



Kooth Work: a guide to 'return to work' anxiety

Helping employers to create a mentally healthy workplace for all

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Foreword

Tim Barker, CEO at Kooth



With the worst pandemic since 1919 still in our midst, we are embarking on the greatest change in the history of the workplace. Returners' Anxiety is an understandable consequence.

On the surface your people will display more obvious and detectable anxiety and concerns around travel and the logistics of social distancing. Under the surface, your people may be carrying much heavier loads.

How can you support your people through these challenging times? This report addresses strategies for both leaders and managers. Perhaps the most important new skill is being able to spot the signs, have a conversation and take or signpost your people to receive the support and hope that they need. There has never been a more important time for companies to offer a positive workplace culture backed up by a positive virtual ecosystem of workplace mental health offerings. For most leaders having an ally that can support the below the surface interference will make the difference.



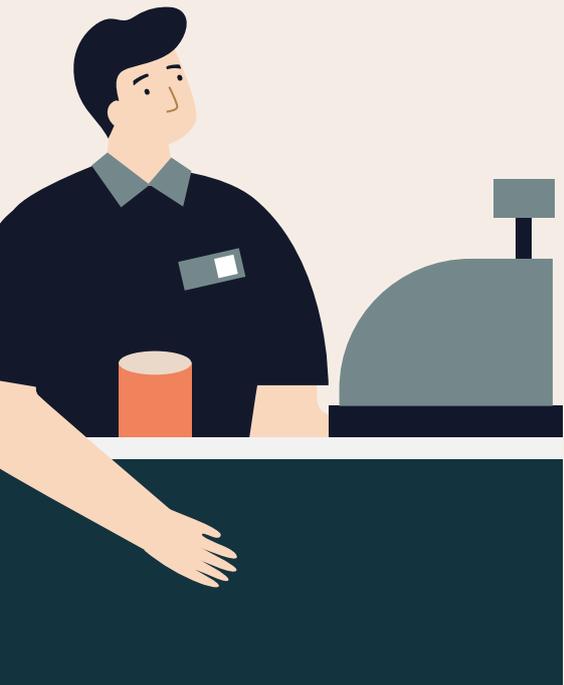
Introduction

The pandemic has presented a variety of significant challenges for organisations in the public and private sector, of all shapes and sizes including having to face untold disruption to their working practices. For office-based firms the regular daily commute was replaced with working from the study, spare room or kitchen table. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the proportion of adults who worked from home increased to 37% in 2020 from 27% in 2019.

It doesn't end there, many organisations have had to make difficult decisions to furlough or lay off workers to simply stay afloat. A situation that hit the travel, leisure, hospitality and arts industries perhaps the hardest and also younger working adults.

In a [recent report the BBC](#) stated that since the start of the scheme, a cumulative total of 11.6 million jobs have been supported by the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) at various times.

[According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies \(IFS\)](#) the number of adults between the ages of 19-24 who were not working increased by



25% since the start of the pandemic, which is much higher than the increases they have seen for older age groups. As a result, young people are reporting being more “pessimistic about their immediate financial future than other age groups”, this is in part due to increased chances of being on furlough, unemployed and losing out on new career prospects.

While the focus for some has been to preserve business continuity and protect the health and safety of employees, the emotional and mental health of their workforce is a factor organisations can no longer afford to ignore. Never more so is this true than with preparation for a return to work.

Earlier this year, the UK government kick-started the discussions

on, and outlined a timeline for, a potential lifting of lockdown restrictions, and an end to its recommendation to ‘work from home where possible’. In response, savvy organisations began to put in place return to work strategies and plans, reviewing the viability and legality of current and future policies.

