

Speaker 1 ([00:06](#)):

Thank you for joining us for today's webinar, Managing the Return to Work brought to you by Cigna. Please note that copies of the presentation slides and handouts are available for download in the drop down box on the lower left side of the player window. Our presenter today is Dr. Rick Conforto. Dr. Conforto is a licensed psychologist in Pennsylvania and holds a doctoral degree in School of Psychology from Temple University. Dr. Conforto has over 40 years of experience providing direct clinical services, and over 30 years of experience in supervisory and administrative roles. He is also an experienced trainer providing wellness and educational seminars to a variety of private and business audiences. And now Dr. Rick Conforto.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([00:59](#)):

Okay. Thank you for those kind words of introduction, and hello everyone. Thanks so much for taking time to join us today for this important training, Managing the Return to Work. You know, we've all just been through some unprecedented changes over the last few months, and just when we were beginning to settle in and accept the new normal, along is coming a newer normal with discussion of returning to work. So it's a very positive milestone of course, uh, but it would be understandable if it was being met with some feelings of trepidation and anxiety and worry. But as before you got this and we're here to help you out with that. So let's take a look at our goals slide and see more specifically what we hope to accomplish in today's training. Again, thank you for joining us.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([01:53](#)):

Now, a return to work is not a, an unique and unusual circumstance. Many of us have done that from returning to work from vacations or maybe even from lengthier absences, like a paternity or a maternity leaves or sabbaticals or breaks to increase our education. But this is unique in that many of us have never returned to work from a pandemic. So we're going to talk about why this is so uniquely challenging, and really understand why we're reacting the way that we are. How have you reacted in the past to a situation like this? How are you reacting now? Let's explore that and discuss that. But our main goal is the third bullet point here. And that is, we want to talk about strategies for coping with this changing, and that, this change, and that will make up the majority of my comments today. So I hope those goals are consistent with your expectations in joining us for this seminar.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([03:00](#)):

So the challenge continues, you know, given that there's restrictions all across our country, some of those are beginning to change now, and possibility, many of us could be returning to work. Shouldn't we be excited about that? Well, there's probably a lot of mixed feelings associated with that, because first of all, there's still some safety issues there, and our daily lives are continue to be impacted by this because of the pandemic and the safety issues involved. And I guess really those won't go completely away until there is a vaccine available to all of us and then we don't have to worry about contracting this illness. And the definition of normal is really yet to be defined, it's changing day by day. What will it look like when you return to work? Many of us don't really know yet. There is discussion, but it's changing on a daily basis and even an hour to hour basis. And that can really become overwhelming, with all these updates and changes, it can be pretty difficult to keep up with everything, and that can further lead to our trepidation.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([04:12](#)):

And then lastly, there's also a lot of uncertainties around what the future is going to look like, what will be considered a normal life in the future? You know, as human beings we really like routine. We like predictability, it makes us feel safe and makes us feel comfortable. Think about it, won't you love it if the stock market was routine and predictable? Right now it's anything but, and our lives are anything but. So that's why it can become overwhelming and disorienting, with so many things happening around us, it can really leave our head spinning. So we'll talk about how to manage that sensation.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([04:54](#)):

But first let's explore a little bit more the impact as we contemplate returning to work. Now we've got some thoughts here and I wonder how many of these sound like some of the thoughts you might be experiencing. Like, hey, I just got used to working from home, and now I've got to go back to work? I was kind of settling in to a pretty good routine there. And how long is it going to take for my kids to get used to another routine? Man, it was painful getting them set up, and now change is going to occur again? And I wonder if it's even safe to go back to the office, how are we going to make that work out? You know, my cubicle is right next to other people. And my coworkers, what if they cough? What if they're sick? How I'm I going to deal with that? I'm I going to be able to social distance? What does that look like at the cafeteria? What's that look like at the copy machine?

