Southeast (HHS Region 4)

MHTTC Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Returning to Work Toolkit

SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

Returning to In-Person Services:
A Toolkit for Mental Health Professionals

SAMHSA

Substance Abuse and Mental Health
Services Administration

Returning to In-Person Services:
A Toolkit for Mental Health Professionals

Table of Contents

Overview

The COVID-19 Pandemic caused many providers of mental health care to shift from in-person to virtual services. After several months of working from home, many clinicians are beginning the process of returning to in-person services or hybrid service provision. This toolkit is meant to help clinicians prepare for their return to in-person service work by providing tools for planning their return, practicing self-care strategies, and reducing anxiety and/or burnout.

Preparing for Return to In-Person Services

Tips for preparing yourself and your workplace

Self-Care for the Mental Health Professional

Tips for safe-guarding against burnout

Action Planning

Putting tools and resources to use

Preparing for Return to In-Person Services

First Things First

- Understand that **"reentry anxiety"** is normal after being away from in-person services for so long. You may have concerns about your safety from COVID-19, and you might have anxiety about social interactions. Returning to work can also exacerbate any preexisting mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

- Are you or is someone in your household at higher risk of severe complications from COVID-19? Before returning to in-person work, check with your employer to see if there are procedures and policies in place to reduce your risk. [1]

Planning Your Return to In-Person Work

- **Communicate with your supervisor** or administrator about a staggered approach to returning (they might be planning on this already, but if they are not you can make that suggestion).
- **Visualize scenarios you might encounter** in your first few weeks of work.
- Your sleep schedule most likely shifted while working remotely. Begin working towards a healthier sleep schedule and **practice good sleep hygiene** in advance of your return to the office by:

    - Going to bed and getting up at the times that are appropriate for your new schedule at least one week before returning to work

    - Creating a wind-down routine, which may include not looking at screens, for at least one hour before bedtime

    - Limiting caffeinated beverages to the morning; avoid consuming caffeine within four to six hours of bedtime, or longer depending on your sensitivity

    - If possible, keeping the room where you sleep cool (recommended sleeping temperature is 68 degrees F) and dark with the use of curtains or a sleep mask

- **Start connecting with individuals and small groups** at the office at the beginning before moving on to in-person interactions with the entire team, if possible.

Preparing Your Workspace for a Return to In-Person Services [2]

- **Office Set Up:** before you begin providing services again, take some time to re-organize your workspace. Make sure that the space in which you will be seeing patients adheres to any state, local, and CDC social distancing guidelines.
- **Prepping for appointments:** will you continue to provide some telehealth services? Assess which treatments are better for which patients. Communicate with administration and with patients in advance about guidelines for in-person appointments such as mask wearing, vaccine compliance, and social distancing.
- **Safety during the visit:** model preventive behaviors to patients such as hand washing, mask wearing, and social distancing. Decide in advance on your personal policies regarding hugs and handshakes. Have hand sanitizer and extra masks on hand in the space where you will see patients.
- **Consider changes in policy or staffing** that might affect workflow: review any changes to the intake process such as new online forms. Be aware of any reimbursement changes if switching from telehealth to in-person services. Assess staffing and scheduling to ensure that you and colleagues will not be overwhelmed and that there will be no gaps in service provision.

Self-Care for the Mental Health Professional[3]

Returning to work after a long time away is a big change. These changes, combined with the stress of increased workload and continuing anxiety around the virus, can create situations that lead to burnout - a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion as a result of chronic stress. It is important to recognize the signs and potential causes of burnout.

Signs of Burnout

Interpersonal:
- Deterioration of relationships
- Withdrawal from family, friends, clients

Behavioral:
- High levels of substance abuse

Occupational:
- Lower job satisfaction
- Poor job performance
- Thinking of leaving your job

Physical & Emotional:
- Depression or irritability
- Insomnia

Causes of Burnout

Client Factors:
- High service needs

Personal Factors:
- Lack of support from family and friends
- Limited active coping skills

Job Factors:
- Work overload
- Role conflict or ambiguity

Organizational Factors:
- Lack of structure, support, or leadership
- Limited autonomy

Reducing burnout begins with awareness and then learning skills to address it.

