Mental Health and Returning to work during COVID-19

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COVID-19 crashed into our lives three months ago, and we met the challenge by fundamentally changing the way we live, socialize, and work. Thanks to the progress based on social distancing, wearing masks, and hand washing, many businesses are preparing to safely reopen. As business owners and HR departments discuss how to safely resume operations in terms of physical health, we must also consider the on-going and upcoming mental health challenges.

Quarantine itself is a mental health challenge. Currently, we’re seeing a major increase in the prescription of anti-anxiety [medication](https://www.healthline.com/health-news/depression-during-covid-19). There is also a major increase in domestic violence cases which creates tremendous strain on the people stuck in these [unsafe homes](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/making-sense-chaos/202005/why-the-increase-in-domestic-violence-during-covid-19). As the population transitions to a phased reopening, there will be new [mental health challenges](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html#quarantine). The workforce may experience relief at returning to a degree of normalcy however it is also normal to experience trepidation about being around people again. Fear of contracting the virus or of loved ones contracting the virus will certainly still be in the forefront of people’s minds. If employees are returning from being laid off, financial stressors are an additional burden. Quarantine has also affected each one of us differently. People in your workforce may have contracted the virus while others did not. Some workers may have been laid off and others were not. This may lead to feelings of guilt if one person’s experience of quarantine was significantly different from another’s. With all these feelings swirling around an individual, they may experience a mental health crisis while at work. These crises could include a [panic attack](https://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/panic-attack-symptoms). Panic attacks consist of a racing heart, breathing difficulties, and chest pains. This could also be a heart attack. If the person has never experienced a panic attack before, call 911. When assisting someone [experiencing a [panic attack](https://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/panic-attack-symptoms)](https://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/panic-attack-how-to-help#1), remain calm, stay with the person for the duration which could take up to 30 minutes, and speak to the person in a calm, non-judgmental tone.

By building a mental health conversation into your reopening plan, you can foster an environment that is more open and productive during this transition. As HR professionals you already have some procedures/resources in place which can be used as a jumping off point in the planning process: such as how to reintegrate an employee coming back to work from an extended leave for illness or personal issues and any policies/procedures around an employee experiencing domestic violence. During such a fluid time, where benchmarks are consistently changing and there is no solid blueprint, it will be important to keep the lines of communication between yourself and your workforce open. With careful planning, we can continue to keep our communities safe while returning to work.

**Links within article:**

Medication - <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/depression-during-covid-19>

Unsafe homes - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/making-sense-chaos/202005/why-the-increase-in-domestic-violence-during-covid-19>

Mental health challenges - <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html#quarantine>

Panic Attack - <https://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/panic-attack-symptoms>

Experiencing a panic attack - <https://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/panic-attack-how-to-help#1>