

RETURNING TO WORK

As initial COVID-19 restrictions lift in Manitoba



A **Question and Answer** series prepared by
health care professionals at Manitoba Blue Cross



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STRESSED ABOUT STRESS

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Q: *Since I started working from home, I have noticed I have less stress, fewer interruptions, and more control over my day – I am concerned that with a return to the office, my stress will increase. What can I do?*

Not feeling like you have control over your day can be stressful. In fact, not feeling like you have control in general is hard for many of us. You've likely experienced this feeling before, whether at home, at work, or (more recently) trying to get some groceries from the store. But there are some things that remain within your control, despite all the changes happening around us.

As you're reading this, take some time to think back to what you used to like about working in an office, before transitioning to working at home. Perhaps the interaction with your coworkers, the structure and familiarity of the office or maybe even just the coffee station? What did you like about these aspects of your office and workplace? What were the aspects that made you feel like you had less control over your day?

One of the ways we can take control over our situation is by selectively evaluating what we can and can't control. By accepting the things we don't have control over – like traffic or pesky interruptions – we free up energy for changing things that we can.

Some variations in your level of stress are expected with any change, so be gentle with yourself. Try to think of ways you can keep some of the positive changes you were able to achieve when working from home. Take walks outside on your breaks, continue your healthy eating habits, listen to that new podcast you've just discovered on your way to work. Even a small blanket in lieu of your sweatpants may help you feel like you are more in control of your physical environment.

Be creative, be open to compromise, and if you can replicate some of the comforts of home (within reason of course!) go for it. These are challenging times, but you absolutely have the ability, the strength, and the know-how to adapt and thrive in any situation. After all – you've come this far, haven't you?



FLEXING MY SCHEDULE HELPED ME FLEX MY MUSCLES

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Q: *Working from home enabled me to get into a great workout routine because I could flex my day and use my breaks to work out. Now I fear that will go to the wayside. What can I do?*

Freedom to exercise at any time might increase your likelihood of engaging in physical activity – especially if you’re a fan of spontaneity. Many things have likely become easier to incorporate into our flexible schedules – watering our plants, letting the dog out in the yard, preparing a fresh meal.

How will we adapt and find time for any health or household tasks once we go back to work?

Think about the way you typically prepare breakfast, walk the dog after work or clean in the evening. Once upon a time, these were things that could not be done during a conventional workday, yet they were still completed because of their importance to your household.

We suggest re-examining the value of regular physical activity and thinking of it as an activity as important as the others. After all, with proven benefits like reduced feelings of anxiety, improved quality of sleep and improved immune system and increased energy – it will also help you return to work.

Perhaps we can reframe the question as: what aspect of your recent workout routine was more motivating than usual, and how can you apply that same concept now? Consider how good the physical activity makes you feel, and make a general plan that will enable you to continue.

As a quick exercise, try circling three of the most appealing descriptors of exercise. Then, think about how you can find a sustainable type of exercise using two or more of those terms.

- Individual
- Social
- Free
- Skill building
- Entertaining
- Conversational
- Laughter
- Integrated
- Social media
- Recreational
- Low cost
- Technology
- Musical
- Relaxing
- Meeting people
- Group focused
- Competitive
- Cultural
- At home
- Repetitive
- Intense
- Intricate
- Team
- Educational
- Indoor
- Mentally challenging
- Productive
- Unpredictable
- Scheduled
- Creative
- Volunteering
- Free
- Family
- Commitment
- Outdoors
- Challenging
- Creative

What you find exciting and rewarding about exercise is likely vastly different than the next person. But take for example: “solo,” “music” and “repetitive exercise” – this translates well into jogging with headphones or biking. Instead of going for a bike ride at lunch, try biking to and from work.

Say you like “competitive” aspects of exercise. Try out one of the many free apps available for download and

track your personal bests for a given activity or compare yourself to others in a given segment.

If “unpredictable” is on your list, think of opportunities for a physical activity “snack” – take several of the idle moments during your day as an opportunity to briefly raise your heart rate. This might be taking the stairs two at a time, doing a few squats while your coffee is brewing, etc.



HEALTHIER AT HOME

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Q: *Since I started working from home, I have become a much healthier eater. What now – back to boring bagged lunches and eating out? How do I keep up with my new regime?*

To put it simply: plan ahead.

Continuing with your new healthy eating regime means you need to plan and prep ahead of time. The foundations of a healthy lunch include a lean source of protein, colorful fruits and vegetables and healthy whole grains.

Prepping is not something you want to do just before heading out to work in the morning when you are still rubbing the sleep out of your eyes – unless you are an early riser and have the time. If you love to hit the snooze button, then you need to get into the habit of making your lunch the night before.

