Nervous about returning to work? Take precautions against coronavirus

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As coronavirus pandemic restrictions are lifted, many Americans will

face physical and mental health challenges—including fear and anxiety—as they return to work.

"Uncertainty and unpredictability can really create an unhealthy amount of fear and stress, especially when it's sustained over such a long period of time," said Dr. K. Luan Phan, head of psychiatry and behavioral health at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center in Columbus.

"Challenges will remain as businesses reopen, and the typical workplace will look very different following this pandemic," he said in an OSU news release.

Phan said it's essential to find new ways to work as a team while maintaining your distance from colleagues and preventing the spread of infection.

Infection precautions such as taking each worker's temperature on arrival, providing face masks, keeping work stations at least 6 feet apart and wiping down surfaces can make everyone feel safer and less anxious.

"Physical and mental health are closely intertwined. While you practice good hygiene and physical distancing in the office, you should also practice stress-reduction," said Bernadette Melnyk, dean of the College of Nursing and OSU's chief wellness officer.

For instance, she suggests taking five deep, abdominal breaths as you wash your hands for at least 20 seconds. "Doing this at least five times a day can reduce anxiety and even lower your blood pressure," Melnyk advised.

Healthy habits such as regular exercise, good nutrition and at least seven hours of sleep a night can give your immune system a boost. It's also

important for workers who feel sick to stay home.

If you're returning to work, Phan advised, ask your employer and managers what measures are in place to keep you safe. If there aren't precautions in the workplace, speak up to protect yourself and your co-workers.

Phan and Melnyk recommend managing stress when you return to work. They suggest using stress-reduction apps; practicing mindfulness and self-care that calms your breathing and nerves; and creating a plan for you and your family to manage the transition.

Here they offer more helpful tips:

- Eat at least five fruits and veggies every day, don't smoke and limit your alcohol intake to one drink a day for women and two for men.
- Be sure to follow recommended safety precautions. These include washing hands frequently, keeping sanitizer and disinfecting wipes handy and cleaning surfaces often. Wear a mask and don't shake hands during meetings or when interacting with customers.
- Avoid crowded conference rooms and keep your workspace at least 6 feet from your nearest co-worker. When possible, employers should allow employees to work from home or stagger in-office shifts.
- If a COVID-19 vaccine becomes available, be sure to get the shot.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on workplaces and the coronavirus pandemic.

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