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Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

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MANAGING THE STRESS OF RETURNING TO WORK AFTER COVID-19:
A Guide for Supervisors

The COVID-19 pandemic has required physical distancing, which altered many aspects of personal and occupational life, including reduced in-person work. A shift to remote work/tele-working changed how workers manage daily routines, develop work goals, perform tasks, and interact with one another.

Living with ongoing uncertainty caused by the pandemic has been challenging for many workers and their families. However, as rates of COVID-19 infection decline and more people are vaccinated, many organizations are resuming in-person activities to improve productivity and work performance. Although some workers look forward to face-to-face interactions with co-workers and supervisors, others are likely to feel reluctant.

It is helpful to anticipate challenges returning to in-person work, including: 1) re-establishing routines and schedules; 2) defining new goals and tasks; 3) establishing workplace safety procedures, and; 4) addressing uncertainty and worker questions about policy and procedures. Supervisors can assist workers to return to the workplace by implementing simple practices, which are listed below.

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Help to Prepare for In-Person Work

- **Anticipate Concerns** — Be prepared to offer additional assistance and support to workers who do not feel comfortable returning to work.

- **Involve Personnel** — Ask workers about challenges of returning to work and potential solutions; individual conversations, group discussions, and surveys can all be useful.

- **Address Challenges** — Help workers plan how best to take care of family needs (e.g., vulnerable family members, child care needs, and others).

- **Reduce Barriers** — Assist their transition back to in-person work by reviewing and modifying policies and procedures that impact worker well-being and productivity.

- **Be Creative** — Consider practices that balance the mutual strengths of virtual and in-person work to create strategies that are positive for workers, as well as the organization.

- **Encourage Healthy Routines** — Encourage employees to get regular and adequate sleep, eat nutritious meals, and engage in daily physical activity.

- **Develop Goals** — Review how best to align workers' short- and long-term goals with in-person activities.

Help to Transition to In-Person Work

- **Re-establish Routines** — Facilitate opportunities for workers to re-establish routines that will foster a sense of community in the workplace.

- **Encourage Connections** — Help workers connect regularly with each other to provide peer support, help with problem-solving, and build team connections.

- **Incorporate Breaks** — Recommend workers take regular breaks and, whenever possible, go outside to get exposure to fresh air and daylight.

- **Communicate about Safety** — Regularly send clear messages to workers about how the workplace is staying up to date and complying with health and safety guidelines.

- **Manage Uncertainty** — Help workers understand that information about COVID-19 and return-to-work is likely to evolve, and as a result leadership will continually adjust practices and procedures to optimize the work environment.

- **Facilitate Growth** — Model for workers how best to adapt their skills and coping strategies as they return to work, and encourage their successful practices.