Dr. Rick Conforto ([05:56](#)):

And you know, I may miss some of my stay at home routine, it wasn't so bad being able to sleep a little later 'cause I didn't have to commute. Maybe I actually got more work done without anybody interrupting me. So you can see, we all have very different individual differences in our ability to cope with change. What's your pattern in the past, you've dealt with change before, how does it affect you? Can you learn from those past experiences in anticipation of dealing with yet another change? But the other part of this is that this pandemic has really challenged us beyond any other normal circumstances that we may have encountered in change in the past. This one is really different. So it would be understandable if we had feelings across the entire spectrum of feeling exhausted and overwhelmed to really being motivated and ready to return to work. So since we all have different reactions let's review some of the most common ones now.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([07:06](#)):

So here you can see on this slide, we've got to pick some of the common emotional reactions to change. Now, I want to just precede more detailed discussion of these bullet points with this notion that all emotions are useful, even if they're unpleasant, we have them for a reason, they're actually a good thing. So for example, an unpleasant emotion like anxiety and fear has some usefulness. It alerts us that there's a threat of some kind and that we need to address it, and then it gives us a little bit of energy to do so, or maybe if we're angry and frustrated about something, that's a way of getting our attention and letting us know something's wrong that we need to remedy. Work, the, the sensation of grief, having experienced a loss, it slows us down. It gives us time to heal.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([08:05](#)):

So keep in mind, emotions are useful, but we may have a mixture of a lot of different ones as you can see here, and that could be a bit confusing, maybe we have a fear of catching the virus from a coworker. You know, after being sheltered at home for a long time, we kind of felt protected in a sense, but now we're going to move out and about a little bit more increasing our potential to be exposed to infection, that's got me a bit worried. And I'm not really sure what's to come again. Again, those unknowns that

we mentioned earlier, we don't really know what a return to the workplace is exactly going to look like right now. And that could create a lot of frustration because things are going to be changing. And I miss the old way. In fact, I'm grieving it as a loss of what used to be, a loss of the carefree lifestyles that we had prior to this.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([09:03](#)):

And it can be exhausting, overwhelming, especially if some work has piled up while we were away, maybe we could only accomplish so much, or maybe you weren't working from home and everything piled up and you have that to look forward to going back. Now on the positive side of the ledger, it's going to be really nice to get back to somewhat of a normal routine, to get a normal paycheck again, you know, if you've been impacted financially by this, and we get to see your friends or coworkers and do the work that perhaps many of us love. So some of us can't wait to get back in the saddle, on the positive side. So believe me, we all feel all of these things. You're not alone, these are normal reactions, some of them may be fleeting, others may feel overwhelming, but remember there's value to those emotions. They're catalysts to help us move forward, to mobilize our resources so that we can respond to the challenge with new found energy.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([10:10](#)):

Okay, that said then let's begin to talk about coping. And on this slide, we've, we've shared with you the notion of preparation. As a former boy scout our motto was, be prepared, because preparation in many ways is the anecdote for that fear and uncertainty that I talked about earlier, because preparation allows you to control the things that you can. I think a great example of this was a I- well-known uh, baseball player was interviewed prior to taking the mound in a very pivotal World Series game, was that he's asking if he was nervous, and he said, no, I've been preparing for this moment since the first day of spring training. And I worked my tail off all through the season so then I could be at my best at this very moment. And the only thing that's left for me is to go out, perform as best as I can and let the chips fall where they may.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([11:13](#)):

So you could see his preparation was a very powerful ally in staving off any sense of anxiety, fear, dread, or self-doubt. So how can you prepare? Well, information is a very powerful weapon, and you want to stay informed, consume your information from health officials for example, so that you're well aware of what's happening on the national, statewide and local level. Also, be tuned into any communication and information coming to you from your organization, your place of employment, what are they sharing with you in terms of one line, outlining policies and procedures that are going to come your way to keep the work place safe?

