Supporting worker wellbeing
During pandemic recovery and transition back to the workplace

It is important that employers and workers work together to identify ways they can support and maintain their health and wellbeing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and navigate changes to work and the workplace.

The recent restrictions to usual activities and changes in lifestyle as a result of COVID-19 have led to an increase in some chronic disease risk factors for individuals. High stress levels, increased alcohol consumption, unhealthy eating and a reduction in physical activity can all impact on health and wellbeing. Studies have shown:

20 per cent of households reported buying more alcohol than usual during COVID-19 and, of these, 70 per cent reported drinking more alcohol than usual. [i].

Around one in five people (19 per cent) reported that they were experiencing difficulties maintaining a healthy lifestyle during COVID-19, which was more of a problem for those aged 18 to 64 years (22 per cent) than those aged 65 years and over (9 per cent)[ii].

Prolonged time at home can increase behaviours that lead to inactivity and contribute to anxiety and depression, which in turn can lead to a sedentary lifestyle known to result in a range of chronic health conditions[iii,iv, v].

Five key strategies for success

How workplaces continue to adapt and thrive is critical to business success. We recommend 5 key strategies workplaces can consider when workers are operating from alternative physical locations such as home or remote workplaces and transitioning back to the physical workplace.

Leadership

Leading by example and communicating clearly and regularly with workers around health and wellbeing can provide confidence and reassurance to workers. It may be an opportunity to share understanding and compassion in the changing situation.[vi]

It is encouraged for employers to establish work health and wellbeing strategies to support health and wellbeing if they don't already have them. If already established in their business, ensure workers are aware of them and how they can be involved. Discuss health and wellbeing regularly through committees with leadership actively supporting these conversations. If there is not a current health and wellbeing committee, this could be a perfect opportunity to establish one.

Consultation and communication

Genuine communication and regular contact with workers will assist them to work effectively from alternative physical locations, including the home or remote workplace environment. Communication is equally important for those transitioning or returning back to the physical workplace.

Workers may have concerns as to what the transition back to the physical workplace is going to look like. Workplaces must consult with workers that are directly affected by a health and safety matter. Workplaces should then effectively communicate with their workers to establish appropriate procedures. This will reduce anxiety and

misinformation. Workers' input and participation improves decision-making about health and safety matters and assists in reducing work-related injuries and disease.

Healthy habits

For some of us, the increased time spent at home may have provided opportunities to adopt healthy habits. For others, our lifestyles may have become less healthy during this period. For example, studies have shown that 38 per cent of us are spending more time cooking or baking, which may involve cooking nutritious meals and trying new recipes. However, 22 per cent of us are eating more snack foods, such as chips, lollies and biscuits during this time.

If workers have adopted healthy habits during COVID-19 they should be encouraged to continue these and/or to start to implement some new healthy habits. Examples of healthy habits are taking a healthy lunch to work rather than relying on takeaway, following the recommended guidelines when drinking alcohol and including physical activity throughout the day.

For workers who feel uncertain about returning to public spaces and want to reduce their exposure to public transport, active commuting such as walking, cycling or running could be an option if the workplace can safely provide bicycle storage and end of trip facilities, including lockers and showers. For those not actively commuting, encouraging healthy habits to promote physical activity levels is beneficial for workers' physical and mental health.

Supporting good mental health

Common consequences of disease outbreaks include anxiety and panic, depression, anger, confusion, uncertainty and financial stress, with estimates of between 25 to 33 per cent of the community experiencing high levels of worry and anxiety during similar pandemicsvii.

It is acknowledged that as we lessen restrictions, some people may experience worry and anxiety. As we know from the documented phases of the mental recovery journey post disasters and pandemics, this may impact individual workers differently.

Some workers will be looking forward to returning to the workplace and others will be reluctant. There may be increased levels of stress and feelings of distress. Refer to the Mental Health Commission National Mental Health Pandemic Response Plan, promote identification and assessment of psychosocial hazards, and know how to implement controls.

Flexibility and work life balance

Workers may have had competing work and home priorities while working from home or other alternative physical locations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Household Impacts of COVID-19 survey results by the Australian Bureau of Statistics report:

One in five adults (22 per cent) with children in their household changed their working hours to care for children kept at home, and 38 per cent worked from homeviii.

1 in 8 adults provided unpaid care to a vulnerable person living outside their household

Managing work hours, home schooling and other family commitments may have been enjoyable or challenging. Anecdotal evidence shows some enjoy the flexibility of working around their family commitments, reduced commuting and having more personal time. Some work tasks have become more outcome focused rather than time based.

Some workers will be reluctant to lose the work life balance and productivity gains they have in the current working arrangements and will want more flexibility in their work schedules than they previously had. It is encouraged to review and promote current flexible work policies. Regular and early consultation and communication with workers about how work is conducted and any changes to work design is encouraged.

More information

For more information refer to the below national and ACT specific sources:

Australian Government Department of Health: https://www.health.gov.au/

Safe Work Australia - National Guide for Safe Workplaces – COVID-19: https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/national-guide-safe-workplaces-covid-19

ACT Government – COVID-19: https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/

Healthier Work – Responding to COVID-19: https://www.healthierwork.act.gov.au/home/responding-to-covid-19/

This document has been prepared by the Heads of Workplace Health and Safety Authorities Health and Wellbeing Community of Practice. This is general information only and should be considered in the context of your work and workplace.

The HWSA Workplace Health and Wellbeing Community of Practice is an alliance between Work Health and Safety Authorities, Health Departments and affiliated health services. The Community of Practice aims to strategically influence evidenced based practice at a national level to create healthy workplaces by focusing on the modifiable risk factors for chronic disease including smoking, poor nutrition, physical inactivity and sedentary work, harmful alcohol consumption, overweight and obesity and poor mental health.

References

i https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-POLL.pdf

ii https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs%40.nsf/mediareleasesbyCatalogue/DB259787916733E4CA25855B0003B21C?OpenDocument

iii https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7031771/

iv https://www.essa.org.au/Public/News_Room/Media_Releases1/2020/COVID-19_Response__Why_exercise_is_more_important_than_ever.aspx

v Maria Charalampous, Christine A. Grant, Carlo Tramontano & Evie Michailidis

(2019) Systematically reviewing remote e-workers' well-being at work: a multidimensional

approach, European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 28:1, 51-73, DOI:

10.1080/1359432X.2018.1541886

vi https://www.anzsog.edu.au/resource-library/news-media/working-from-home-7-steps-to-leading-an-effective-team

vii https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200319_covid19-evidence-and-reccomendations.pdf

viii https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/EBDDC15057ED1E8ACA2585760081C321/$File/household%20impacts%20visual%20summary.pdf

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