

May is Mental Health Month – a perfect time to talk about “Re-entry anxiety”

Info provided by Cleveland Clinic Canada

Most of us would never have predicted a global pandemic in 2020 – and even fewer of us could fathom the scale and duration. Now, as we cautiously test the waters and attempt to return to some semblance of “normal”, some people may be feeling “re-entry anxiety” around returning to the office and participating in other previously “normal” activities.

While for some, the thought of re-opening the workplace and increased socialization with colleagues brings a welcome sense of relief and even excitement, for others it can bring about acute feelings of anxiety, trepidation and even dread.

All of us experience anxiety at times. When faced with potentially harmful situations or worrying triggers, the experience of anxiety is our body’s way of telling us to pay attention to our environment.

When returning to the workplace, feeling some stress or anxiety is a normal reaction and can be constructive. Optimal levels of anxiety sharpen our senses, causing us to become more alert and focused, which can be helpful in certain situations such as meeting an important deadline, or delivering a presentation. However, having too much anxiety can interfere with, and negatively affect, our performance.

When anxiety results in avoidance of a situation or makes it difficult to function at work or in relationships, these are signs that the level of anxiety may be overly persistent or intense, which may require more formal support and intervention.

Recognizing anxiety in ourselves and others

Recognizing anxiety in ourselves and others can be tricky since everyone processes and reacts to anxiety differently. Some signs to watch for that could indicate anxiety:

- Irritability: more irritable or seeming to have a shorter fuse than normal.
- Avoidance or social withdrawal: consistently avoiding certain situations or increased absenteeism.
- Poor concentration: difficulty staying on task or making more mistakes than usual.
- Difficulty making decisions: having a hard time being decisive and seems unsure of themselves.
- Interpersonal difficulties: challenges in effectively relating to others.
- Nonspecific physical complaints: physical complaints such as fatigue or widespread aches and pains.

Managing anxiety related to return to work

Risk tolerance will vary amongst people, but it’s important to find a balance between being safe and living your life. For example, we know that there are inherent risks when we drive on the highway. But if we wear our seatbelt, stay within the speed limit, and pay attention to our surroundings, most of us will continue to drive on the highway in order to do the things that are of value to us, such as taking a trip, seeing family, and getting to work. While avoiding a particular situation may ease anxiety in the short term, it actually fuels anxiety in the long run.

In relation to the pandemic, engaging in avoidant behaviours, such as not leaving the house or avoiding taking public transportation, can reinforce one's anxiety. To reduce anxious thoughts, we need to minimize the anxious behaviours that drive them. With gradual exposure to the situations that make us anxious, and by learning to tolerate the uncomfortable physical sensations and emotions that come with them, our situational anxiety will decrease over time.

Tools to help manage and mitigate anxiety

- Take an anxiety-provoking situation (e.g., being in an elevator) and break it down into bite size exposures (e.g., visualize being in an elevator, then ride the elevator alone up one floor, then ride it up one floor with 1-2 people in it, etc.). As you learn to tolerate the uncomfortable physical and psychological symptoms of anxiety with each progressive step, your overall anxiety is likely to begin to decrease.
- Engage in deep breathing exercises (e.g., inhale through the nose for 2-4 seconds, exhale through the mouth for 2-4 seconds, and repeat). Increased oxygen in our bodies helps to mitigate physical discomfort such as heart palpitations, dizziness, and shortness of breath.
- Write down a list of anxious thoughts, and then evaluate each thought as if you were a scientist. Document objective evidence for, and against, each thought, in order to help you to generate an alternative thought which is less emotionally charged.

Conversations with colleagues about anxiety or mental health

Understand that even if you are ready to talk about anxiety, others might not be – and that's ok. If you suspect someone is feeling anxious, you can mention that you care about them, and that you are available if they want to talk. If someone does open up about their anxiety to you, here are some things to keep in mind in your conversation:

- Start with open ended questions, and connect to real world observations (e.g., "You seem less talkative than usual. How are things going for you?").
- Listen with an open mind: Don't interrupt or rush. Reflect back what you hear to ensure you have understood.
- Avoid judgement, but be empathetic (e.g., "that seems like it must be hard for you").
- Help to formulate an action plan: How have you managed this in the past? How can I help you?
- Provide information about support programs available to them.

[EY mental health resources:](#)

LifeWorks (Employee Family and Assistance Program) at 1-844-880-9142: LifeWorks is a confidential, short term counselling and referral service for you and your family.

MindBeacon Digital Therapy: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) sessions for people with mild to moderate symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia, PTSD, panic disorder, health anxiety, and much more.

\$5K Mental Health Benefit: EY offers a \$5,000 mental health benefit under your Manulife medical plan for all EY staff and eligible dependents. Reimbursements are subject to reasonable and customary amounts.

LifeSpeak Education Videos: Confidential, 24/7 videos on subjects such as communications skills, mental health, relationships and more. Watch anywhere and anytime to help you overcome hurdles, have tough conversations, and accomplish your personal goals.

Healthcare Online: on-demand healthcare service available 24/7 for your health and wellness needs for all plan members and dependents at no cost to you. Healthcare Online can be used to seek treatment for primary care needs and mental health. You can talk to a nurse practitioner 24/7 for free, or you can schedule a meeting with a registered social worker, registered psychotherapist, and registered clinical counsellor which can be expensed under our mental health benefit.