



Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on people with disabilities and the services they receive. This brief is one in a series for individuals to help guide them as continue to work, seek employment, or participate in community-based day supports. We welcome your feedback and ideas as we all work together so that individuals can work towards their goals while staying safe and healthy.

ICI COVID-19 RESOURCES: covid19.communityinclusion.org

If you still are working during the COVID-19 crisis you have probably experienced some changes at your job. These changes are not just happening to you. People across the country, and around the world, are doing their jobs differently. Many things have changed at all our jobs and we need to learn about the new rules and figure out how to continue doing our jobs well.

Why have things changed at my job?

COVID-19, sometimes called the coronavirus or the pandemic, is making many people sick. Some people who have the virus don't feel sick. Others may have a fever, a cough, or a hard time breathing. People who have the virus can give it to you by being near you or touching things that you touch.

The germs from the virus can get inside your body through your nose, mouth, and eyes, and make you sick. Most people who get the virus may be unwell for a few days and then get better. A few people feel very sick and must go to the hospital for treatment.

We all have a responsibility to try and stop people from getting sick, including at our jobs. The best way to make sure you don't get sick or make others around you sick is to follow the new rules at your workplace.

How long will the COVID-19 pandemic last?

No one knows how long the COVID-19 pandemic will last. It will probably be at least some time in 2021 before things go back to normal. So it's important to think about how to work and succeed at your job, following the new rules of the pandemic, for the next several months or more.

A note about language: Many individuals with disabilities have staff who help them with issues related to work. These staff have different job titles such as employment specialist, job coach, employment support staff, or counselor. In this publication, we use the term "employment counselor" for any staff person who helps you with your employment needs.

What types of changes are employers making?

Employers now have rules about how to protect you and others when you are at your job. These may include:

- ▶ Wearing "personal protective equipment" such as a mask and gloves.
- ▶ Washing hands often and using hand sanitizer.
- ▶ Rules for "social distancing" (staying at least six feet from people) such as:
 - no longer eating in the lunchroom
 - doing your work in a different area
 - working a different schedule
 - walking in one direction, such as one-way hallways
 - coming in one door and going out another door
- ▶ Physical changes in the workplace, such as plastic barriers to protect workers and customers.
- ▶ Changes in job schedules.

As a result of these changes, you may have to do some of your tasks in a different way or have to work with different people who may not know how to best interact with you. It is important to be comfortable following these rules, and that you feel these rules are good enough to protect you.



What should I do when I'm done with work for the day?

When you are done with work, wash or dispose of any personal protective equipment (such as mask or gloves) according to your employer's instructions and wash your hands. When you get home, take off your shoes before you go into your house. Wash your hands right after you get home. If you have a job where you interact with many other people, you may also want to throw your clothes in the laundry and take a shower right after you get home.

Can my employment counselor still come to the workplace?

You may be used to having an employment counselor come to your workplace to see how you're doing. That may not be possible right now. However, they can still provide support by using a phone, tablet, or computer to communicate.

If staff cannot come to your workplace, they can still guide you on how to do your job. Your employment counselor can help you talk to your supervisor about any questions or concerns you have. [See the publication *Using Technology for Employment and Day Services: A Guide for Individuals*](#) for tips on how to receive services remotely (from a distance).

What about changes in my transportation for work?

Along with protecting yourself at work, you also need to protect yourself from the virus on your way to and from work. For example, if you take a van to work, you may need to get in a back door to limit your contact with the driver. If you take public transportation, such as a bus, subway, or train, there may be new rules such as where you can sit or stand on the bus or subway.

It is important that you follow all the rules when using transportation to make sure everyone, including the driver, stays safe and healthy. This includes wearing a mask. Talk to your family, house staff, or employment counselor about how you get to and from work, and whether changes in transportation are needed to keep you safe and healthy.

What if I'm working at home?

If you are now working from home due to COVID-19, there are a number of things to think about:

- ▶ Do you have the right technology to work from home?
- ▶ How will you get the help at home that you usually get from your supervisor and co-workers?
- ▶ How will work tasks be assigned to you?
- ▶ How will your supervisor and co-workers meet with you?
- ▶ What will be your schedule of tasks at home?

Talk to your supervisor about how they can assist you in working at home. Also, ask your employment counselor for help.

What if I get sick?

Everyone wants to stay safe at work, so if you are feeling sick you should tell your supervisor and stay home until you are better. You don't want to get other people around you sick. It is also important that you let people know if you start to feel sick at work.

If you are sick, you may be eligible for sick pay. If you get COVID-19, or have to be quarantined, under a law called the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, you can get partial pay for 2 weeks. Check with your employment counselor about whether you are eligible for sick pay, and how to apply.

What if I'm having trouble with all these changes at work?

Talk to your supervisor: You should talk to your supervisor if you have questions about the changes at work, or are having difficulty doing your job. Do not be afraid to ask for what you need.

Talk to your employment counselor: Discuss with your employment counselor the rules for keeping you safe at work, and your plans for staying healthy at your job. Let them know how you are feeling about your job, how you are performing at work, and any concerns you have. If you want, have your employment counselor talk to your supervisor about your questions, needs, and concerns.

Talk to others who can help: In addition to your supervisor and employment counselor, others may be able to help you, including other staff, your family, friends, and the people you live with.

Is it normal if I feel scared about going to work?

