

OPINION

Returning to work during the COVID-19 pandemic

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As we continue to control the spread of COVID-19, it is safe to say that most Michiganders, ready, willing, and able to return to work, welcomed our entering Stage 4 of the Michigan Safe Start Plan on June 1.

Stage 4 recognizes that Michigan is experiencing fewer COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths. In Stage 4, Improving, most business and organizations will be open under strict safety measures. For example, under Stage 4 outdoor crowds of up to 100 people are allowed, swimming pools and day camps for children can open, and businesses can serve customers without an appointment. Although restaurants and bar openings were planned for Stage 5, Governor Whitmer's order also allows them to reopen on June 8. When Stage 5, Containing, is announced, remaining businesses and organizations will be allowed to reopen, including schools, indoor theaters, gyms and salons. In Stage 6, Post Pandemic, we will return to "business as usual," with a few lasting safety procedures in place.

How each of us returns to our office or place of business will differ. While some jobs lend themselves to remotely working from home, allowing those workers a controlled return to work on a case-by-case basis, people in service, production and maintenance-related fields will have to physically return to work to maintain employment. It is also the case that the industry we work in will determine how often we come into contact with others and the number of different people we see each day. Everyone has a different risk tolerance level, so what some people dismiss will concern others. While most people will be happy to return to work, others will do so with trepidation. This is understandable, because the fact is that as businesses and organizations incrementally open during Stages 4 through 6 of the Safe Start Plan, COVID-19 won't be gone, nor will the fears that surround it.

If you or a loved one is feeling anxious about returning to work, there are some practical steps that can be taken to reduce feelings of anxiety.

First, if you haven't maintained structure at home, now is the time to start. Lack of a routine is one cause of anxiety. Try to get into your work routine at home. Wake up at the time you used to get up for work, get bathed and dressed as you would normally, and try to return to your normal timeline during the day. This will make the transition back to work easier.

Next, try to get a good night's sleep. For most of us that is about eight hours sleep a night. Not only does lack of sleep cause anxiety in people who usually do not experience it, it will exacerbate anxiety and stress caused by other concerns.

Finally, if you are experiencing stress and anxiety about returning to work, do not wait until it is time to return to work to talk to someone about it. Often, simply sharing our concerns and realizing others share them as well helps us. If you don't have someone you want to share these feelings with you can call the St. Clair County Community Mental Health COVID-19 Support Line at (810) 985-8900 to speak one-on-one with a mental health professional. You can also receive Support Line services by texting (810) 956-6335 or emailing covid19support@scccmh.org.

If you own or manage a business and are concerned about stress, anxiety and other complex emotions of returning employees, you can contact the COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team at (810) 989-6965. The COVID-19 Response Team is a joint effort between SCCCMH and the St. Clair County Emergency Operations Center. This team is made up of professionals from a variety of disciplines who have been trained to provide confidential and flexible support to essential workers and other employees returning to work.

As you return to work, there are some simple measures you should follow that will also help reduce anxiety while providing for you and your co-workers continued safety. These are familiar to most of us by now but there is a danger of forgetting over time just how important they remain, even as it appears the virus is being contained.

Remember to wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol if it is available. Avoid touching your face. Keep wearing a face mask as long as recommended by health authorities. Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects in your work area, including keyboards and phones, and avoid using anything in others' work area. Of course, most importantly, stay home if you are ill and let your employer know if you are living with an individual with COVID-19. For detailed information about COVID-19 expectations for your industry, you can visit the CDC or OSHA websites.

To make your necessary transition back to work as easy as possible, begin planning for it now and encourage friends and family to do the same. Supporting one another as we return to work will make the day we return our community and country to life before COVID-19 happen much sooner.