Fast forward to July 2021, and the wheels were in motion for imminent returns to the office and other workplaces. [It’s been reported that up to 50% of employees](#) have readopted their daily commute into the office, but it would be fair to say that not all businesses are suggesting five-days a week in the office, straight away. Instead, some are choosing a staggered approach and others are adopting a permanent ‘hybrid’

way of working. Research conducted by Owl Labs as part of their annual [State of Hybrid Work](#) found that nearly 89% of European companies plan on having a hybrid or remote workforce post-pandemic. Additionally, a [survey undertaken by the BBC](#), showed that almost all of the companies surveyed (43 out of 50) did not intend to bring staff back full-time. With this in mind, together with ongoing self-isolation requirements, the 'return to work' period will not be limited to one day in July, or August, it is likely to be a process that spans over the next few months, or even years.

As a semblance of certainty does return to the daily lives and business operations, it is vital that employee welfare remains at the forefront. Being mindful of employees who are feeling anxious and adapting plans for those who need to take the return to the office at a slower pace, is an important component of every 'return to work' strategy, policy and plan. And looking out for signs of potential distress and anxiety, and addressing them effectively and with compassion, will help ensure all employees receive (and feel they are getting) the support they need.

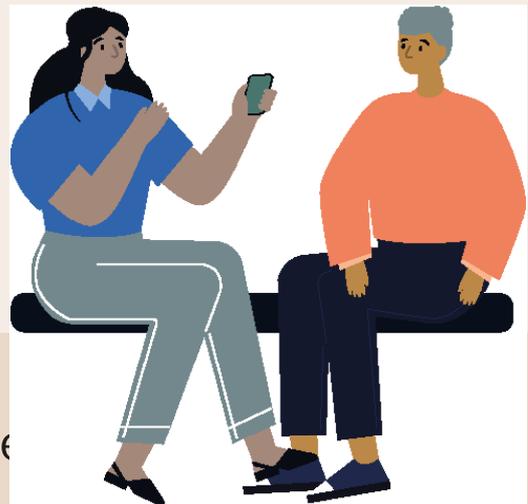
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“The Bank Workers Charity (BWC) continues to partner with NatWest to help colleagues across a range of wellbeing issues including mental health, money worries and relationship issues. We know many of our colleagues are experiencing these issues first hand as a result of the pandemic. Balancing unique and differing responsibilities is difficult, so to help the BWC are continuing to provide expert support including onsite and virtual support for colleagues who may be anxious about the transition to a new way of working.”

Fiona McAslan

Wellbeing Lead, NatWest Group





Section One

How are UK employees feeling about a return to work?

The world today is drastically different to the world yesterday. COVID has impacted the vast majority of the UK workforce. There is a lot of uncertainty in the market, especially around job security.

The pandemic has meant that organisations in the public and private sector, of all shapes and sizes, have faced untold disruption to their working practices. For office-based firms the

regular daily commute was replaced with working from the study, spare room or kitchen table.

The need to adhere to stringent Government rules, regulations on, and procedures for, social distancing has fundamentally changed the face of the workplace for businesses where working from home was not an option. For example the retail, manufacturing; engineering; construction; telecoms; warehouse and factory-based industries, as well

as blue-light workers, to name but a few. It doesn't end there, during the pandemic many organisations had to make difficult decisions to furlough or lay off workers to simply stay afloat. A situation that hit the travel, leisure, hospitality and arts industries perhaps the hardest.

Whilst the focus for many organisations has been to preserve its business health, the mental and emotional health of its employees is becoming a priority of equal parity too.



Returning to a workplace

A return to the workplace has multiple different meanings in the era of COVID-19 - and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

For those who've spent more than a year working at home or have been furloughed for a long period of time e.g. in retail, travel and hospitality, it is the beginning of a return to some form of 'normality'. The easing of restrictions has received a warm welcome for those employees simply looking forward to the end of back-to-back Zoom calls and a start to being able to interact with colleagues in real life. In fact for some the return to work isn't just a time to celebrate, it's a lifeline and a respite from an incredibly difficult year.

A return to work isn't merely restricted to those who could work from home, or were part of the government's furlough scheme. For those employed within industries where working remotely was not an option, it could also signal a return to workplaces after being told to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace.

