

Back to Work

How to Prepare for Five Mental Health Challenges Facing Returning Workers

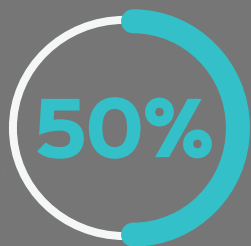


Americans are going back to work. With roughly half of adults vaccinated and pandemic numbers dropping, company leaders are beginning to discuss “when” — not “if” — that shift will occur. In one [survey](#) of executives at 56 Fortune 500 companies, more than half predicted their employees will return to the workplace between July and December. A third of respondents (and 78% of those in the hospitality and retail industries) said they would open workplaces even earlier, by June.

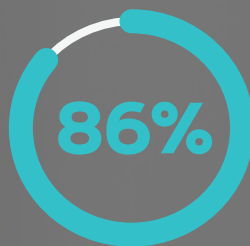
What this means for workers is another major shift in schedules and practices just as they had adjusted to working remotely. Mental health, already challenged by stress, anxiety and depression during the pandemic, as tracked by our [Mental Health Index](#), will take another hit as workers reshuffle priorities and acclimate to a familiar-yet-unfamiliar work environment that will likely have COVID-19 guidelines and requirements in place.

In a recent opinion survey by Total Brain, 50% of respondents said their employer has not done enough to address the mental impacts of COVID-19 on employees, and 86% want their employer to build a corporate culture that encourages open dialogue about mental health challenges.

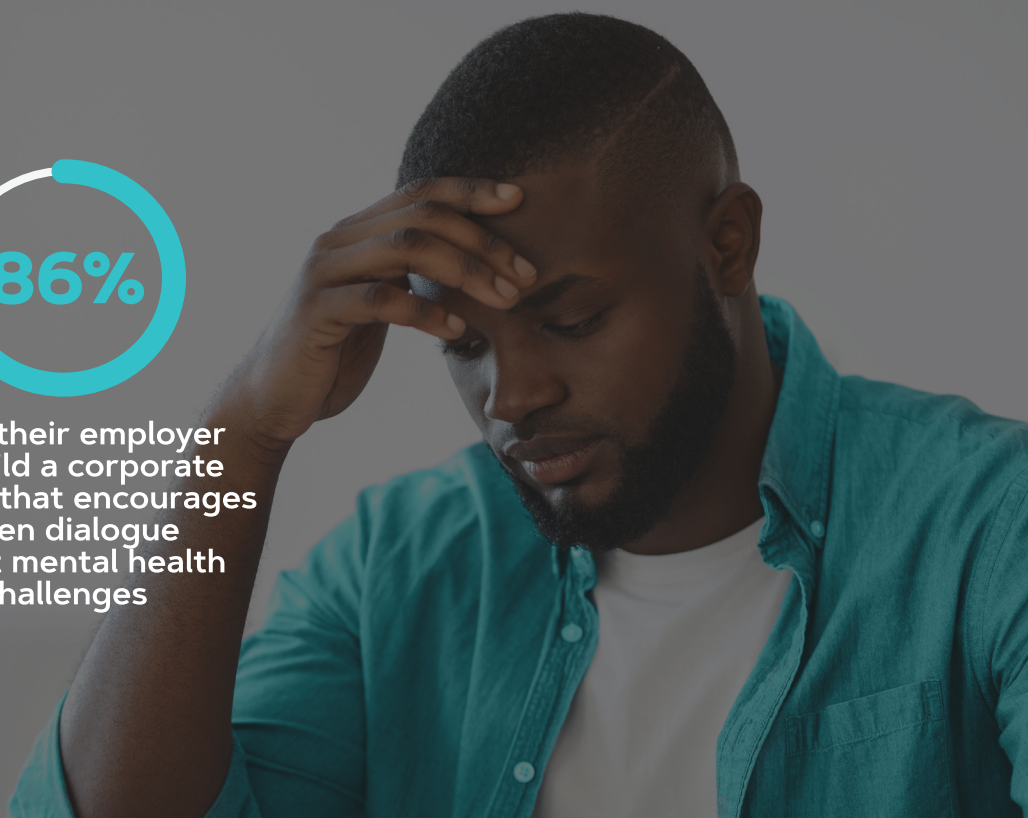
This report will discuss those survey results in the context of five mental health challenges employers are likely to face as workplaces reopen. We also provide takeaway points managers can put into place to make the transition back to work as smooth as possible.



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1. Employees will feel stressed and anxious as they navigate competing priorities.

Three in four Americans say working remotely has had a positive effect on their mental health, and two-thirds say they feel somewhat or extremely anxious about returning to work, according to the Total Brain survey. Why? At the top of the list (50% for both men and women) is the anticipation of having less flexibility or freedom with their schedules.