A quick and easy option is making extra dinner and packing up the leftovers. This feels more robust than your

average “bagged” lunch. There are some great packed lunch ideas online to help you think “outside of the bag” and make your noon hour more exciting.

If on occasion you don’t have time to pack a lunch, then healthy take-out is an option. Support our local restaurants and select items from their menu that include the foundations of a healthy lunch (a lean source of protein, colorful fruits and vegetables, healthy whole grains).

Lastly, remember to enjoy your lunch. Make a healthy environment, move away from your desk and actually enjoy your lunch break.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

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Q: *Since I didn't have to commute to work, I got used to the extra time and improved efficiencies. How do I keep the efficiencies that I am now used to and enjoy?*

Although returning to the workplace will mean spending time commuting again, it doesn't have to be the end of your newly streamlined lifestyle. If you're enjoying the increased efficiency in your day-to-day life, congratulate yourself on adapting well and using effective tools to achieve change. Maintaining these changes is largely about identifying the tools you've used and continuing to use them with intention.

Think about where you've noticed the changes. If it takes you less time to get ready in the morning, what are you doing differently? Have you let go of practices or habits that weren't serving you well or aren't as necessary as you once believed? What new (or old) time-management skills have you put into use?

For those who live with another person, this is a good time to review your household roles and responsibilities. If being home more than usual has resulted in some rejigging of roles and an improvement in quality of life, consider whether you want to continue with the new system or if further adjustments could make things even better. Couples and families are dynamic systems, so it's important to review who does what regularly – not just when a major life event happens.



NO PLACE LIKE HOME

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Q: *I felt safer at home; I could control my environment. Washing hands, cleaning surfaces, wearing a mask, physical distancing – now what?*

While we can appreciate that many of us probably feel safer and more in control of our environment, it is also considered healthy to return to what we knew as a normal lifestyle.

It is important for our well-being to return to work and to our regular workplaces when safe to do so. We look forward to returning to the outside world and enjoying our family and friends – remembering to respect the guidelines for the number of people gathering of course. We may want or need to return to our errands, whether that is grocery shopping, appointments or banking.

We can still do our best to control our environment by continuing to practice physical distancing. When we return to work for example, we can regularly clean the surfaces of our work station, including our keyboards and mouse for those in-office settings; counter-tops or kiosks for others.

If we drive, we may consider wiping the steering wheel. If the situation calls for it, we may consider wearing masks. For example, if you are experiencing cold symptoms or if you are visiting or will be around those who are elderly, ill or immunocompromised, a mask will help protect you and those around you. Just remember to throw out the mask after your visit or when you return home from your errands.

Remember to sneeze into your elbow sleeve. Wear clean eye-glasses or eye protection. Do not touch your face, and especially avoid your nose and mouth. Remember the best protection for preventing the spread of infection and disease is practicing good hand washing.



WORK LIFE BALANCE

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Q: *Since I started working from home, my work-life balance has gotten so much better. How do I keep that up when I return to a busy office?*

If you have found a way to bring more balance into your life, this has likely been a positive change. Better work-life balance is a change that we want to maintain!

Consider this: did you move from a clock-driven day to a “compass-guided” day? Clock time is about all the things that fill our waking hours (and sometimes our sleep as well)! Demands, deadlines, interruptions, schedules, emails, meetings – you know the drill. It results in feeling out of balance as we experience an “all things are urgent” pressure, resulting in a time famine and a diminished sense of self.

Now let’s consider compass time: an internal guide that is about our values and priorities and making conscious decisions about where to focus our energy. In compass time we attend to our physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual needs. It is a conscious and intentional way of being. A life guided by our compass is one in which we live from all that is important to us: our values, our priorities, our vision, our passion, our motivations, our joy and our love.

So the trick is, how do we return to a busy office or workplace guided by our compass and not tyrannized by the clock? Embracing internal guides doesn’t mean that demands or deadlines won’t be there. However, you can challenge yourself to show up with a compass-guided mindset. You have been doing this already – keep it going!

Rather than focusing on the “to do” list, deadlines and commitments, bring your attention to your values and priorities. Ask yourself questions that will keep you guided by your compass: “How can my work today be a reflection of my values?”

Yes, you still have all the “to do’s” but when you focus on how you approach tasks guided by your values (and not tyrannized by the clock) you may notice that you can work with ease and flow.

Following your compass is what you’ve experienced in these past several weeks – it’s what helped you feel in balance. We do clock time, but we thrive in and long for a compass guided experience.