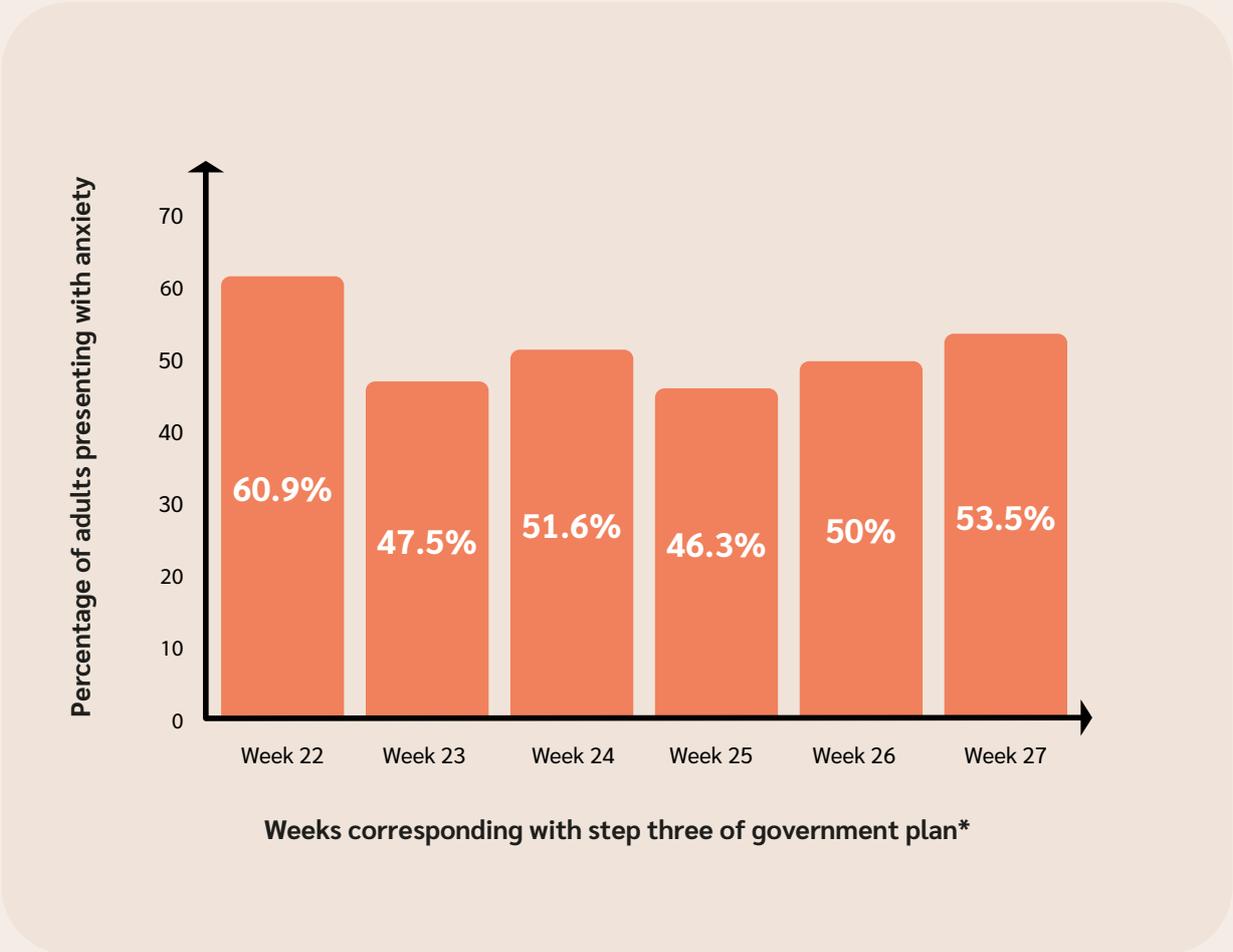
COVID-19 has taken its toll on the mental health of working age adults

The recent Kooth Pulse 2021 Report unearthed the effects COVID-19 posed on UK society, giving a clearer picture of the issues that will emerge and need to be addressed now, and in the years ahead. One thing that became apparent was the profound impact it had had on the mental health of working age adults. In February 2021, 27% of all adults presenting with mental health issues displayed thoughts of suicide.