Dr. Rick Conforto ([12:08](#)):

And then what preventative measures can you take to protect yourself? Now, we all know the drill, way about washing our hands and practicing cough hygiene, keeping our fingers away from our face, and you know social distancing and all that. And these are important things hopefully that we'll continue to do, so always a good idea to wash your hands and to practice cough hygiene. But you may want to raise your game to a little bit of a higher level now upon returning to work and maybe take some hand sanitizer and anti-bacterial wipes with you to the workplace so that you can wipe down your workstation. You can clean things that may come in contact like a keyboard or pens or other implements that may collect germs. So taking those added preventative measures gives you a sense of being

prepared and taking action, and knowing that processes are really going to look different than they used to.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([13:09](#)):

So one of the preparations you have to do is around your mindset, right? There are going to be changes, you've adapted to changes, try to picture what might be different in your workplace. Anticipate it, try to wrap your head around it a bit and then prepare yourself to be flexible in dealing with those potential changes. Maybe in the way that you engage in client or team meetings, business travel's, probably going to be very different. Are the workspaces going to be significantly impacted? I bet they are. So anticipate the unanticipated, I guess, is the best way to put that. And then set realistic expectations for yourself and others. That's an important thing to understand because how productive have people been able to be while working at home? Some maybe more so, some maybe less so. And then what about upon the return to work, how is that going to affect productivity?

Dr. Rick Conforto ([14:18](#)):

I think you can expect some bumps in the road for a little while, and maybe you won't be productive as you always hold yourself in terms of expectations to be, and maybe others, your colleagues might not be as productive, they may let you down so to speak. So practice acceptance and compassion for both yourself and for your coworkers and be willing to forgive at least for a time, some changes, some hiccups, some bumps in the road, if you will. And then lastly on this slide, preparing yourself for the long haul is a good idea. You know, enter with a product, with a mindset of tolerance and patience for a newer normal here, and recognizing that it's going to take time, it's going to be a process, and you want to trust the process.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([15:20](#)):

On the next slide, we want to talk about being proactive. And now that we've thought about the different things I mentioned previously, how can you take charge? How can you take action? How can you seize the day, if you will. Well, one place to start is to begin to resurrect some of those old routines to kind of get yourself started here. You may have settled into not setting your alarm. Well, maybe you need to begin to do that again and maybe settled in to a different bedtime, uh, maybe you need to resurrect that old sleep routine, if you will. How about new routines, maybe begin to prepare lunches on the weekend, for example, to save yourself some time in the morning. So what are some of those old work preparation routines that you had nailed down pretty well before all of this happened and begin to do those now prior to returning to work, to kind of get yourself back into the swing of sleep and meal routines.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([16:24](#)):

And one thing that can give you a sense of some foundation and predictability in your day is to prepare some to do lists for when you get back. You know, granted, there's going to be unexpected things that come up, but you know, some of the things that you can look forward to, maybe some meetings that you have to attend to that haven't been held since we've been on quarantine, maybe some clients that you need to get in touch with. So think ahead, what are some of the things you may need to do and make those lists. And even though they may be derailed a bit now and then because of things that were unpredicted or unanticipated, that's okay, your to do list can really help you feel grounded and productive, no matter what.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([17:14](#)):

And then feel free to talk to your manager about any concerns, don't be afraid to do that. Maybe you're experiencing some childcare woes, or maybe just worried about your health and your safety upon returning to work. You want to be able to have an honest conversation with your manager about such things, and then brainstorm about potential solutions to some of those concerns. Maybe you continue to work remotely at least part-time perhaps if that's a possibility, or maybe there's some schedule modifications or other accommodations that may be available for a period of time as everyone is adjusting to this newer normal.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([17:57](#)):

And then remember to tap into the resources that you have to get some support to address some of these things above. You know, maybe you can explore local options for childcare, for example, or reach out to others who may have some help and some thoughtful solutions as you return to the workplace. Maybe there's college kids who are out for the summer and don't have any summer jobs that may be okay for babysitting. And then consider maybe meal or grocery delivery, and that'll help ease some of the burden of your meal preparation as you get back into the workplace routine. So remember, be proactive, take some of these steps, gives you a sense of accomplishment and a foundation for coping.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([18:48](#)):

And then next up it's about the kids, right? For those parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, they'd be engaging in some childcare responsibilities. Wow, how do we get the kids back to dealing with another change in their routine and structure, which is what they desperately need, that's what they thrive on. Now, some kids may be pretty eager to get back and others may not be. So I work a lot with children adolescents, and I can tell you interestingly, the adolescents are expressing a great appreciation for school. That's what I said ladies and gentlemen. Adolescents are expressing a great appreciation for school and they can't wait to get back. They miss their friends, they miss the routine and I never heard any of them saying anything like that before.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([19:40](#)):