Now, you might be thinking, doesn’t the nature of 9-5 work mean that it’s driven by the clock? Well, yes and no. The pull of a clock-driven day will be there, but stay the course guided by your compass. Talk about engaging approaches to work with your team as you return to this new normal. Your desire to maintain your work-life balance is your priority and it will also be top of mind for many of your coworkers.

So, bring your compass to work and be the change you want to see.

LOSING SLEEP

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Q: *I just got into a much better sleep routine. Now it will be disrupted again. I didn't realize until now how much I worried about the next day at work. What can I do?*

Getting used to a new sleep routine – only to have it change again – can be stressful. But there are a few things you can do to make the readjustment easier.

Before bed

It's always important to maintain a proper sleeping environment – but it's especially vital now that your sleep routine has been disrupted again.

Remember the essentials. A good sleeping environment includes a comfortable and supportive mattress and pillow(s), a moderate temperature in the environment and limited background noise and light.

Invest in comfortable and properly fitted bedding. And remember to sleep on your back or side and try to avoid stomach sleeping, which can lead to back and neck pain.

If you've been enjoying a more relaxed sleep schedule, you'll have to try to switch to a more rigid regimen when starting back at your workplace. Try to incorporate a relaxed sleep schedule by tucking in a bit earlier, instead of watching TV late into the evening.

Firstly, choose a reasonable bedtime and stick to it! Keeping a routine will make it easier to fall asleep.

Get ready for bed by engaging in relaxing self-care rituals like meditation, reading a book, or listening to soft music.

In the morning

This is going to be the hard part. Try to keep a consistent sleep-and-rise schedule seven days a week to maintain the body's circadian rhythm. And note that short (less than 30-minute) daytime naps have shown to improve cognitive functioning. If you work a standard, 9-5 job, daytime naps might not be feasible – but if your schedule allows, they can be a useful tool.

Now that you're back on a tighter schedule, try to make a plan and stick to it – take your allotted lunch or break times, try to start and end at the same time every day, and enjoy the benefits of a set sleep schedule.



LEAVING MY COMFORT ZONE

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Q. How can I feel comfortable returning to work now?

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, life was what we considered “normal” – whatever that meant for us individually.

Normal may have meant continuously juggling the requirements of an active family life (kids’ sports and extracurricular activities) while attending to our own needs (going to the gym and taking care of our own health). Someone else’s normal may have meant embracing the single life by navigating a welcomed hectic schedule of social events or simply embracing much-needed solo recharging time. Whatever normal was, we engaged in our daily routine with little to no impending concern for our own and others health. Indeed, most of us thought we had control of our lives and our day-to-day activities.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, including all the restrictions and limitations (embraced by some and degraded by others) – all of which has had a direct impact on how we navigate our world. Nowadays it can feel as if nothing is in our control. Indeed, many of us have developed fear and anxiety regarding different aspects of our personal and work lives, questioning the how’s, why’s and when’s of the return to our own “normal” in a safe, healthy and well-informed manner.

One of the most common phrases that we all hear when seeking advice is, “We are all in the same boat.” However, as it relates to the navigation of this unprecedented time in history, this statement rings untrue. An unknown source has expanded on this sentiment and eloquently stated, “We are all in the same storm, but we are all on different boats.”

In Manitoba, we’re starting to see restrictions being lifted and along with that, the modified daily personal and work activities that we just became accustomed to are about to change on us again. We know our work and personal lives are not going to look the same as they did pre-COVID-19.

Many of us find this new change and the unknowns overwhelming, causing feelings of anxiety, worry and difficulty focusing. A way to assist with these feelings is to focus on what is in our control versus what isn’t. For instance, we may not be able to control when our employer is able to accommodate the protocols of re-opening – however, we can control the steps we take in respect to the physical distancing recommendations and health measures implemented for our and others’ safety. This includes ensuring we have access to PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), including homemade or purchased non-medical masks, gloves and hand sanitizer.

We can have timely conversations with our employers about our concerns in respect to social distancing in the workplace and the steps they are taking to ensure we are all safe. We can advocate for workplaces that are well-prepared for the eventual return to work. If you are unsure of how to ask questions or express worries to your employers, try connecting with a counselor, friend or coworker. This may assist you and them in creating best practices on how you can approach the subject with your employer. Try to problem solve or think about worst case scenarios with solutions. All of this will help you identify the barriers associated with returning to work, not only for yourself as an employee of an organization, but for your organization as a whole.

An even more challenging task is working on our attitudes and perceptions of the task at hand. Changing your reaction from a negative one to a positive one (the glass is half full) can impact your overall success in returning to work. For example, “I am not comfortable/ready to return to work,” can change to, “It will be nice to see people that I have not seen in a while,” or, “I am excited to have my personal and work life separated again.” Consciously make the effort to see the good in the bad. By controlling your thoughts and emotions, your reality can change. As Dr. Wayne Dyer said, “If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.”

