage or return to work. The CDC offers clear guides for high-touch communal items and suggestions for scheduling breaks and shifts to limit contact. If you are concerned about taking a break to eat because the lunch room is suddenly crowded, consider eating outdoors. If there are windows to open, do so to increase the ventilation. While it once would have been fun to chat with friends, it may still feel unsafe to do so without six feet of distance. Give yourself permission to gradually transition back to pre-COVID interactions. It will take some time for us all to feel comfortable again.

Tip 4: it may not be all or nothing. If your productivity has increased or remained steady while working from home, it might be important to still work remotely part time. Talk to your supervisor about possible flex or hybrid options, and remember to factor in the positive benefits of improved communication and peer support that come from increased contact with your colleagues. Even as vaccines are proving themselves effective, we may not go back to “normal” for quite some time, and we will have different levels of comfort with the transition for some time. When you return to work, follow public health guidelines, they will help you and your coworkers to stay well at work. Find more tips for staying well at work on our website and at the CDC or your local health department.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.