So, and younger kids may actually enjoy being home and maybe experiencing some added attention or routine from parents, and now that's going to be disrupted. So how do you deal with that? Well, try to map out some changes that are on the way to everybody's schedules, but where you want to start building upon is what won't change. Have a conversation about the things that are staying the same. And that's the concrete to the foundation upon which then you can add some of the things that may be a bit different than what they can anticipate. And wherever you can try to maintain some consistent-consistency, remember, routine, structure, that helps kids adjust and deal with anxiety. It gives them kind of a sense of control. So have you developed some newer routines during the quarantine that you can continue to maintain upon return to work that will help kids feel grounded, maybe family dinners, or maybe there was special one-on-one time to do arts and crafts and projects and schoolwork, maybe exercise together as a family and took walks or rode bikes. Can you still do those kinds of things?

Dr. Rick Conforto ([21:01](#)):

And you want to begin to set expectations for kids about the changes that are going to return and to begin to get them ready for those. Bedtime and uh, and getting up and going to bed are two very important things. So you need to return to those routines in advance if you can, so you can begin to practice it. I know adolescents, a lot of them have flipped their sleep schedules and they're up all hours

of the night playing video games and then sleeping all day. So you have to begin to mold that routine back to a normal sleep and wakes- wake cycle, give a 10 minute warning so kids know they need to get up and get moving.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([21:45](#)):

And then we talked about how important it is for you to be accepting of your experiences and emotions. How can you help kids process their feelings, be accepting of those too, recognize that they're going to react emotionally and that's okay, give them the psychological airtime to ask their questions and to express their feelings, and then be prepared that it's going to take some time. And you may see kids with some stress reactions that set them back, like physical complaints, or sleep problems perhaps, maybe moodiness or irritability, maybe separating from you makes them very anxious, where they withdraw. So be very patient, be gently supportive and really manifest a very positive, optimistic attitude. You want to role model that for your kids. You know, they're always looking to us for our cues. And so we want to role model appropriate reaction to change. They're watching us.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([22:51](#)):

I think the best example I can give of this is many times I'll have parents in the throws of a di- of a divorce say to me, you know, I'm really worried about how the kids are going to react. And I share with them, that kids are amazingly resilient and they will react according to how we do. So if divorcing parents can be collaborative and be cooperative and co-parent effectively, their kids are gonna do just fine for the most part. The parents are going to go to war, then the kids will be the casualties. So remember your kids are resilient, set a good example for them. Even if you're feeling anxious yourself, have a cool presentation to them. That'll help you out a bit more with this. We have a handout that accompanies our presentation today called Helping Children Manage Change. It's a very helpful handout that details a lot more specifics on how you can help kids out, and especially some tips on recognizing if you, uh, if your kid may be in a bit of some trouble and how to get some help to address that.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([24:02](#)):

Okay. So now you've dealt with a lot of different challenges. What do you do when you're actually back in the workplace? How do you manage that? Well, you want to begin by getting yourself acclimated to that workplace again. Do you have everything? Have you made your space familiar and comfortable like it was before you left? Do you have all the supplies you need? Don't forget to replenish that snack drawer with some of your favorite snacks too, and the other things that help make your workplace your home away from home, if you will. And then recognize everything will not be exactly the way it was. We're going to have to let go of a lot of 'the way it used to be,' if you will. Hold on to some positive memories, but don't get stuck spinning your wheels harboring resentment, anger, and frustration over what was lost.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([25:01](#)):

Take some time to grieve it and appreciate it and then move forward. And remembering that human beings are social creatures, and the importance of social connectedness, plan ahead to have some catch up meetings with your colleagues, maybe you haven't been connected with all of them during the time at home, and of course we want you to do it in a safe manner, but get connected again with your colleagues, enjoy a laugh, give each other support, trade tips, sta- tell each other quarantine stories. It's okay, it's that human touch that really means so much to us. And of course you want to practice self-

care. Everyone knows the oxygen mask metaphor that you really do have to take care of yourself first so that you could be there for others.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([25:57](#)):

