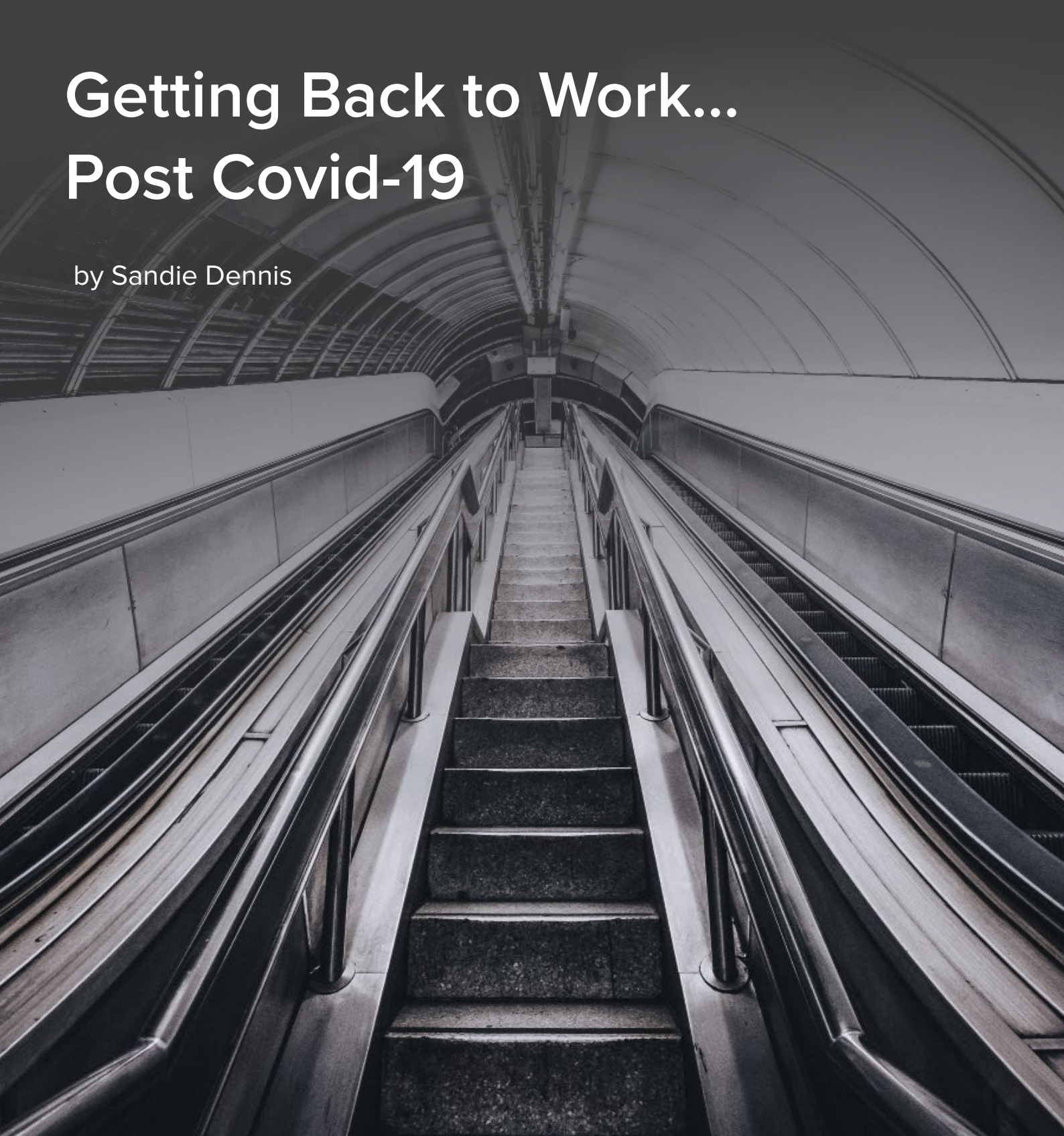


Getting Back to Work... Post Covid-19

by Sandie Dennis



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for life's toughest challenges

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“There’s a LOT
of hidden anxiety
around returning
to work. I’d love to
know what would
help alleviate that.”

HR Director, London

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At the time of writing this, lockdown measures are easing across the UK.

This is good news for many, as it means we can slowly start returning to our lives: seeing our loved ones, taking longer periods of exercise in the fresh air... and going back to work.

But the comments enclosed reflect the conversations I’m having with many of my clients.

These are still very uncertain times, so if you’re anxious about welcoming your employees back, or if you’re an employee who is worried about returning to the workplace, please be assured that these feelings are perfectly normal.

We’re all going to have to take extra care of ourselves and others, as we negotiate our paths back into the wider world.

“Returning to work is going to involve some re-education, because we’ve all got to learn how to be in each-other’s company again! I think the fear factor will be hard to overcome.” Head of HR, London





The lay of the land

The adjustments and transitions we have all had to make in accommodating lockdown are going to happen all over again, now that we are slowly emerging.

Many employees are going to have to re-adjust from working at home, or coming back from furlough, as we pick up the pieces of our lives and work, and discover business as (new) normal.

Added to this is the fact that some people will have either suffered from coronavirus themselves, or are still grieving a death caused by the virus. If either of these areas have effected you, read my ebooks on 'Recovery' and 'Bereavement'.

They may be in the midst of resolving delayed practical issues, such as clearing out a relative's house, or they could be distraught from not being able to give their loved one the lively, sociable send-off they would have wanted.

Some could still be medically vulnerable, or living with a high-risk person that they are also caring for.

