

# Mentally Healthy Workplaces and COVID-19: Emerging Issues



## Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome

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Australian Government  
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**THE MENTALLY  
HEALTHY  
WORK  
PLACE ALLIANCE**

## Overview: impacts of post-COVID-19 syndrome at work



While most people with COVID-19 recover fully within a few weeks, around 5% may experience persistent symptoms at three months after the initial infection.<sup>1</sup>



With symptoms such as fatigue, breathlessness, chest pains, mood, sleep and memory problems, post-COVID-19 syndrome can impact a person's ability to complete their usual work tasks.



Organisations can support people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome to return to work by making reasonable adjustments and regularly communicating about the types of supports the person needs.

## Introduction

People affected by post-COVID-19 syndrome, which is commonly referred to as “long COVID”, can experience various ongoing symptoms such as fatigue, breathlessness, chest pain, mood, sleep and memory problems. These symptoms can impact someone's ability to complete their usual work. This can create challenges for workplaces as well as affected individuals.

How organisations and businesses respond to support people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome, can be a key factor in determining how successfully that person stays at and/or returns to work.

This guide helps organisations and businesses understand the impact of post-COVID-19 syndrome and provides some practical steps for supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.

“It's important to say to the person, ‘we want you back, we need your skillset, what you do is important.’ That support and encouragement from the workplace, and social interaction with their workmates, is just so important for people's recovery.”

**Dr Warren Harrex**, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM)



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“We can all stay vigilant for enduring symptoms following COVID-19 infections. Optimal rehabilitation, recovery and return to work are possible. The evidence is changing, so ask for expert help early on.”

**Dr Mary Obele**, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM)

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“First and foremost, we need to always be mindful that the COVID-19 pandemic is a major, global health crisis and it is likely to be a serious and scary experience for any individual who finds themselves infected. Heightened fear, stress, stigmatisation and loneliness and isolation are common during the infected period, and poor sleep, fatigue, depressed mood, anxiety and excessive worry are symptoms that can persist for many months after infection. Of course, employees don’t leave these psychological issues at the door when they return to work and in most cases will need extra support and care in the workplace. Leaders can demonstrate their awareness of, and support for these issues by ensuring the right employee supports and information are available.”

**Dr Zena Burgess**, CEO of the Australian Psychological Society

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## About post-COVID-19 syndrome

While most people with COVID-19 recover fully within a few weeks, a small proportion may continue to experience symptoms weeks and even months later.

These common symptoms can include fatigue, breathlessness, chest pains, mood, sleep and memory problems (see symptoms below).

Dr Warren Harrex, a Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, says post-COVID-19 syndrome refers to people continuing to experience COVID-19 symptoms usually three months after the initial diagnosis.<sup>2</sup>

## Ongoing problems

"There may be ongoing medical and psychological problems for the person. These can include respiratory problems such as breathlessness, heart problems such as inflammation of the heart, neuropsychological problems, and problems with memory. People often talk about having brain fog," says Dr Harrex.

"There is a lot of research going into this area now," says Dr Harrex. "It seems to be a multi-system problem with a change in people's immune system, which remains active and chews up a fair bit of energy."

## Estimated prevalence

Estimates of the prevalence of post-COVID-19 syndrome vary depending on the length of follow-up and the type of patients. Guidelines from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, which were updated in December 2021, state the prevalence of post-COVID-19 syndrome among people managed as outpatients is thought to range from 10% to 35%.<sup>3</sup> Other studies indicate that between 3% and 10% of people who had COVID-19 may still have symptoms after three months, even after a mild infection initially, according to Dr Harrex.<sup>1</sup>

In some cases, people may experience a 'bust and boom' pattern where they start to recover and feel better only to have symptoms return, potentially requiring further time off from work. This can make it challenging to plan for return to work as what they can do may vary day to day.

## Symptoms of post-COVID-19 syndrome can include:

- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Cough
- Chest pain
- Memory, concentration or sleep problems
- Joint pain and muscle pain or headache
- Fast or pounding heartbeat
- Loss of smell or taste
- Depression or anxiety
- Fever
- Dizziness when standing
- Worsened symptoms after physical or mental activities

Source: The Mayo Clinic ([read more here](#))



# How organisations can respond



## 1. Listening to the person

One of the first steps to supporting someone experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome is listening to the person's experiences and needs. Many of the symptoms of post-COVID-19 syndrome may not be visible, which means that it will be hard to judge what that person can do.

"It's important we don't dismiss people. Even though they might look well, if they're saying they're exhausted, we must believe them," says Dr Harrex.

## 2. Exploring adjustments

The next step is finding ways to help that person stay at work or return to work, even if it is in a limited capacity for a while. This may include adjustments, such as changes to workloads, working hours or opportunities for more breaks throughout the day. These adjustments may need to be flexible to allow people to pace their activities based on their energy levels or current symptoms.

"We know in the long term, people who return to work have better health outcomes. We know the health benefits of good work, so it's important to get people back to work," says Dr Harrex.