That's especially true for those who have caretaking responsibilities at home. One in five of those with children say they feel stressed over how they will manage their kids' remote learning schedules; 9% say they are concerned about leaving a pet at home; and 8% worry about having less time to care for elderly parents.

Some companies are preemptively addressing this concern by offering creative scheduling to workers who want it. For instance, Google has announced it will test a "flexible work week" starting in September, which allows employees to combine three "collaboration days" in the office with two days working from home, in hopes that this "will lead to greater productivity, collaboration and well-being," reported the [New York Times](#).

These measures are likely to hit the right notes with American workers, 55% of whom say they would feel better about returning to work if they had a hybrid option, according to the Total Brain survey. Other companies are initiating or expanding flextime or part-time scheduling for employees who need or desire it.

For employers who require full-time, on-site work, it will be especially critical to provide additional mental health support around managing and reducing stress. That can take many forms from having managers do weekly one-on-one or team check-ins to make sure workers are managing well, to offering childcare or eldercare referral programs for caregivers.

Companies should also utilize mobile technology tools that can help workers address stress in the moment – either at work or at home. Total Brain's [Resonant Breathing](#) exercise is an excellent place to start.

Takeaway:

Employers must prepare now to anticipate their worker's stress and anxiety pain points as they return to work, or risk losing workers to overload. They must develop comprehensive and creative solutions that include work schedule adjustments, on-site mental health support and online tools that promote stress management both on the job and at home. An emphasis on empathetic management is important so workers know they can turn to their leaders for support if needed.



2. Employees may feel afraid to return to work as pandemic lingers.

One in three employees feel they are risking their health to return to work, according to the Total Brain survey. An American Psychological Association survey reported that almost half of adults feel uneasy about returning to any in-person interactions, including 48 percent of those who have been vaccinated.

Employers should keep this front-of-mind as they make plans to bring employees back to work. It will be important to have sufficient PPE available and to reconfigure workspaces to comply with CDC guidelines. About one third of workers polled by Total Brain say they would feel better about returning to work if their employer required vaccinations (37%), provided protective materials (35%) and had check-ins in place to prevent negative effects on workers (29%).

In addition, 34% of employees said knowing what health protocols are in place to keep workers safe would help them return with confidence. Employee communications are extremely important in that regard, ideally long before the workplace opens. Err on the side of too much, rather than too little, communication and provide employees the opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns if they have them. Safety should feel like every employee's goal and mission, not simply top-down policy.

Notably, some anxiety about returning to work stems from residual mental health strains from the past year. Anxiety among U.S. workers peaked last spring and remained above normal through December, according to the Mental Health Index – a prolonged situation that will have lasting impacts on worker well-being. In other words, employers must be prepared with structures and services that address mental health issues as well as physical health concerns. More than 20% of workers told Total Brain they would feel better about returning to work if their employer increased access to mental health resources.

"Employers should stay sensitive to the fact that workers remain vulnerable, especially with much of life still in flux through 2021, and that mental health was already a struggle prior to the pandemic. It is crucial to continue providing employees with adequate support and recognize that future setbacks are inevitable if we do not examine the impacts on mental health beyond the pandemic," says Matt Resteghini, Total Brain's Chief Marketing Officer, in a recent [blog](#).

Takeaway:

Because workers remain fearful of COVID-19, returning to work will require addressing the physical health concerns with a combination of the right equipment (masks, face shields, air purifiers, etc.) and right practices (temperature checks, distancing). On top of that, employers should develop a form of "mental health PPE" that includes elements like on-site education and support services, counseling referral, and digital tools and resources like the [Total Brain platform](#). Employee communications should use all available channels – emails, internal social media, team meetings, etc. – to convey what the company is doing to keep workers safe and support their mental health.



3. Employees will struggle to focus.

Despite a few dips, U.S. workers have maintained focus (sustained attention) throughout 2020. Since January 2021, focus levels have even been on the upswing, consistently higher than pre-COVID levels. This may reflect both the easing of anxiety as vaccines became available, and the benefits of a quieter, simpler work-from-home routine.

As employers reopen offices and factories, that focus may wane at least temporarily as workers readjust to the natural noise and interruptions of the workplace. About 18% of workers say they feel stressed over the anticipation of “being less productive in the office.” Some workers may also feel distracted by home-life concerns, such as their childcare situation or home maintenance issues, that were more easily handled when working remotely.

Companies should lean toward compassion and empathy as they give workers time to readjust. Managers can facilitate discussion and even brainstorming around focus in team meetings; encourage workers to take occasional, short work breaks to manage home/life concerns; and remind them of employer benefits, such as paid time off (PTO) or family leave, that can be used to handle personal needs.

