

Healthcare Systems and Services Practice

Returning to work: Keys to a psychologically safer workplace

Employers can potentially reduce stress and anxiety for their workers by considering mental health as part of a holistic on-site return plan.

Erica Coe, Jenny Cordina, Kana Enomoto, and Jeris Stueland



As the population fully vaccinated against COVID-19 grows, more employers are asking employees to come back into the office. But while some employees may welcome the return to on-site work, one-third of respondents in a new McKinsey survey¹ said their return to work has had a negative impact on their mental health. Almost half of those who have not yet returned anticipate negative mental health impacts.

With a workforce already suffering from a notable rise in mental distress from the pandemic,² a real risk exists that millions of people will encounter yet another wave of stress and anxiety as they return to the workplace. [Pervasive workplace stigma](#) exacerbates this risk, with fewer than one in ten employees describing their workplace as free of stigma on mental or substance-use disorders, leading many to avoid seeking needed care.

Employers who recognize and prioritize psychological safety alongside physical safety in their post-pandemic operations can help employees' mental health and their own efforts to [cultivate inclusive workplaces](#). This support can have concrete effects on critical workplace outcomes, including employee well-being, satisfaction, productivity, and absenteeism. Employers can take immediate actions to support employees' safety concerns and need for flexibility in the return to on-site work; over the longer term, they can continue to evolve operating models and workplace culture to support mental health, belonging, and flexible ways of working.³ While some employers have already begun to take steps, [opportunities remain](#).

Safety and flexibility are core concerns for employees and represent key opportunities to support mental health during the on-site return

Employees are mixed in their expectations and experience of the mental health impact of a return on-site, according to the June survey. While some who have not yet shifted

back from remote to on-site work expect that their return will have a positive impact on their mental health (19 percent), almost half of respondents (49 percent) anticipate going back will have somewhat or significant negative impacts. Of those who worked remotely during the pandemic and have returned on-site, reported mental health impacts have been mixed: 36 percent of respondents reported negative mental health effects of on-site work, while 37 percent report positive effects (Exhibit).

Consumers who expect going back will have a negative impact on their mental health overwhelmingly attribute it to concern over safety and protection from catching COVID-19, as well as to concerns about scheduling flexibility. These pre-return concerns largely align with the experiences of those employees who have already returned to on-site work. Among those who have experienced negative mental health impacts of returning on-site, the top drivers have been concern about their own safety due to COVID-19 (45 percent) and risk of contracting COVID-19 and transmitting it to unvaccinated or at-risk children and loved ones (29 percent).

As employees return on-site from remote work, they report that COVID-19 safety and flexible work arrangements could help alleviate stress. Among safety interventions, improved air filtration was a core request, with 62 percent of respondents reporting that it could decrease the stress they experienced from returning on-site. Employees also request autonomy in determining when and where work gets done: of those who have returned on-site, a majority report that flexible work schedules (60 percent) and hybrid work arrangements (57 percent) could reduce stress. Overall, in an era characterized by increased demands at work, at home, and in society, the request that employees make most often is more time. Close to two-thirds of employees (62 percent) report that additional time off could alleviate stresses associated with returning to on-site work.

Employees with children at home and those with greater mental health needs are particularly concerned about the mental health impacts of on-site work

People with children in their homes were more likely to report that returning to on-site work had negatively affected their mental health. Forty-four percent of respondents with children reported negative mental health impact, compared with 27 percent of those with no children in the home. Although much of the discussion about the impact of the pandemic on parents has been about the challenge of balancing work and childcare, these respondents said they are also particularly concerned about physical safety for themselves and their families. When surveyed on workplace policies that would alleviate their stress, their top choices were related

to safety: mandatory on-site testing for COVID-19 and antibody testing. Work-life balance does continue to be a concern as well, with two-thirds reporting that hybrid models and flexible work schedules could alleviate stress.