There could be outstanding childcare issues, relationship breakdowns, financial worries, or mental health concerns that have been exacerbated during lockdown, with its extended lack of social contact, and potential for increased anxiety.

Although this is quite a list in itself, I'm still able to think of many more reasons why people may feel worried about returning to work right now.

I'm sure you can, too.

I'm here to help you

I am an experienced specialist in supporting employees who are returning to work after a range of different scenarios, including maternity leave, illness and following a personal loss.

From this, I have learned that no matter what the scenario, many of the issues surrounding an employee's return to work are the same, such as lack of confidence, anxiety around anticipated changes, and worry that they will not be able to 'keep up' with their former workload.

But I have also learned that honesty and transparency are our closest allies.

So, if you are feeling anxious, your first step should be to speak as openly as you can with your HR department or line manager. Discussing your fears and concerns now means you'll be able to quickly access the support you need for a successful return.

(Don't forget that your HR and management team are only human themselves – and they will almost certainly have faced similar issues during the pandemic).

Employers are obliged to make reasonable adjustments wherever possible, so it could be that you can organise a phased return with regular review points, or continue to work from home if you have home schooling commitments to keep up with.

Just remember that getting the right support begins with a conversation. It may also be helpful to read my ebook on, '[How to stop catastrophising and start living](#)'







Here is some additional, more specific advice to take account of:


- **If you have been bereaved**, then you absolutely must give yourself time to grieve (my eBook on 'bereavement' may help). Don't suffer in silence; if you need more support – such as from a dedicated EAP scheme, or someone like me – then please ask for it.
- **If you're caring for a vulnerable person**, your first port of call should be to discuss your situation with whoever is responsible for your return. If working from home isn't an option, you could ask to work on your own, or in an isolated area.
- **If you've been suffering from mental health issues**, then aside from talking to HR or your line manager, you should ask for specialist help – even if you're not sure what form this should take. If this is the case for you, my eBook about 'how to recognise situational depression' could be useful.
- **If you have unresolved financial or relationship worries**, you should ask to be referred to your employer's EAP programme, or for more specialist help.

How to prepare yourself for the transition back to work


 **Make sleep your priority.** If you've been furloughed, you may need to resume a routine of gradually going to bed and waking earlier than your new 'usual'.

I have written an eBook about 'the importance of sleep', in which I've also shared some personal tips and techniques.

 **Nourish yourself.** Try to eat more high-protein foods, as protein contains an amino acid that converts serotonin (the 'happy' neurochemical!) in the brain. Start to reduce your alcohol intake if, like many of us, you've noticed it rising over the past few months. You could also begin taking probiotic supplements, to boost your immune system and energy levels in preparation for your return (read my eBook on 'Boost wellbeing, ease stress and sleep better').


 **Talk to yourself!** Far from being 'the first sign of madness', research has actually shown that daily positive self-talk helps you to feel more positive... because the audio cortex processes what you say to yourself, and believes it to be true.

So instead of telling yourself that you can't go back to work, start saying things like, "I can do it, and I've got this!"

 **Practice a mental rehearsal**
Visualise things going well. Just as your audio cortex believes what you hear to be true, your visual cortex believes what it 'sees'.


Professional athletes understand the power of visualisation; regularly using it to predict success.

So, visualising that your first day back went really well, and imagining all the good things that happened, will create the exact kind of healthy, positive thinking that will help to make it all come true.


 **Breathe properly.** Nose-breathing has so many benefits; particularly its antiviral, anti-bacterial fighting properties. You could practice this type of breathing to prepare for your commute.

Breathing through your belly (not your chest) also activates the parasympathetic system, gives mental clarity, improves brain function, improves energy, and calms the hypothalamus – which alerts your stress reaction.

Deep breathing before sleeping, and then throughout the day, should become a habit you continue during your working hours.

 **Journal your thoughts.** Write down your feelings about returning to work. Don't try to write 'correctly', and don't censor yourself; you aren't going to show it to anybody!

Simply scribbling your thoughts will relieve anger and resentment, and help you process your feelings.

 **Feel grateful.** You've got through this, and now you're on the road to some form of normality. In the future, you may look back and see just how well you coped, and acknowledge everything you learned. But for now, just try to feel grateful that you're returning to work, and that you'll soon be 'seeing' your colleagues again.



Finally, here are some quick tips for boosting your neural chemicals:

- Make sure you have lots of food shopping in a day or two before returning, so you can prepare nutritious meals for your first week back.
- Create daily lists of small goals that you want to achieve.
- Reward yourself for a job well done! Don't ignore your achievements, no matter how small. Take pride instead, reflecting on your good work (this boosts dopamine, which is your 'feel good' neurochemical).
- Get out during the working day for a 'sunshine break', to help raise your serotonin levels.
- If anxiety strikes, use the nose and belly breathing tips I've mentioned above. You could also try counting down from ten to one, which will help to move your brain away from the worry you're feeling.
- Create a 'happy' playlist to listen to as you travel to and from work.
- Plan a social project, such as a reunion party, or celebrations with your colleagues, for when distancing ends. You could even get an online group together to make suggestions about how you should all celebrate!
- Be kind to yourself once you return home; maybe by running a scented bath, or by going for a walk in the fresh air.
- Hug the people, (and the animals) in your household! Cuddling releases oxytocin – the 'love' neurochemical – for you and them.
- Make a point of communicating with your line manager and/or HR team regularly, to keep them updated with your progress.

I wish you the very best of luck as you make your return to work.

You've come this far, so be proud, and don't forget to give yourself the time, patience and care you so deserve.

With my very best wishes,

Sandie.



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