## 3. Communicating and engaging

Communication is key to making these adjustments successfully. This includes communication between people and managers about what work they can currently complete, when this changes and the expectations around work.

It also may require communication across the team, particularly if changes in workloads impact other team members. However, it is also important to respect confidentiality and share only what that person is comfortable with others knowing.



## 4. Supporting managers

Managers often have a key role in supporting someone staying at work while they are experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome. Managers can provide a supportive environment and allow people to take a proactive role in finding solutions that work for them and the team.

Managers can also look across team workloads to identify how work may be re-allocated to create adjustments to support that person.

## 5. Reviewing policies and procedures

It is important to review any adjustments or return to work plans over time to ensure they are working as intended and are not causing any concerns for the individual or the broader team.

Many organisations already have processes or policies in place for helping people return to work following illness or injury, which can be adjusted to support people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.

Workplaces may also wish to review and update their existing sick leave and return-to-work policies to reflect the needs of people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome, and use any learnings to potentially update their existing systems.

Workplaces may also find it helpful to work with a team that includes a person's treating GP or medical specialist to plan for a sustainable return to work while someone is recovering from post-COVID-19 syndrome, Dr Harrex advises.

## Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome

- **Review your relevant policies and procedures** to ensure they are relevant to people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- **Plan** for what supports you can link people in with, including employee assistance programs or trusted health advice.
- **Ensure people managers are aware** of how to support a team member experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- **Maintain open communication** and keep in contact if that person is away from work.
- **Listen** to that person's experience, needs and challenges.
- **Explore** and make reasonable adjustments when possible.
- **Highlight available support** (e.g. psychological, rehabilitation).
- **Create a team of supports** for that person, that may include medical professionals or workplace buddies.

## Potential adjustments to support

Every person may require different supports, these ideas can be a conversation starter about adjustments to support someone experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome:

- Changing hours spent at work.
- Changing the start / finish times of work.
- Creating more opportunities for breaks or independence in pacing work.
- Assigning less intensive work or tasks.
- Allowing more time to complete usual tasks.
- Changing deadlines of existing work or projects where possible.
- Providing more supervision or support.
- Allowing time off for healthcare appointments.
- Allowing remote working arrangements until they recover.

# Where organisations can get support



[Society of Occupational Medicine. COVID-19 return to work guide: For managers](#)

[Health Direct Australia, Understanding post-COVID-19 symptoms and 'long COVID'](#)

[Health Direct Australia, Recovery and returning to normal activities after COVID-19](#)

[Australian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Health Benefits of Good Work™](#)

[Safe Work Australia, Work health and safety consultation, cooperation and coordination Code of Practice](#)

[Comcare, Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – Supporting others in times of uncertainty](#)

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## References

- 1 Liu B, Jayasundara D, Pye V, Dobbins T, Dore GJ, Matthews G, Kaldor J, Spokes P. Whole of population-based cohort study of recovery time from COVID-19 in New South Wales Australia. *Lancet Reg Health West Pac.* 2021 Jul;12:100193. doi: 10.1016/j.lanwpc.2021.100193. Epub 2021 Jun 25. PMID: 34189493; PMCID: PMC8225991.
- 2 World Health Organization. A clinical case definition of post COVID-19 condition by a Delphi consensus. 2021, October 6. Available from [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Post\\_COVID-19\\_condition-Clinical\\_case\\_definition-2021.1](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Post_COVID-19_condition-Clinical_case_definition-2021.1)
- 3 Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. Caring for patients with post-COVID-19 conditions. 2021, December. Available from <https://www.racgp.org.au/FSDEDEV/media/documents/RACGP/Coronavirus/Post-COVID-19-conditions.pdf>

## About this guide

This guide is part of the *Mentally Healthy Workplaces during COVID-19: Emerging Issues* series, created by the National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

The series explores key issues workplaces are facing due to the challenges created by COVID-19. Each guide provides a summary of the issue, expert guidance on actions organisations can take and links to further resources.

This guide has been developed in association with:

- **Dr Warren Harrex**, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Physician and Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM). Member of the COVID-19 Expert Reference Group of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.
- **Dr Teri Lillington**, Occupational and Environmental Physician and fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM).

### Read more

- The guides in this series include:
  - Helping people return to workplaces after extended periods working at home during COVID-19.
  - Strategies to support wellbeing of decision makers through periods of sustained pressure.
  - Identifying and managing fatigue and burnout during COVID-19.
  - The hidden impact of COVID-19 on sleep.
  - Creating mentally healthy hybrid teams in the recovery from COVID-19.
  - Responding to COVID-19 concerns in the workplace.
  - Supporting people experiencing post-COVID-19 syndrome.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to download the series.



## National Workplace Initiative

- The National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance are developing the National Workplace Initiative to create a national approach to mentally healthy workplaces.
- [Visit the Commission's website](#) to learn more about the National Workplace Initiative.

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