HOW TO LEAD IN THE DARK

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Q. I am in a supervisory position. How do I best support my employees who express some apprehension to returning to the workplace?

It is quite common and completely normal for an employee returning from a leave to have some anxiety leading up to that first day back in the workplace. Think back to your first day on the job! Whether returning from a disability, maternity or paternity leave, plant shutdown, or a layoff, it is natural for one to have questions or apprehension when returning to the worksite.

Common apprehensions may centre on:

- **Adapting to change:** staff, workflows, technologies, expectations or physical space
- **Performance:** ability to deliver to the quality and volume standards upon return
- **Job security:** questions and doubts about whether skills and roles are valued and needed
- **Personal circumstances:** competing responsibilities and managing how returning to work affects roles and relationships at home

Additionally, it is common to experience a physical and/or cognitive re-acclimatization period to a changed level of activity with return to work, similar to the experience of starting a new exercise routine or education program.

Given that returning to work is now occurring within the context of COVID-19, there are some added complexities and challenges to employees and employers. First off, it is important to recognize that when an employee communicates with you regarding their apprehension, it is a very positive sign! Thank the employee for having the courage to speak up. Each and every employee matters, and what can be learned from one employee may benefit other employees and the company.

Ask open-ended questions

Ask questions and seek to understand the employee's concerns. Good listening skills are key. Summarize what you have heard and repeat back to ensure understanding. Ask the employee for what they believe to be a reasonable solution and engage in two-way conversation, acknowledging what can reasonably be expected from both employee and employer in this situation. As a leader it will be important to identify a specific goal and promptly follow through.

Be prepared, transparent and flexible

Successful reopening of the worksite involves providing information, tools and support for the most common questions and concerns relating to returning from leaves and the specific COVID-19 issues through the lens of your employees.

Provide information and training on new safety protocols, provide and use protective equipment, and set expectations on physical distancing and physical changes to the workplace environment. Map any workflow changes and provide training for any new tools, technologies and processes. Clearly communicate any changes to expected individual or departmental performance standards. Provide flexibility for accommodation requests as the company is able. Recognize opportunities to include employees at all levels for input on further changes.

The adjustments and innovations you make will work toward an engaged, healthy and productive workforce!

PROVIDING SECURITY IN UNSURE TIMES

Wendy Unger, B.S.W.

*Director, Corporate Services
Manitoba Blue Cross*

Q: *How do I reassure my returning employees that it is safe for them to return to our workplace?*

Communication in this instance – as with most – is critical.

It's important that employees are provided more than just notification of the date to report back to the workplace. Your communication should include information regarding the measures undertaken by the company to prepare for the return and focus on measures supporting employee safety and wellness. Reference any requirements mandated by government and public health authorities and relay what the company is doing to comply with those requirements. Review any additional measures that have been implemented, beyond the mandated ones, to support a safe and healthy workplace (e.g. supplementary facility cleaning, limited building access, staggered shifts to support social distancing, graduated return of employees to the workplace, protocols for visitors and customers, etc.). Advise that the company is monitoring the evolving guidelines and recommendations of public health authorities and responding accordingly.

Provide information about the company's re-entry plan – who will be returning to the site and when? Is the company back to pre-pandemic levels of service or a limited subset for a time? Relay as much information as possible to help eliminate the unknowns that can cause uncertainty and anxiety. If applicable, relay that consultation with union representatives and/or the company's health and safety committee has taken place. Commit to providing regular updates as circumstances change and plans evolve. If possible, share written documentation of any new protocols and procedures for employees to review in advance.

After sharing information about the company's re-entry plans and preparation activities, ask how your employees are feeling about the upcoming return to the workplace.



For those expressing concerns with respect to safety, ask what would allow them to feel more comfortable about returning. Consider if the solution(s) can be implemented, not only for that individual, but incorporated into the plan to support others with similar concerns. Remind employees of the support offered through your Employee Assistance Program.

Upon return of employees to the workplace, conduct training on any new safe work procedures and workplace protocols. Confirm understanding, encourage feedback and incorporate suggestions as appropriate. Demonstrate the company's priority of providing a safe work environment by ensuring compliance with the established expectations. Depending on the size and nature of your business, consider designating a "pandemic procedures coach" whose job it is to observe behaviours during the initial days, identify where refinement of procedures is required and provide gentle reminders and corrections when they see deviations from the procedures. Conduct regular debriefs with employees to review what's working well or where improvements can be made.

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