It revealed an 89% increase in adults coming to Kooth for mental health support, with 39% saying they feel down, depressed, or hopeless nearly every day. That's a rise of 28% compared with 2019. It doesn't end there, during the pandemic the anonymous data from the Kooth platform on working age adults reported that:

- Sadness has increased over the last year, and in 2020 is significantly higher than the same months in 2019 (despite a slight decline in December 2020 and except for January). In July 2020, Kooth saw a 129% increase in the proportion of users presenting with sadness.
- Sleep difficulties have been consistently more common compared to the previous year. In November 2020, sleep difficulties were 106% more prevalent than in 2019.
- Suicidal thoughts have also been increasing over the past year, with significant spikes in November and December 2020. In February 2021, 27% of all adults presenting with mental health issues displayed thoughts of suicide.
- Self-Harm issues have been rising among adults and have been worse than the previous year in every month since August 2020, and most prominently in February and March 2021.

And using the Work and Social Adjustment Scale (WSAS) to measure functioning, our data showed that a 54% increase in the number of Kooth’s service users that reported that their ability to work has been severely impaired, compared to last year.



*Step 3 of government plan, which took effect after 17th May. Large groups of up to 30 people will now be allowed to meet outdoors. Indoor mixing allowed, up to six people or two households. Indoor venues such as pubs, restaurants, hotels, museums and group exercise classes reopen. Weddings allowed up to 30 people. Sports venues, both indoor and outdoor, reopened.



These are worrying statistics for employers, particularly as many people are now returning to the workplace where they're facing yet more change and renewed challenges.

Grief is a recurring theme: for some, grief for the loss of a loved one; and for many, grief at the loss of a way of life, through long COVID or the loss of a lifestyle that had become the family norm. Tension may arise in the workplace between those who seek to maintain that lifestyle, and those who have suffered at home and need the space, social connection and mentoring promised by a return to the office.

It is a hard ask, for any employer to know which state of mind each of their employees will be in, at any one time. Add to this, 79% of employees think that their leaders should do more to support their mental health, but less than 50% of employees are prepared to talk to them about their issues.

But even if they did would employers know how to support their staff in each of these states? The 'potential effectiveness' of an employee may be curbed by this 'interference', affecting their own performance and potentially having an adverse negative knock-on effect on their colleagues/ team around them.

Returners' anxiety

For every employee that is feeling jubilant about a return to work, there are others who remain anxious. In fact, a recent study from [the Limeade Institute](#) revealed that 100% of employees surveyed - that were previously working on-site pre-pandemic, but are currently working from home - had some anxiety about returning to work. In addition, employers should be cognisant of employees with pre-existing mental health conditions and their anxiety about returning to work. [Martin Lewis's Mental Health and Income Commission](#) found that more than four in 10 people were concerned about returning to work vs. 30% of the general public.

Exposure to COVID-19: [77% of those surveyed](#) cited being exposed to COVID-19 as their top source of anxiety. For some employees who are clinically vulnerable or shielding, or those who may be living or caring for someone who is clinically vulnerable or shielding, this is particularly of concern.

In fact, researchers at Kingston University have identified a '[COVID Anxiety Syndrome](#)'. This is defined as 'worrying about catching the virus or about loved ones catching it and having coping behaviours that include excessive avoidance of certain situations, frequent symptom checking

and attention to threat (for example, if others are displaying symptoms of the virus).' According to their latest study one in five are suffering from it and will struggle to reintegrate back into daily routines.

For other employees, anxiety that they are feeling is about experiencing new things or returning to activities they haven't done in a long time, such as the return to a busy office after months working from home, readapting to the daily commute and direct or indirect physical contact. Whilst we can control our own behaviour to some extent, we cannot control the behaviour of others who may be less worried.

