

Getting back to the office: Anxiety and the transition



The approval of multiple COVID-19 vaccines is a major step in fighting the pandemic. Yet some may be feeling hesitant to get it once they're able. And those who want it have often found long waits – even in countries with the most available doses.

66%

of global respondents report a strong or moderate trust in COVID-19 vaccines.¹

Approximately

312.25 MILLION

people have already been vaccinated.²

A year into the pandemic, a review of several studies that tracked self-reported symptoms showed that one-third of adults are experiencing anxiety – and the impact appears to be greatest on women, younger adults and those of lower socioeconomic status.³

With symptoms such as irritation, anger, nervousness and sadness – plus trouble sleeping or concentrating⁴ – stress can have a big impact on everyday life. And hearing that it's time to return to the office may only add to the anxiety for some people.

Nervous about in-person work?

If you've been working remotely over the past year, you might be hesitant to return to the office and be around other people – especially if you think your co-workers might not get vaccinated or might not be taking other preventive measures. While your anxiety isn't just something to dismiss, there are some ways you can try to reduce it by taking control where you can.

Get vaccinated. While availability varies throughout the world right now, if you have access to a COVID-19 vaccine, be sure to get it. The vaccines have gone through rigorous testing, and scientists have confirmed that they're safe and effective. While we don't yet know how much of the population needs to be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity, scientists estimate that it's a lot. The threshold is 80% for polio and 95% for measles.⁵ So it's going to take a lot of people being vaccinated to curb the spread.

Keep up safety measures. Continue wearing a mask, washing your hands and social distancing to protect yourself and others, particularly those who have not yet been vaccinated. It's important to remember that the vaccines aren't 100% effective. There's still a small chance you could get COVID-19, but if you do, the vaccine should help reduce the severity of your symptoms. Also, experts aren't sure yet if you can spread the virus after vaccination even if you don't get sick.⁶ Wipe down shared surfaces, too. Droplets spread in the air when people talk, sneeze or cough, and they can be viable for hours on surfaces, as well.

Be open with your manager about your concerns. Ask what's being done to keep employees safe. You might hear about steps such as desks being moved further apart and filtration systems being installed, and this may be comforting. You can also suggest opening windows or using fans to increase air circulation,⁷ having virtual meetings so you don't gather in groups, and staggering work hours for employees. If it's warm where you work, consider taking breaks, lunches or even meetings outside.⁷

Talk to your co-workers. Even if you have different views on the pandemic, there may be steps you can all agree on to keep each other safe, such as staying at least 6 feet apart when talking.⁴ Discuss covering each other's responsibilities when someone doesn't feel well, too. If you work on a laptop and your company permits it, consider bringing it home with you in case you experience symptoms or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19. Also, add video or phone options to meetings, so colleagues can choose to dial in from home if they don't feel well.

Take care of yourself. Identify what you don't have control over and do your best to accept it.⁴ Think about all the things you *can* control. For example, packing a lunch can help you avoid crowded areas such as restaurants and cafeterias. If you're experiencing anxiety, reach out for help. Talk to your doctor, or contact your company's employee assistance programme to learn about resources that are available to you.

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2. Our World in Data. Coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccinations. Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>. Accessed March 9, 2021.

3. Wang Y, et al. Factors associated with psychological distress during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on the predominantly general population: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE*. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0244630>. Published December 28, 2020. Accessed February 16, 2021.

4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Employees: How to cope with job stress and build resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/mental-health-non-healthcare.html#:~:text=%20Communicate%20with%20your%20coworkers,schedule%20before%20the%20pandemic>. Accessed February 16, 2021.

5. World Health Organization. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Herd immunity, lockdowns and COVID-19. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/herd-immunity-lockdowns-and-covid-19>. Accessed February 16, 2021.

6. CDC. Frequently asked questions about COVID-19 vaccination. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html>. Accessed February 16, 2021.

7. CDC. COVID-19 employer information for office buildings. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/office-buildings.html>. Accessed February 16, 2021.

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