Having navigated the extraordinary, stressful impact of the pandemic for over a year now, it would seem that signs of a return to “normal” would be nothing but welcome. It may come as a surprise to discover that you have mixed feelings or even anxiety about this next chapter. These thoughts and feelings are normal, but it can be helpful to have strategies to manage and work through them.

**Understand the factors in play**

**Hard-wired survival learning has taken place.**
The pandemic triggered real fears for our lives. We learned to be wary of everyday activities and even being near other people. The sense of threat and reliance on the precautions we took to feel safe are part of us now and will echo for some time.

**We’re still grieving losses of all sorts,** from norms and routines to the overwhelming loss of loved ones or one’s livelihood. As life begins to look more “normal,” we can feel these losses even more deeply.

**Pressures that were on pause are coming back.**
As social “engines” restart, we can once again struggle with loneliness, FOMO (fear of missing out), and social comparison. Social anxiety may flare. Work flexibilities may be ending. We may need to once again consider our appearance, our child’s academic progress, and so on. We’re out of practice in managing these stressors, increasing their impact on us.

**Our adaptations that have changed us.**
New habits grew up around daily life, relationships, and our attitudes. In isolation, many turned inward, making discoveries about themselves that may feel out of place now. Do we try to maintain the changes or discard them? Are they helpful or a hindrance now? It can be stressful to be unsure of ourselves in this way.

**The definition of “normal” is still evolving.**
What will the workplace look like? How will schooling change? How will day-to-day life, the economy, and our lifestyles be impacted? When will we feel safe? Massive uncertainties remain. It’s natural to be wary.

**Manage your mindset**

**Continue to follow health guidelines**
shared by the CDC and local public health agencies. This has been a reliable way to feel empowered in the face of worrisome uncertainties. Allow yourself to trust recommendations from these sources that say it’s okay to gather, such as after being fully vaccinated.

**Be patient with yourself and others.**
Remember the factors in play. Give yourself permission to work through this at your own pace. Recognize that reentry is different for each of us. We all have a right to set and keep our own boundaries and for those boundaries to change. Be careful of holding others to your standards.

**Talk about your experiences.**
Telling our stories is a way to validate and organize what we’ve gone through. It can help us see our strength and find commonalities with others. When you gather, take time to do an intentional “debrief” about this extraordinary experience.

**Understand how anxiety works.**
Carrying a lingering sense of threat and being unsure of what comes next creates an opening that anxiety is quick to fill with worst-case scenarios. It’s natural to want to avoid anxiety-provoking situations, but doing so reinforces the sense of threat, and leaves you no way to change the script.

**Move forward in “baby steps.”**
To get past this cycle, we have to engage with those fears. Try small steps forward in areas that are important to you, such as gathering with others. Start with meeting one person outdoors, then work up to larger indoor gatherings. If anxiety or other emotions get overwhelming, reach out for professional support. Your EAP can help you connect.
Making meaning

Reflect and take stock. Take time to think about and write down the impact of the past year. Work to process the challenges, but also consider the gift in this experience – learning things about yourself, your lifestyle, and how you interact with the world. Exploring what it has meant for you and finding value can make it easier to move forward with a sense of positivity.

Think about how to integrate what has worked. What changes had a positive impact? Perhaps you found you appreciated the scaled-back lifestyle, spending more time with people who are important to you, or getting outdoors more regularly. Maybe it was more about how you want to show up in the world. This is a unique opportunity to make some changes.

Experiment with putting changes in play. Learnings can fade as life resumes a more “normal” rhythm. Identifying and taking action toward specific goals can help you make them a norm. Making a commitment to meaningful takeaways can ground you and give you back a sense of control in what has been a very chaotic and uncertain time.

Navigating the return to work

Stay informed on updates from your organization and from health officials. Understand company policies and protocols related to health precautions, vaccinations, working from home, and other pandemic-generated question marks. Not knowing, or relying on rumors, can increase anxiety needlessly.

Reach out to your manager if you have questions on policies or personal impacts, such accommodations related to child care or public transit workarounds. Be forthright about concerns and ask to explore what might be possible to relieve them.

Recognize that there may be some awkwardness. Team interactions, meetings, and workspaces may be impacted for some time. Safety precautions may create a sense of barriers. We may feel unsure of ourselves in this altered environment. Be intentional about reconnecting. Take time to catch up, enjoy a laugh, provide support, or perhaps trade tips on navigating the challenges as you acclimate together.

Challenge yourself to maintain a flexible mindset. Given the still-evolving nature of recommendations, it’s likely that changes will continue. For example, how certain tasks are completed and decisions about how remote work will be handled may go through more modifications. Try for a “go with the flow” attitude. Be proactive by sharing creative solutions.

Revisit your routines. If you’ve worked from home and are returning to onsite, consider differences in how you approached the day. Resurrecting old norms can offer stability, but consider if new processes you’ve developed may work better. If given options about where to work, be thoughtful about the pros and cons of each option, especially if a majority of colleagues will be in one setting.

Set realistic expectations for yourself and others. With much still in flux, you and your colleagues may struggle to be productive. Tensions might be elevated. Many of us are more sensitized to stimulation now; small things may cause bigger waves. Give yourself and others the benefit of the doubt. Connect with your manager if tensions or productivity are causing ongoing problems.

Watch out for negativity. It is natural to experience a sense of grief, loss, or nostalgia for what was when faced with a change – especially one you didn’t ask for. Memories are fine, but we don’t want to get stuck focusing only on what’s been lost and resisting what is new. Notice when your self-talk gets negative and try to reframe: “It’s not the same, but I’ll find my way.”

Be proactive to avoid burnout. Being productive can feel like an antidote to the disruption and uncertainty, but overworking can bring the risk of burnout.) Set achievable goals and commit to a realistic day’s work. Start and end your day on time. Get your PTO scheduled. Talk with your manager if you need help.

Resilience reminders

Keep encouraging yourself to take small steps forward, while giving yourself grace to do that in a way that’s manageable for you. Fold in the learnings you’ve discovered on this journey and trust that, just have you so far, you will continue to find your way.

Remember that your EAP is just a call away. We’re always available to help.