Public Transport and Spaces:

Employers cannot control the environment outside of the workplace, but it is important to acknowledge that there are employees who simply do not feel ready to give up all restrictions including social distancing or the wearing of masks. Commuting to work was a cause of anxiety for 58% of respondents to the Limeade Institute study, it therefore comes as no surprise that 71% of those responding to a [YouGov survey](#) agreed that masks should continue to be mandatory on public transport for a further period of time.

Being in a crowded space is also a source of anxiety for employees, 66% believed that face masks should continue to be mandatory in shops and some enclosed public places for a further period of time, and 70% said they think they will feel less safe in a crowded or unventilated space once face masks are no longer compulsory.

As a result, a number of public transport operators such as Transport for London, London North Eastern Railway (LNER) and large retailers are continuing with their policies or making polite suggestions to customers to wear a mask.



In the Office, Working from Home or Hybrid: it is important to understand that the anxiety some employees are feeling is not just about the risk of catching the virus. [According to CV-Library](#), the reasons for feeling anxious about returning to work include: flexibility (73.4%), getting more done when not in the office (44%), don't want to deal with office politics (37.1%), as well as the commute (23.6%).

Every industry sector, and business within it, has a different need and perspective on the new world of work. [In an article for Stylist Magazine](#), Emma Williams, employment solicitor at Midlands law firm Higgs LLP outlines employee rights when it comes to the return to the office and flexible working “From a statutory point of view, any employee who has 26 weeks of continuous service can submit a request for flexible working, which could be an amendment to the number of days or hours worked or the option to work from home for some or all of the week. An employee may well argue that their performance hasn't dropped since working from home began and, therefore, they should be able to remain at home. There is also some talk from the government about making working from home a right in the future.”

In the Office: the UK government may have [issued health and safety guidelines](#) on keeping workplaces safe as coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions are removed - but it is up to the individual business to develop and enforce their own policies. There are ongoing discussions on how employers may be liable for outbreaks of COVID-19 in their workplaces in the future. Employees want to be 100% certain that their place of work is deemed 'COVID safe' and the necessary risk assessments have been carried out - with policies created from them. Specifically, that they are suitable and sufficient risk assessments to identify all risks, with this in mind they should also look at different

groups of workers (e.g. pregnant employees, those with medical or clinical issues) and thus, implement all practicable measures to minimise risks.

After all, anxiety is not just limited to catching the virus, for some it's the social anxiety of human contact - direct or indirect - a simple hug, handshake or tap on the shoulder can provoke social anxiety. Then for others it's the potential of having to deal with conflict in the workplace - the pandemic has been a contentious topic of discussion for many, especially around taking the vaccine, obeying the rules/restrictions, or simply wearing a mask. Everyone has their own opinion on what is/isn't acceptable - and debates can get heated.

Case Study: WMAS

The West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (WMAS), was the first university ambulance trust in the UK. WMAS comprises of 111 and 999 call centre teams, a corporate team, a training academy and attendees from external Universities, community responders, an ambulance service, air ambulance service, and the patient transport teams. It is also the second largest ambulance trust in the UK.

Kooth plc was commissioned by WMAS in May 2020 in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic. NHS staff, already used to dealing with long and stressful work days, were now having to cope with the impact of rapid changes in protocols, a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), worries about the health of loved ones, balancing parenting as well as their own fears of contracting the virus.

Kooth Plc provides a safe and trusted digital mental health platform for organisations to offer to their employees. The service is unique because it is completely anonymous, allowing employees to access high quality therapeutic services without the traditional gate posting. The platform is available 24/7 from any device with no need to download an app and offers a choice of support for staff supported by qualified counsellors when needed.



“As an organisation, we welcomed Kooth’s offer to partner with us to support our workforce during such demanding times. Throughout the partnership, Kooth have consistently delivered on through the promise of providing our staff with easy access to a reliable and clinically robust digital support service through the platform. We’ve seen great staff engagement and it’s a pleasure to work with a company that is focused on delivering the right care to people in the best way possible.”