Burnout Prevention Principles & Practices

There are many effective burnout prevention strategies that can be incorporated into one's life depending on time commitment, level of effort, and personal interest. Prevention practices include **contemplative**, **cognitive**, **time management**, and **building social support**. The most important consideration in reducing burnout is to try a few different strategies and find the one that works for you. Remember to make a personal commitment to take care of yourself prior to returning and upon your return to work.

Make a personal commitment to take care of yourself prior to returning and upon your return to work.

Contemplative Practices: These are active strategies for focusing on the present and finding gratitude from reflecting on meaningful work experiences. Common examples include journaling, meditation, yoga, and deep breathing. It could also include contemplative arts such as drawing, music, or dance; relational activities such as storytelling or deep listening; spiritual activities such as attending a place of worship; or altruistic activities such as volunteering.

Cognitive Practices: These strategies reframe the way we think about our work, allow us to reconnect with our work purpose, and exercise gratitude. This means learning to catch negative, irrational and stressful thought processes about work and replace them with realistic, valid and healthier thought patterns.

Thought Reframing Example:

Instead of accepting a negative belief:
"I've always done so much for that client, but they always get upset and never change."

Reframe in a realistic hopeful way:
"Maybe this client is having another bad day. I hope they appreciate my help even if they show appreciation differently."

Reconnect with Meaning: Think of a time when you felt you were your best at work. What happened? What made that time special? Have a conversation with a colleague by sharing with them about that meaningful work experience or pose the same questions to them.

Exercise Gratitude: Reflect on things at work that bring you joy. Think of one thing *outside* of work for which you are grateful.

The way you experience time is influenced by how present you are in the moment and by your intentionality.

Time Management Approaches:

Our time is a precious resource - spend it well.

Helpful strategies include organizing your day, setting boundaries, and changing your approach to time management.

Ask yourself: *How much do I work? Does it fall within my capabilities? How do I spend my time at work? Am I efficient? How do I integrate work and personal life?*

More Present

- Focus on the task at hand and limit distractions, if possible.
- Before starting your workday or a specific task, engage in one of the contemplative practices listed above.

Intentionality

- Set goals and prioritize important activities while limiting wasteful activities.
- Utilize "time-blocking" by designating chunks of time for specific tasks (e.g., 9:00 AM for emails; 10:00 AM for phone calls).
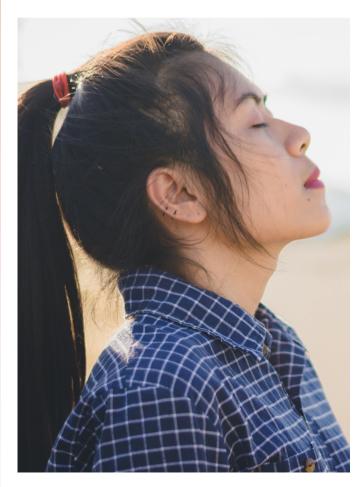
Social Support and Relationships in the Workplace: Relationships with colleagues and supervisors play a role in preventing burnout. Identify those relationships that are positive and supportive. Foster an environment of mutual respect, engage in crucial conversations with colleagues, and invest in meaningful workplace relationships.

Action Planning: Identifying the Tools and Resources to Use

An important part of returning to in-person services is to make a personal commitment to your self-care by incorporating a burnout prevention plan into your daily life. This can be accomplished by identifying the prevention practices that work best for you, developing a S.M.A.R.T. goal, and writing it down. The following section can help you start the process.
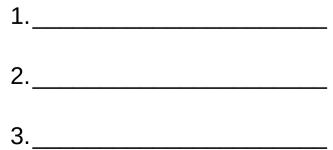
Try It Out: Below we review burnout prevention practices and encourage you to identify 3 activities that you enjoy, would like to try, or have found to work well for you in managing stress and reducing burnout.