Employers can also offer online tools, such as Total Brain’s [Think Balance](#), that have been shown to improve focus in the face of distraction when practiced for about 10 minutes a day.

Takeaway:

It’s inevitable that the return to work will involve a certain amount of distraction. Rather than fighting this tendency, which will increase stress in the environment and actually worsen distraction, employers can take a patient, understanding approach that empowers and inspires workers during the transition. Thankfully our brains are highly adaptable and we can train them to focus better with the right tools and a supportive work culture.

4. Employees may have lost social skills.

Social connectivity has remained strong throughout COVID-19, according to the [Mental Health Index](#), reflecting workers' desire to seek and enjoy interactions with others. That said, most of those interactions have been limited to close friends and family members, or remotely via internet platforms like Zoom.

Returning to work will require workers to meet a higher bar of interacting with a wide variety of people, in person, for the first time in more than a year. That may feel very awkward at times and may trigger feelings of anxiety and stress – especially among the 20% of American workers who say they dread returning to a toxic work environment.

Employers can smooth this transition by easing workers back into in-person group work gradually, and by providing opportunities for workers to reconnect once the initial shock of reentry has passed. Eighteen percent of workers say social connectivity events planned by their employers would be helpful for their mental health.

Takeaway:

Workers will feel some trepidation at returning to in-person interactions, so employers can step up to offer team-building and socializing activities as appropriate and safe. The small percentage of workers who struggle with [social anxiety disorder](#) may need additional support during the months immediately before and after the workplace reopen. Companies can provide counseling referrals through their Employee Assistance Plan or similar program, and online tools also can help. Workers should particularly focus on [reducing anxiety](#) in the moment through measured breathing, meditation and Neurotunes™.

5. Employees will need more mental health services overall.

Though vaccinations and business reopenings may signal a return to normal, mental health challenges remain a concern for many U.S. workers. Mental health struggles were already on the rise before COVID-19, and the pandemic exacerbated that trend; others developed stress and anxiety disorders for the first time during 2020.

“While we are very pleased to see positive trends, we should be very clear that anxiety, depression and PTSD are, and will remain, at elevated levels. They will also long outlive the pandemic and there is no vaccine for them!” says Garen Staglin, chairman, One Mind at Work. Employers can smooth this transition by easing workers back into in-person group work gradually, and by providing opportunities for workers to reconnect once the initial shock of reentry has passed. Eighteen percent of workers say social connectivity events planned by their employers would be helpful for their mental health.

Workers know what will help them navigate back-to-work struggles, and it boils down to one thing: more services for mental health. Now is the time to put into place a comprehensive mental health plan that complements your company’s larger health plan. Workers suggest those benefits should include:

- **Mental health PTO - 52% (58% of women)**
- **Health insurance with mental health benefits - 40%**
- **Employee assistance programs - 36%**
- **Stress management training - 34%**
- **Access to mental health support groups - 27%**
- **Digital mental health assessment/training tools - 14%**

Clearly, not every tool will fit every employee, so it’s necessary to offer a variety of options that meet workers where and when they have a need. On-the-job programs and groups, as well as before- and after-work resources are equally important.

Takeaway:

Though physical health concerns have dominated the conversation about reopening the workplace, employers cannot afford to neglect the lingering mental health challenges that lie ahead. Expanding health and wellness benefits to include mental health programs, services and digital tools will ensure that workers have what they need to cope, adjust and even thrive as they reenter the workplace, with all the benefits and stresses that transition will bring.



Back to Work Using the Total Brain Solution

Ushering employees through the mental health challenges of returning to work will require investment in a variety of resources, including digital ones. The online Total Brain platform offers clients a scientifically proven method for monitoring and supporting mental health and wellness. By building self-awareness and providing tools for transforming stress into a calm, relaxed state, founder Evian Gordon, MD, Ph.D., a leading neuroscientist, and his team of scientists, technologists and strategists empower participants to measure, improve and manage their mental health as they do their physical health.

Our participants take assessments every 30 days to measure their 12 core brain capacities and screen for the risk of seven common mental health conditions. Then each individual receives a customized training plan including digital cognitive, emotional and breathing exercises – all designed to improve mental fitness. Those practices are especially critical during times of increased stress, fear and uncertainty, such as now.

Since 2000, Total Brain has partnered with many of the largest companies in the United States to boost productivity and insight, encourage healthy behaviors and lower mental health costs. By measuring, evaluating, and comparing assessment data during the COVID-19 outbreak, we seek to better inform and equip both employers and employees.

