

# HR Insights

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## Managing the Mental Health of Returning Employees

The coronavirus pandemic has affected nearly every aspect of daily life. Businesses are closed or have reduced capabilities, individuals are worried about their physical and financial safety, and no one knows when circumstances will improve. These and other factors illustrate the burdens individuals must endure during the pandemic. When businesses begin to reopen, employers must keep these factors in mind.

Reopening a business does not erase the hardship endured by its employees during its closure. Employees may still be grappling with mental health issues that can impact their performance when the doors reopen.

This article provides tips and considerations for employers that intend to reopen their businesses after the coronavirus pandemic. This guidance can help manage the mental health of returning employees.

### Consider a Slow Open

Many employees had to be laid off or furloughed during the coronavirus pandemic. These individuals may need some time to reacclimate to the work environment. Even remote employees who retained their positions may need time to readjust, having to now deal with regular commutes and professional appearance expectations.

Reopening slowly can give employees time to get back into their normal routines. Without this adjustment period, employees may experience

emotional whiplash, since they must now suddenly deal with expectations they haven't faced for weeks.

As such, employers should consider phases to their reopening. These may include bringing employees back in waves and gradually expanding operational hours back to normal. This gradual reopening can give employees the time they need to properly bring their bodies and minds back to work.

### Think About Caregivers

The coronavirus pandemic inadvertently turned thousands of employees into full-time caregivers in just a few short weeks, with nursing homes, day cares and schools closing down. Many of these employees will retain these caregiving duties even when businesses reopen.

Employers should understand that some employees may have caregiving responsibilities that impact their mental health. Flexible scheduling can be a small perk that makes a big difference. Employers can help relieve some of the caregiving burden by allowing employees to move their schedules around, accomplishing job functions on their own time or during core work hours. This ensures the employee can maintain their personal responsibilities while still getting their professional work done.

Offering such a perk can also make an employer more attractive to working parents who may prize flexibility over many other workplace incentives.



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Offering a financial credit or reimbursement for caregiving services is another potential perk employers can pursue. This can drastically reduce the mental stress of caregivers, but it's often too great of a financial burden for employers. At the end of the day, even small accommodations can make a difference to employees' mental health.

## Encourage Transparency

Reopening a business comes with many uncertainties. The main one for employees is whether their jobs are in jeopardy. Being transparent with employees about the status of the company can alleviate some of those worries and keep employees focused on their performance.

This doesn't mean only sharing good news—employees should be apprised to all major company developments. The last thing employers need is a rumor mill spreading mistruths right after a business resumes its operations. Getting in front of news and maintaining transparency should be a top concern for employers.

Employers should consider holding town hall meetings (virtual or otherwise) periodically to discuss the latest company news. Employees should be encouraged to bring up suggestions, feedback and criticism to evaluate the reopening process. Critically, employees should understand that transparency works both ways and that they should bring up any issues before they persist. If problems are occurring right after reopening, they may continue if they aren't swiftly corrected.

## Be Empathetic With Performance

While the coronavirus pandemic has upended the global economy and businesses across the globe, it's easy to dwell solely on the financial devastation. But employers cannot lose sight of the hardest-hit victims: individuals—many of whom may be their employees.

It's important to keep the human toll of the coronavirus in mind when reopening a business. This should help inform performance conversations for returning employees. If someone isn't hitting their usual marks, employers should have a conversation with the employee instead of immediately taking action. It's possible the individual is dealing with significant issues outside of the workplace that

need to be addressed. Simply reprimanding the employee for poor performance would do little to help the situation.

Instead, employers should rethink how they evaluate performance while their businesses are in the reopening stages. Taking an empathetic approach can help ease employees back into a professional mindset and help alleviate some of the stress of returning to work.

## Conclusion

Reopening a business isn't an easy decision to make, especially following a global pandemic. Employers may naturally focus primarily on operational factors, like supply chains and budgets.

However, ignoring employees' mental health upon reopening can create significant issues down the road. This is a critical period when employees can develop negative, lasting patterns. Get ahead of these potential issues by considering some of the guidance in this article.

For more workplace tips, speak with Wallace Welch & Willingham today.