Sarah Greswolde

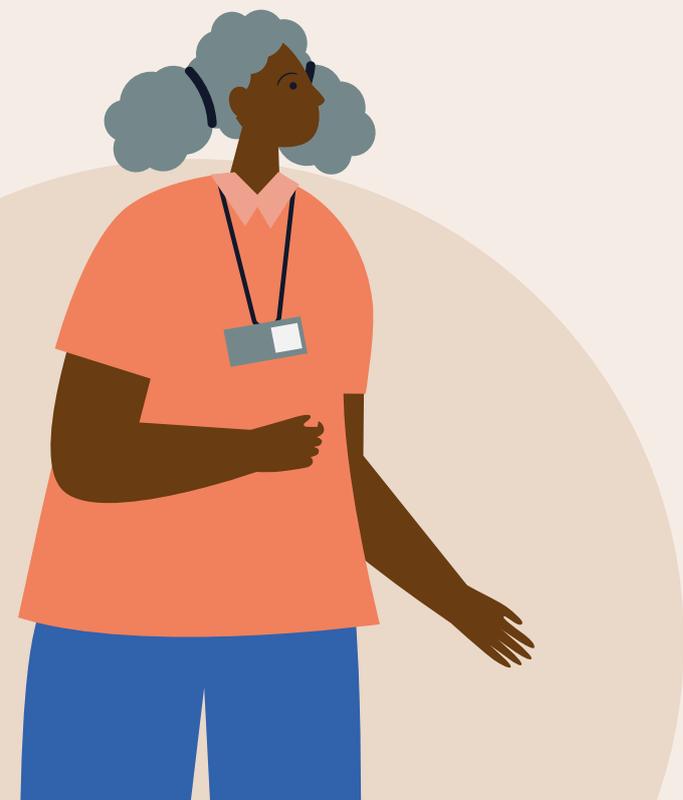
Mental Health Practitioner, West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust

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West Midlands Ambulance Service is fully committed to supporting the health and well being of our employees. We are proud of the wide range of support services that we are able to offer and signpost our staff to. Qwell is now well embedded into our health and wellbeing offering, with good levels of uptake amongst staff. Being a 24/7 service, Qwell has been beneficial in enabling staff to access mental health support at times that are convenient for them around shift patterns and family commitments.”

Lucy Mackcracken

Head of HR, West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust





Section Two

Spotting the signs of return to work anxiety?



It is important that employers pay attention to potential indicators of distress or signs of those amongst their workforce who are not coping.

From the senior leadership team, human resource departments and anyone with line management

responsibilities, they should all have their antennae tuned in their employees' wellbeing, keeping an eye out for any signs of concern or distress. It can often be a minefield for employers as it can be tricky to detect when employees are having a hard time, after all, people handle change and anxiety in varying different ways. It would also be fair to say that spotting

the signs of return to work anxiety should not be new to many organisations - after all there is a chance that they've had employees with long-term periods of absence, due to mental or physical illness, grief and loss, in the past. The challenge is that it may not have been quite on this scale or for an ongoing period.



“Some people who are suffering or disengaged can carry on for quite a while, apparently as normal. You might only become aware that something’s wrong when you when you notice a change in work performance.”

Lisa Kramer, Business Psychologist at Kooth plc

The signs of stress / distress

Sometimes, it’s obvious when people are suffering. For example, someone who was previously a chatty, open person might become quieter and more reserved. Being attuned to noticing if they are feeling on edge, restless, withdrawn, overtired is helpful – these can all be signs that an employee is struggling to cope with changes to their daily routine. Overcompensating through an unusual increase in productivity might also be a warning sign - the key thing here is a change in usual presentation.

Anxiety can also present itself through physical symptoms too, so employers should also be aware of any increased absences due to physical ailments, along with communications regarding poor sleep and symptoms of panic such as sweating, breathlessness and avoidance of activities. It can be difficult to spot the signs if employees are working from home, so regularly check in to see how they’re doing. The most important action for employers is don’t ignore warning signs of distress.