Contemplative Practices

Journaling, meditation, yoga, and deep breathing; contemplative arts such as drawing, music, or dance; relational activities such as storytelling or deep listening; spiritual activities such as attending a place of worship; or altruistic activities such as volunteering.

1._____

2._____

3._____

Cognitive Practices

Thought reframing, reconnecting with meaning, reflecting on gratitude
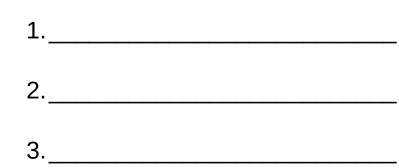
1._____

2._____

3._____

Time Management

Organize your day, set boundaries, utilize time-blocking, prioritize activities

1._____

2._____

3._____

Supportive Relationships

Foster mutual respect, engage in crucial conversations, invest in meaningful workplace relationships.

1._____

2._____

3._____

Action Planning: Putting the Tools and Resources to Use

Now that you've identified strategies to calm your anxieties about returning to work and identified resources to support you in your return, it's time to develop a goal and plan of action. Be sure to make your goal SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound). Hold yourself accountable by writing it down.

Make your goal S.M.A.R.T. and don't forget to write it down.

The following pages contain templates you can use to practice. An example is included to help you get started.

Goal Setting Example

Strategy: <u>Deep breathing exercises</u>

Why did you pick this strategy?

- Deep breathing exercises have helped me relax in the past.

Set a SMART Goal (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound).

- I will practice box breathing for 3 minutes before my 9:00 AM meetings on Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays for the next 2 weeks.

What problems or barriers might you encounter in meeting your goal?

- I could be interrupted - phone rings, urgent email is received, or a client/colleague knocks on my office door.

How can you get around those problems or barriers?

- I will turn off my phone and email; close my office door.

Who can help me?

- Administration and supervisor

Goal Setting Templates

Strategy: _____

Why did you pick this strategy?

Set a SMART Goal (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound).

What problems or barriers might you encounter in meeting your goal?

How can you get around those problems or barriers?

Who can help me?

Strategy: _____

Why did you pick this strategy?

Set a SMART Goal (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound).

What problems or barriers might you encounter in meeting your goal?

How can you get around those problems or barriers?

Who can help me?

Goal Setting Templates

Strategy: _____

Why did you pick this strategy?

Set a SMART Goal (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound).

What problems or barriers might you encounter in meeting your goal?

How can you get around those problems or barriers?

Who can help me?

Strategy: _____

Why did you pick this strategy?

Set a SMART Goal (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-bound).

What problems or barriers might you encounter in meeting your goal?

How can you get around those problems or barriers?

Who can help me?

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (August 2021). <u>Activities</u>, <u>Gatherings, and Holidays</u>. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/index.html

2. SMI Adviser (June 2021). <u>Reopening Your Mental Health Practice</u>. https://smiadviser.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Checklist-for-Reopening-Your-Mental-Health-Practice.pdf

3. Southeast Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (April 2021). <u>Reminding Ourselves to Breathe in Our Work</u>. https://mhttcnetwork.org/centers//southeast-mhttc/product/breathe-module-1-reminding-ourselves-breathe-our-work

Additional Resources

- Southeast Mental Health Technology Transfer Center on-demand 3-part BREATHE series: <u>Remembering to Breathe in Our Work</u>, <u>Managing Our Workloads</u>, <u>Connecting with Colleagues</u> and accompanying <u>infographic</u>.
- Southeast Mental Health Technology Transfer Center on-demand <u>Compassion Fatigue: Managing During Troubling Times</u> and accompanying <u>infographic</u>.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration <u>Returning to Work fact sheet</u>.

Southeast (HHS Region 4)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

SAMHSA
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration