

# Re-Entering the Workplace in 2021: A Manager's Guide

Leaders and managers across the world have struggled to adjust to the “new normal” of COVID-19 and the impact on their workforce. They recognize that everyone is exhausted after over a year of struggling with the new normal of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adding to the stress now is the concern for those who work remotely about when and how their re-entry will look. Given that many public schools are still closed or in hybrid forms, employees are still juggling their work and family responsibilities.

With this in mind, we propose some guidance to help leaders support their employees to manage this re-entry stress. We outline guiding principles and then specifics on how to do this well. We hope you find this helpful

- **Anticipatory planning is a healthy coping mechanism!** One of the best ways to reduce stress is to prepare in advance. One of the challenging things about COVID-19 has been all of the uncertainty. We strongly suggest the following:
  - **Meet regularly** (e.g., monthly) with employees to discuss re-entry plans.
  - **Spread positivity!** Discuss the benefits of different types of work (in-person, hybrid, fully remote), and create space to explore creative ideas about this. Understand employee preferences regarding extent of remote vs in-person work. Reduce stress by providing dates that would be the “earliest we would consider” going back to a hybrid mode.
  - **Advocate for flexibility.** One important lesson from this experience is that remote work can be just as productive – if not more so in some cases – than in person work. Consider flexible models that accommodate your teams differing needs as well as the best way to get the work done. What works best in person? What is ok or even better done remotely? If employees feel both understood as individuals and respected as professionals, they are more likely to be productive and positive team members.
  - **Solicit hearing their concerns, hopes, and ideas** for a smooth re-entry. Engage employees in other positive ways that work can be re-envisioned post-COVID.
- **Create structural changes to promote well-being.** Most employees are feeling exhausted, and often it is our work itself that is also contributing. Below are some suggestions:
  - **Slow and steady:** Make sure that any new expectations for in person work are communicated well in advance. Consider a transition back to in person in stages. This is a process that may take some time to get used to again, and a slow transition can help you identify issues before they become big problems.
  - **Transparency is key:** Clear, honest communication about safety, how decisions are being made, opportunities for feedback, and any changes to the plan is critical.
  - **Reduce Zoom fatigue:** Implement policies for people to start meetings 5–10 minutes after the hour (so meetings are 25 or 50 minutes long) when possible. This is now an official [UCSF School of Medicine policy](#).
  - **Take a vacation:** Encourage employees who have not taken vacation to take time off from work, even if it is a short vacation. Try to support them in efforts to unhook from work email.
  - **Email management:** If your email server allows it, set up delayed responses so emails only arrive between 9 a.m.–5 p.m. If you are working at night or on weekends, you can also set individual emails to be sent out during working hours.
  - **Implement community building activities** (e.g., zoom lunches, coffees, community pods) to reduce isolation.

- **Express gratitude:** Simple and genuine expressions of gratitude toward staff is very important. Leaders should recognize and thank individuals and teams for the work they are doing during regular weekly meetings.
- **Prioritize your own self-care:** Being a leader in 2021 is still very stressful. It is important that you get the support you need as well. Remember to help yourself first. Think about using the resources available to you via [UCSF Cope](#). If you can maintain your own well-being, your team will benefit. Further, sharing any ways you keep work life balance or seek mental health support leads to role modeling and de-stigmatization of mental health challenges.
- **Destigmatize seeking treatment for mental health:** One of the most important things we can do is destigmatize mental health issues. Now that they are so common, this is an opportunity to talk to them about openly and reduce the shame and guilt associated with them or seeking help. Here are some ways we can work on [stigma](#). Consider reminding all of your staff that that [UCSF Cope](#) is still available for free mental health treatment for UCSF community members.

***This document is a collaboration of the UCSF Cope and Cope Columbia Programs.***

# UCSF Cope: Manager Tips During COVID-19

Managers across the world struggle with how to adjust to the “new normal” of COVID-19 and the impact on their workforce. As a manager, it is hard to know what their staff needs to feel supported because we are in such uncharted territory. Also, staff might feel hesitant to reach out for help—especially in healthcare where there is a culture of being self-reliant. Studies have shown that staff who feel supported by their manager are more resilient and can get more work done. With this in mind, below is a guide with suggestions that managers can try in their work settings. We hope you find this helpful.

- **Check-ins during standing meetings:**

Managers typically hold regular meetings with employees. These meetings are a great opportunity to build staff supports and resilience. The first step is knowing what makes your team anxious. Once you know this, you can focus on these specific areas. To do this, we recommend using standing meetings to do the following (**See Box 1**).

- **Recognizing stress and providing support:**

As a manager, we need to recognize that staff have limits. They are under incredible stress at work and at home. Staff should be encouraged to care for themselves and get good sleep, drink water, and exercise. During weekly meetings, managers should talk about the opportunity to seek more support via the [UCSF Cope Program](#) (e.g., “*Feeling stressed is not a sign of weakness, it is normal in these circumstances. I want to share some resources that might help our team to become stronger.*” If your department or division would like a monthly hour-long well-being town hall or resilience small group meeting, the UCSF Cope team can discuss these services with you. You may also think about having individual check-ins with staff whose behavior has changed so you can review these support resources with them

- **Hold informal group meetings:** Several teams are having virtual coffee breaks, lunch meetings, and happy hours. Other teams set up Slack groups. These are important because this is a way to deliver peer support. It is not needed for managers to be at these meetings. In fact, it is better for employees to meet without the managers. Use your best judgment.

- **Gratitude:** Simple and genuine expressions of gratitude toward staff is very important. Leaders should recognize and thank individuals and teams for the work they are doing during regular weekly meetings.

- **Listening Form.** At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, our partners at Stanford University’s Department of Psychiatry created an online form. Faculty, trainees, and staff could submit their concerns and challenges to their leaders. The Chair’s office had three workers responsible for screening all requests. Requests were sent to the right leader for a response within 24 hours. Anonymous concerns helped identify problems and distribute resources by the leadership team. Notably, they only got about 1-2 emails daily. If this is set up in your unit, be mindful that women are often tasked with these types of “office housework” tasks. We suggest sharing this responsibility equally among men and women.

## **Box 1**

### **Create space to understand the sources of stress**

- ❖ Carve out 5-10 minutes in your agenda at the beginning or end of every meeting to understand sources of stressors (both at home and at work).
  - *“This is an incredibly challenging time. Our work is really stressful, and you might be experiencing new stressors at home, too. I want to understand what’s been difficult so we can figure out what resources might help.”*

### **Assure your staff that you hear them**

- ❖ Simply reflecting, *“I hear that you are worried about getting sick. That makes total sense.”*

### **Work to develop approaches to address concerns**

- ❖ Managers should be open and non-defensive to critiques of how they or the University are adding to stress, and try to address these quickly or by the next meeting.

### **Inform them of available resources**

- ❖ *“There are several resources to support wellbeing at UCSF, like UCSF Cope. I have used it and encourage you all to check it out.”*

- **Recognize differences among your employees:** Several studies have identified particularly vulnerable populations to psychological impacts from COVID-19. These include front-line providers, women, nurses, people with children at home, and people early in their career.
- **Provide breaks:** Studies have shown that having frequent short breaks can help promote well-being. This break-time is especially needed given all the “zoom fatigue” being reported. Consider reducing hour-long meetings to 50-minutes and encourage your staff to take breaks during the day.
- **Supporting yourself:** Being a leader during the COVID-19 crisis is very stressful. It is important that you get the support you need as well. Remember to help yourself first. Think about using the resources available to you via UCSF Cope. If you can maintain your own well-being, your team will benefit.
- **Additional Resources:** The UCSF Learning & Organization Development (L&OD) Employee Engagement Program has a great set of [resources](#) for managers to promote well-being among their staff.

*This document was created by Christina Mangurian, MD, MAS, and the UCSF Cope Well-Being Subgroup.*

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