“I’m so overwhelmed right now. I feel completely stuck and so scared of everything that’s going on outside. I suffer from anxiety and I’m terrified to even leave the house right now, let alone go to work.”

Marianne, aged 26



“I am in a well paid job and the company is good. However, the actual work is extremely stressful and my colleagues seem to go out of their way to make my life difficult. I have really enjoyed working from home for the past year or so, and am so anxious about returning to work.”

Ben, aged 52





Section Three

How to create a mentally healthy return to work plan

The culture around mental health is changing fast. Work to address stigma and a greater openness mean managers' roles are changing and employees' expectations are shifting. A supportive workplace is no longer seen as a 'bonus', but is becoming the new normal. And quite right too. This change needs to be driven from all sides, with senior leaders role-modelling positive workplace principles to build and maintain a culture where everyone really belongs.

During times of change, collectively, employers must make sure employee wellbeing is a top priority as they return to the office. And as a duty of care, employers need to be mindful of those who may be feeling higher levels of anxiety. It is vitally important that those employees who are anxious do not feel embarrassed or under pressure to 'just be grateful' that lockdown restrictions have been lifted.

Everyone is different, but when noticing any changes the first port of call for an employer is to try and talk openly with the employee. It's essential that a safe space is provided where the employee feels that they have time to talk and will be listened to - somewhere they can share their worries when feeling anxious, without judgement and fear of stigma, can really help. While simply talking can sometimes feel daunting to employees, it is a crucial first step to addressing difficult emotions.

In addition, as part of any corporate wellbeing programme, yoga workshops and meditation sessions can be introduced, or employers can simply encourage people to take regular breaks during the day or go out for a walk and enjoy time in nature. All of these are proven to reduce stress and help people achieve more balance in their lives.



We've all been changed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The health and wellbeing anxiety, the lockdowns, the threats to livelihoods – they've all left psychological scars. It's OK not to be OK about this. But in my experience, managers are resilient and innovative people. They learn lessons from tough times, and they step up to take on new challenges. With 62% of managers believing that the wellbeing/mental health of their team has or will be affected by a return to the workplace and 45% of women threatening to

quit if forced to return full-time to the office, it's imperative that managers talk to their teams, build trust and respect their views on how to handle the return. Employers, in turn, must develop flexible, inclusive and tolerant ways of working. This resource together with our own [Better Managers Roadmap](#) will guide you and your organisation through this next phase.

Ann Francke OBE

Chief Executive, Chartered Management Institute

Seven ways employers can spot and tackle return to work anxiety

01

Keep employees informed:

Communication is key here, especially when people first come back to work and need the most reassurance.

Ensure there is no ambiguity on, or miscommunication surrounding, the 'return to work' plan, timeline and policies. If things change, let them know.

02

Lead by example:

As an employer, it's important to set a good example and 'practice what you preach'. If employees are being asked to be in the workplace 60% of the time, make sure leaders are too. At the same time be mindful that everyone wants to look after their people, especially given all the challenges we're facing during the pandemic. But it's also important to recognise when you're not the best person to offer help.

03

Communication is a two-way street:

Provide a safe space for employees to raise their concerns and fears about the return to work, i.e., an anonymous pulse survey or employee engagement platform/app and/or mental health first aider. Then communicate back with the employees, summarising what you have heard and what you are planning on doing to address some of the issues.



04

Be flexible and fair:

Ensure that employees are being listened to and concerns and fears that employees have on the return to work are being addressed. And adjust plans and policies to make individual employees feel safe and secure.

05

Provide mental health training for all leaders and managers:

On how to identify and respond to mental health issues and concerns from themselves and employees.

06

Schedule regular one-on-one check-ins with employees:

Go beyond the perfunctory 'how are you' and ask open-ended questions to really find out what's concerning employees and how as an employer you can support them.

07

Signpost employees to your mental health support:

Ensure all your employees are familiar with your mental health programme and what services you can provide for your staff. Make sure you choose one that is fit for purpose and matches the needs of the people in your organisation. An anonymous digital health services such as Kooth is welcomed by most staff.