Parents will also grapple with how to balance their enduring family priorities and responsibilities with their employers' new and evolving policies. During the pandemic, 40 percent of mothers and 27 percent of fathers spent an additional three or more hours daily on childcare and housework, per [LeanIn.org](#) and [McKinsey's Women in the Workplace Report 2020](#). It is unclear whether families will want to return to pre-pandemic levels of in-person activities and how they will evaluate social interactions if their children have not yet been vaccinated.

As employers have become increasingly aware throughout the pandemic, employees with

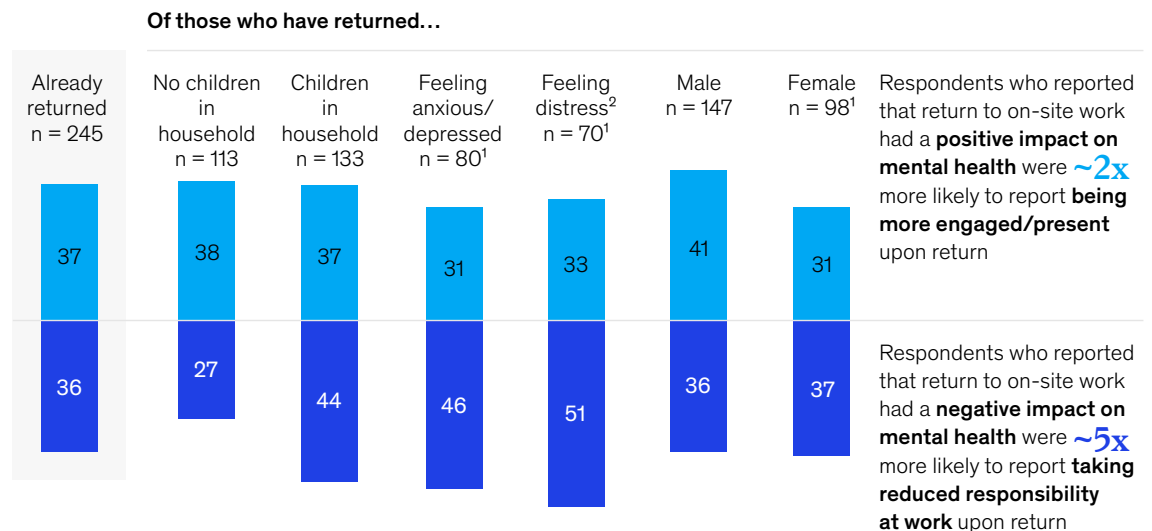
Exhibit

Employees report that returning to on-site work has impacted their mental health.

Reported impact of going back to work in pre-COVID-19 environment on mental health

% respondents working remotely immediately after the pandemic began who have returned on-site

■ Somewhat or significant positive impact ■ Somewhat or significant negative impact



¹ Findings are considered directional given sample size.

² Defined as pandemic-related distress.

RETURNEDMH. How would you describe the impact returning to work in your pre-COVID-19 environment has had on your mental health?

QOUTCOMES_RETURN. Which of the following best describe actions you have taken due to returning to your pre-COVID-19 work environment? Response options include "Being more engaged/present at work (eg, being more motivated)" and "Taking on less responsibility at work."

QFEEL1. Over the past week have you felt anxious?

QFEEL2. Over the past week have you felt depressed?

QFEEL2A. Please indicate your level of distress related to the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic. Responses are on a 1-10 scale with 1 being "least distressed" to 10 being "most distressed." Distressed is 8-10.

Source: McKinsey Consumer Health Insights, June 14, 2021

elevated mental health needs represent a large proportion of the workforce, and their needs will be important to address during the return to on-site work. More than half of survey respondents reported feeling anxious in the past week, and 42 percent reported feeling depressed in the past week. Individuals who reported experiencing depression and/or anxiety in the past week also stated concerns about the effects of on-site work on their mental health. Among those who had returned to on-site work, 46 percent reported that it negatively affected their mental health. These individuals overwhelmingly reported that additional flexibility and benefits could reduce their stress: these benefits may include additional time off, flexible work schedules, and pandemic stipends.

