

**Managing Your
Return To Work:
A Guide for Staff Who
Have Been Shielding**

The aims of this guide

Whatever your experiences of shielding have been, it is likely that returning to work after a long period of being at home will bring up lots of different emotions. This guide was developed to help you manage your return to work. It will go through some common responses to going back to work and some strategies that might help you manage.

A mix of feelings

During lockdown many of us have experienced a complex range of feelings. There might have been moments where we felt anxious and scared, others we felt frustrated or guilty and times where we felt thankful and content to be at home. It is likely that your return to work might also bring up lots of feelings. It might be that you are looking forward to some aspects of going back and dreading others. It is very normal to experience different feelings at the same time. It is also understandable if you feel overwhelmed.

It can be helpful if you notice and acknowledge feelings when you have them. Reminding yourself that your feelings are a normal part of the changes you have, and are going through can be useful. If you can, try to get used to the idea that there are likely to be ups and downs as you return to work. Mentally preparing for this can make feelings a little easier to deal with.

Anxiety and fear

For the last few months, the government has told you to stay at home and avoid other people to protect yourself. The message you have been given, was that you were at high risk of catching COVID-19. Understandably, it is likely that this caused you a considerable amount of anxiety and fear.

As lockdown and guidance for those shielding eases, the situation has changed and you can go back to work. For many people, returning to work is likely to result in feelings of anxiety and fear. Whilst coming out of shielding might present some risks, perhaps one of the most challenging tasks over the next few months might be to retrain your brain to the idea that it is now safer for you to leave your home.

It might be that you have lots of worries about catching the virus, a second wave or whether people you meet are following government guidelines. Whilst these are all understandable and normal worries, they are unfortunately not things that you are able to control.

One way of managing anxiety is to try and focus on things you can control. Perhaps you can plan your journey to work in a way that minimises risk or create a plan for your day which helps you to feel as safe as possible. Creating plans can help you to feel in control and can reduce worry.

Changes to your workplace

It is likely that your work place has had to change and adapt as a result of COVID-19. There might be new policies or procedures in place which you are not yet familiar with. Coping with changes at work can be stressful. When you return to work, it might be that it takes time for you to adapt and feel confident and comfortable with all the new ways of working. It might sometimes feel as if you are working somewhere new.

If this is the case, try to remember that your colleagues have had months to get used to these changes and they coped with change together as a team. It might be harder for an individual to cope with all these changes at once.

If you can, try to be kind and gentle with yourself. Try to keep your expectations of yourself low. It is unlikely that you will get everything at work right the first day or even in the first few weeks. You might make mistakes or struggle to remember everything you need to. This is normal and understandable.

If you are struggling with a new aspect of the job, try to speak to your line manager or a trusted colleague. They might be able to help you by organising some training or shadowing. They also might be able to provide you with reassurance that others took a while to adapt and learn the changes too.

Feeling overwhelmed and tired

It can be hard taking in lots of new information, particularly when you have been at home for months. Meeting lots of people and being in a different environment are likely to be things you haven't done much recently.

It can be helpful to expect that returning to work will be tiring. You might find it harder to concentrate or pay attention. It might take a while until you feel you have the right levels of energy to do your job as well as you want to.

Try to acknowledge that, for a while, you are likely to find work more tiring than you used to. If you can, try to pace yourself. It might be that you are able to have a conversation with your line manager about this and ask whether any adjustments can be made to accommodate a graded return. If this is not possible, it can be helpful to plan times where you can rest and relax outside of work.

Relationships with colleagues

Some people will have kept in touch with colleagues whilst they were shielding and others will not have. Regardless, it is normal to feel some worries about how your colleagues might react to your return. Whilst shielding, you might have felt guilty that you weren't able to work or envious that others were able to carry on whilst you were stuck at home.

If you can, try to be honest with your manager and your colleagues about how you are feeling. Although this can be difficult, sharing your thoughts, feelings, worries and concerns with trusted colleagues can really help.

If you feel unable to talk with colleagues, it might be helpful to share your feelings with a family member or friend. There are also a number of helplines you can call to talk through any issues you might be experiencing. Details of these helplines are below.

Looking after yourself

Returning to work might feel hard! It is important to acknowledge that you need to take care of yourself. Try to plan fun activities, time with people who make you laugh, relaxation time and treats! All these things will give you more energy to cope with work. Everyone deserves to have times doing things they enjoy.

Recognising when you are struggling

It is important to acknowledge that your life changed dramatically in the spring. You are now going through another process of change. Many people will slowly adapt to our strange new normal over time. However, for some people COVID-19 and its impact on life might mean they struggle with their mental health. It is useful for all of us to be aware of signs that mean we are finding things difficult. Examples might be, finding it difficult to sleep or sleeping too much, over eating or not eating enough, drinking more

alcohol than usual, withdrawing from other people or getting angry/frustrated more easily. Try to be aware of your own warning signs.

If you notice that you are struggling give some of the suggestions below a try. It is also ok to ask for help. Sometimes talking about how you feel with someone trained to help can make a big difference. There are a range of options available to you and these below.

Tips to cope with returning to work

- Notice and acknowledge your feelings
- Share your feelings, worries or concerns with other people
- Try to limit your expectations and give yourself time to adapt
- Pace yourself and plan times you can rest and relax
- Create a plan of things you can control
- Be kind to yourself. Spend time doing things you enjoy and with people who make you laugh.
- If you are struggling ask for help.

Help and resources available to you

Find out support and help is available through your work

Many organisations have put in place a range of staff support options. If you feel able, it might be helpful to speak with your line manager or supervisor about what supports might be able to you.

You might be able to access staff counselling or support from occupational health. If your organisation has an intranet page there might be some helpful information available on that.

Self-help guides

There are lots of self-help guides available on the internet some useful ones on managing stress, anxiety and looking after your mental health can be found here <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications>

Useful Apps

- **Calm** provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music.
- **Headspace** Learn the skills of mindfulness and meditation by using this app for just a few minutes per day.
- **Sleepio** is a personalised, digital sleep improvement programme based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), that gets to the root of stubborn poor sleep. Sleepio users interact with The Prof, their virtual sleep expert, who teaches them evidence-based skills via 6 weekly video sessions.
- **Daylight** is an app that will teach you ways to manage worry and anxiety in your life. Through cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques Daylight offers audio-led guidance tailored to your unique problematic thoughts, behaviours, and responses to worry and anxiety. The programme introduces you to a range of techniques and guides you through daily practice sessions.

Helplines

Breathing Space. It helps to get some Breathing Space. You are not alone and talking about how you feel is a positive first step in getting help. You can call 0800 83 85 87. Weekdays: 6pm-2pm, Weekend: Friday 6pm – Monday 6am. Free from any phone.

Samaritans. To talk about anything that is upsetting you, you can contact Samaritans 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You can call 116 123 free from any phone.

Contact your GP

If you have general concerns about your mental health or believe that your wellbeing has been impacted by your experiences during COVID 19 then it might be helpful to make an appointment to see your GP. Your GP will be able to speak to you about your difficulties and refer you to appropriate services if required.

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