Stephen Covey calls it sharpening the saw, he of the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. And the way we sharpen our saw is to make sure we're eating a healthy diet, nutritious food, that we're getting some regular exercise, that we have really good sleep hygiene. These are all things that can reduce our stress level. And if you started some good habits while at home, like walking, can you continue to do some of those when you're in the workplace, can you take a break or part of your lunch to go outside, get some fresh air? Now that spring time is finally here, maybe you can do more of that. We do have another handout that accompanies the presentation called Take Care of Yourself. It's got some pretty good reminders, you may want to take a look at that.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([26:46](#)):

Another good strategy is to stay in the moment, avoid the temptation of hopping into the time machine and go to the future where we're catastrophizing all of the worst possible outcomes with thoughts of what ifs and what's going to happen. And instead, as best as you can try to stay in the moment. It's, it's the concept behind mindful meditation, focus on your breathing as a way to anchor yourself to the present moment so you don't get swept away in fears and worries about the future. Take a moment to look around and appreciate what's going on right now. Maybe the uh, looking out your window and appreciating some of the marvels of nature, for example.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([27:36](#)):

And then you want to be careful and monitor yourself talk, right? Cognitive hygiene, if you will, that will help you guard against so-called stinking thinking. So one way to manage this good cognitive hygiene is through positivity. Try to think of one positive thing that occurred each day. One thing that went well, or maybe start a gratitude, a gratitude journal where you write down one thing each day that you're grateful for. It creates a very positive mindset, indeed.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([28:18](#)):

So let's move on to our concluding slide, navigating transitions. And let's face it, you may not have thought about this before, but everything that you've been through in the previous months, the incredible challenges that you've been able to cope with, these built your resiliency - your sense of resilience up even higher. Now resilience is the strength and ability to bounce back from adversity. Every one of us has that, it's built into our DNA. If you think about it, we're all descendants of survivors. Even in prehistoric times, the individuals who didn't survive didn't live long enough to pass along their genetic material, but we are all descendants of everyone who has survived. So we have this resilience built into our DNA, and we all had our resilience store build up even before COVID came along because we had other setbacks and other challenges in our lives that built some resilience. And then certainly through COVID and the quarantine, we have finally honed some of our resilience talents, if you will.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([29:31](#)):

So now how can you tap into those resources? Well, by asking yourself the following questions, how have I successfully managed change so far? How do you get yourself through that? You survived these challenges. You're still here to talk about it. How did you make that happen? How did you overcome the self-doubt that you may be experiencing right now? And what is constant in your life? What isn't

changing? Step back, take a big look, take a look at the big picture. What's solid, what's positive, what's not going anywhere in my life, whether it be family, friends, maybe my career, my spirituality, whatever it may be.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([30:20](#)):

And what do you have control over? Right? Maybe those safety things that we talked about, I'm going to wear a face mask to protect myself and others in the workplace. And I'm going to exercise to keep my body fit so that I can fend off any illness potentially coming my way. And what are the positives in this change, right? There's always some positive associated with any kind of change, and you get to see your colleagues again. I had one patient told me that she really misses her commute because it gave her time to disconnect from work and prepare herself for being home with her family and vice versa. It gave her a chance to set her mind for going into work, and she would do that by listening to some of her favorite music.

Dr. Rick Conforto ([31:09](#)):

So maybe the return to some of those routines are going to bring you some happiness and joy. And the knowledge that you're able to get through difficult times, that's really important too. So recognize this is not your first rodeo. You've been through some tough changes in the past and you've gotten through that challenge, and you can get through this one now. You got this. So that concludes my comments for today. I hope some of the suggestions that I shared with you were useful and helpful, even if there's just one thing that you take away from my comments to implement today, that'd be a terrific thing. And remember as I said before, have faith in yourself and you got this. But take care of yourself and of your loved ones. Thanks for joining me today.

Speaker 1 ([32:06](#)):

Thank you, Dr. Conforto. And ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for being with us today. That concludes today's webinar.