The return to in-person work and socialization for some in mid-2021 represents a major shift in daily experience. Remote work and increased flexibility may have made it easier for some individuals to maintain regular preventive mental and physical healthcare. [Working remotely](#) may also afford some individuals greater autonomy over their work environments, creating the opportunity to cultivate physical and social settings that promote health and reduce factors that exacerbate symptoms. Individuals may fear the next chapter of work will mean reduced autonomy and less supportive environments.

How employers can help

The return to a post-pandemic new normal is not a simple overnight switch from remote to on-site activity; many organizations are planning [enduring changes to operating models](#) and adaptable, resilient mindsets to ensure that all of their employees are able to work in [inclusive environments](#) that support their best work. Employers can design their return-to-work plans to foster the positive impacts of on-site work and support employees who are more likely to experience negative impacts.⁴ Going back to on-site work may drive engagement and effectiveness for some employees while hindering it in others; employers can design strategies that account for the needs of their diverse workforces. Respondents who reported that the return to on-site work had a

positive impact on their mental health were three times more likely to report having more productive hours upon their return.

A majority of employees who experienced negative mental health impacts of returning on-site reported that policies that increased workplace safety and flexibility of work could help reduce their stress. [Communicating these policies clearly](#) and at the earliest possible date can help manage that anticipatory stress and create the opportunity for employees to plan for changes to their lives (for example, childcare options) and health needs. Communicating support for flexibility can help employees understand that their employer will be responsive to evolving needs. Some employers are [using a test-and-learn approach](#) to flexible and hybrid work, adapting their approaches to best serve employees' needs. Employers can communicate early and often that they are addressing the following concerns:

- Recognizing that different employees anticipate and experience on-site work differently; communicating how positive and negative mental health impacts are valid
- Caring for the health and safety of employees and their families through specific COVID-19 practices (for example, improved air filtration, certain spaces closed to help with social distancing, easy access to COVID-19 testing)
- Supporting flexible and hybrid/remote work options and allowing employees to adjust their schedules and hybrid/remote arrangements after trial periods
- Addressing stigma head on by replacing negative attitudes and discriminatory policies with healthier attitudes and policies that can improve employees' well-being

In prioritizing employees' mental health as part of return planning, employers can reduce stress and anxiety for their workers. In doing so, employers have the opportunity to contribute to improved mental health in the workforce. Understanding, prioritizing, and planning for employees' post-pandemic mental health is an important part of an organization's return-to-work strategy.

Erica Coe (Erica_Coe@mckinsey.com) is a partner in McKinsey's Atlanta office and co-leads the Center for Societal Benefit through Healthcare. **Jenny Cordina** (Jenny_Cordina@mckinsey.com) is a partner in the Detroit office and leads McKinsey's Consumer Health Insights research. **Kana Enomoto** (Kana_Enomoto@mckinsey.com) is a senior expert in the Washington, DC, office and co-leads the Center for Societal Benefit through Healthcare. **Jeris Stueland** (Jeris_Stueland@mckinsey.com) is an expert associate partner in the Minneapolis office.

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¹ McKinsey Consumer Health Insights, June 14, 2021.

² *2021 mind the workplace report*, Mental Health America, March 2021, mhanational.org; Erica Hutchins Coe, Kana Enomoto, Patrick Finn, John Stenson, and Kyle Weber, "Understanding the hidden costs of COVID-19's potential impact on US healthcare," September 4, 2020, McKinsey.com; National Center for Health Statistics, "Anxiety and depression," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed June 30, 2021, cdc.gov.

³ Garen Staglin, "Embedding preventative mental health care in the workplace," *Forbes*, June 24, 2021, forbes.com.

⁴ Liz Hilton Segel and Kana Enomoto, "5 Ways Employers Can Support Women's Mental Health," *Harvard Business Review*, June 11, 2021, hbr.org.