Lisa Kramer, Business Psychologist at Kooth plc:

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“Make sure you have one person who’s clearly leading your communications. Let people know what you’re planning to do and gather feedback on how people feel about your plans. And don’t ask for feedback if you’re not ready to act on the results! Send out weekly updates and check in to make sure that people are okay. Even if you’re a fast-moving corporate business, attention and support go a long way to make people feel valued and cared for. Also, it can be difficult to help people who haven’t told you that they’re feeling under pressure. This is why reaching out to an anonymous service like Kooth can be a lifeline to many.”

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“You may not know how to deal with someone who’s suffering from stress yourself, but you do need to know where to signpost them for help. This might be your Mental Health First Aider, your Wellbeing Officer, or someone outside the organisation who can offer professional support and guidance. Also, remember to look after yourself. You’ve been living through the pandemic, too, and you have your own stresses to deal with. Make sure you’re doing what you can to support your own mental health.”

About Us

Kooth is the UK's leading digital mental health platform. Our mission is to provide accessible and safe spaces for everyone to achieve better mental health. Our platform is clinically robust and accredited to provide a range of therapeutic support and interventions. All our services are predicated on easy access. Early intervention is so important when managing mental health. Reframing issues can prevent some of the severe impacts of poor emotional health so giving employees access to support is essential for employers.

Our four services are:

1. Kooth Work: for employees
2. Kooth: for children and young persons
3. Kooth Student: for university and higher-education students
4. Kooth: for Adults

Kooth is a fully safeguarded and pre-moderated community with a library of peer and professional created content, alongside access to experienced online counsellors. There are no thresholds for support. Currently, Kooth sees over 4,000 logins a day.

For adults, Kooth operates across distinct locations and serves specific cohorts, including parents, teachers, victims of crime, and those who have suffered from or continue to experience domestic violence. It is also offered as a benefit by a number of corporate organisations delivering anonymous digital mental health support services to employees.



About Kooth Work

Many large organisations already have a mental health support offering in place for their employees. But, mental healthcare providers like Kooth can offer digital tools that empower leaders to sign-post employees to access high-quality mental health care conveniently and easily on their own time. They can also provide the data to evidence what is actually working in helping to support employee mental health.

Kooth Work is designed to work alongside existing provisions, giving them an extended choice of therapy. Research shows that giving your employees options rather than a single prescription approach will increase positive therapeutic outcomes by 58%.

As an employer, you will be able to see real time feedback and notice a significant improvement in Mental Health KPIs. Through the data and reporting we provide, you can start to plan more effective strategies around mental health to ensure you attract and retain the best talent for your organisation. Users remain completely anonymous, and our sleek onboarding process allows for maximum participation.

Organisations from the private and public sector such as CMI, M&C Saatchi, NHS West Midlands Ambulance service have partnered with Kooth Plc to make the Kooth digital mental health platform freely available to their employees.



Kooth's platform comprises of four pathways of usage:

- **Proactive community** - Users actively involved in reading, creating, and commenting on the Kooth magazine, participating in self-help activities such as mini-activities and journaling and users actively participating in peer-to-peer conversations via forums.
- **Responsive support** - Users receiving immediate interventions for brief and intermittent therapeutic support.
- **Structured counselling** - Users actively working through therapeutic interventions with a Kooth practitioner.
- **Ongoing therapeutic support** - Users who choose to use Kooth's service instead of traditional mental health services.

Kooth holds a UK-wide accreditation from the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

Kooth Work:

Employee mental health support that helps your people thrive and flourish.

Kooth Work provides your people with a complete package of mental health support including professional counselling, self help tools and community articles.

You will receive detailed reports and insights to inform your mental health strategy and gain a clearer picture of your workplace wellbeing.

[Book a Demo](#)

Talk to us about how we can help you navigate the pressures of this post pandemic era on your people. We can give you the tools to support & guide them.

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