Yes. Many people have concerns about going to work right now. You may be concerned:

- ▶ about getting sick
- ▶ about getting other people you live with sick
- ▶ that your employer is not taking enough steps to keep you from becoming sick
- ▶ about following the rules at work for keeping you and others from getting sick
- ▶ your doctor telling you that you are at high risk of becoming sick from COVID-19 and should do everything you can to avoid being infected

If you start feeling anxious about those things, that's totally normal. Talking to supportive people and following the ideas in this publication can help bring your anxiety down.

What kind of things might I ask for to help me feel safer at work?

If you have concerns about doing your job, with all the changes resulting from COVID-19, you may need to advocate with your employer. Possible things to advocate for include:

- ▶ changing your job tasks or allowing you to work in a different space to limit how much you interact with others
- ▶ changing your schedule so you're at work when things are not so busy
- ▶ allowing you to work from home
- ▶ taking a leave of absence (time off from your job)

Your employment counselor can help you in advocating with your employer.

What is the best way to advocate with my employer?

Use these guidelines:

- ▶ Talk to your supervisor about what you need and why you need it.
- ▶ Along with speaking to your supervisor, put the request in writing. Get help from your employment counselor if you need help writing out the request.
- ▶ If your employer has a human resources department, also contact them. They can help you and your supervisor understand what the company rules are and what is allowed.

How can the Americans with Disabilities Act help me during COVID-19?

As a person with a disability, you have rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act. One of these is the right to "reasonable accommodation." This means you have the right to ask for changes in a job that will allow you to perform the tasks of your job successfully. If those changes are considered "reasonable," your employer must make those changes. For example, if you cannot wear a face mask due to your disability, you can ask if you can work in a different area so that you are not near other employees. This would be considered reasonable if it doesn't cost your employer too much money, if you can still perform all the required tasks of your job, and if it won't be too difficult or disruptive to the business.

Your employment counselor can help with deciding about requesting a reasonable accommodation. Additional information is available from the [US Equal Opportunity Commission](#) and the [Job Accommodation Network](#).

What if I can't follow the new rules?

It may be hard to accept these new rules at work and may take a while for you to get used to them. However, if you cannot follow the new rules at your job for staying safe and healthy, your supervisor can tell you that you no longer can come to work, and you could either temporarily or permanently lose your job.

What is a leave of absence, and should I take one?

A leave of absence is when you have permission from your supervisor to not be at work for a set amount of time. Generally, you are not paid during this time, but your job is waiting for you when you return. Under a national law called the Family Medical Leave Act, and some other state laws, if you have to take time off due to a medical condition, your employer may have to let you take time off without pay. However, you may not be covered under these laws, and it may be completely your employer's decision to let you take a leave of absence.

If you need to take a break from work, your employment counselor can help you talk to your supervisor about taking a leave of absence and starting back to work again at a date in the future.

How is a leave of absence different from a furlough or being laid off?

A leave of absence is time off from your job that you request. A furlough (temporarily losing your job), layoff (permanently losing your job), and termination (being fired) are actions by your employer that result in loss of your job.

Most employers have rules regarding taking time off or loss of your job, and it is important to understand those rules. [See the publication *What is COVID-19 and Why Many People Are Not Working*](#) for additional information about not working during the pandemic.

Could I lose my job if I don't want to go to work?

If you decide that you are not able to continue working right now due to concerns over COVID-19, and can't take a leave of absence, you may have to quit your job, if your employer says you must come to work. This is not an easy decision to make, but you need to decide what is best for you. Not being at work and not earning a paycheck will make it hard to pay bills. Talk with your employment counselor and others (such as family members) on how to make sure you have the resources and income you need to take care of your living expenses.

Can others decide whether I should or should not go to work?

You have the right to make your own decision about whether to go to work or not. Other people should not be making these decisions for you. In making this decision, think about:

- ▶ your need for a paycheck
- ▶ possible loss of your job
- ▶ your ability to protect yourself from getting sick
- ▶ your concerns about getting you and others sick

Consider all the facts, and then make an informed decision. If the people you live with or residential staff disagree with your decision, discuss with them why you feel the way you do, and ask that they respect your right to make your own choices.

How can I get through this challenging time?

During this time, we all must do our part to follow the rules and keep everyone safe. Stay connected with your support team: your family, friends, and staff. Take steps to protect yourself at work and stay healthy. All the changes going on are a big adjustment for everyone. Don't be afraid to ask for help!

It's important to do things when you're not working that will help you feel better and keep up your spirits. Here are some suggestions:

- ▶ Try not to watch or read too much news about the virus. For example, you might watch the news in the morning or in the evening, but avoid watching or reading the news many times a day.
- ▶ Eat healthy and try not to snack too much when you are sitting at home. Don't eat to keep busy: read a book, text a friend, play a game, exercise, or do a hobby instead.
- ▶ Being at home when you're not working, instead of going out seeing friends doing activities, can make you feel bored. Find some new ways to have fun at home. Now is a great time to explore new hobbies and interests, including taking an online course.
- ▶ Try to go outside every day, even just for a walk or to sit outside. Fresh air is helpful to feel more energy and to have a better mood. Remember your mask(s)!
- ▶ Stay connected with loved ones, friends, and support staff. You may not be able to see them in person, but you can still talk to them on the phone or via video. If needed, schedule times that you talk to certain people throughout your week, including staff who provide supports to you.
- ▶ Join an online support group to talk to others about what they are doing and how they are feeling. If you're in a day or employment services program, they may offer a group like this. Or you can do an online search for national, state, or local self-advocacy groups. This is a great way to talk to other people who are also wanting to socialize during this time.

RESOURCES

COVID-19 Information

These resources help explain COVID-19 and what to do to stay safe and healthy.

- ▶ [SARTAC: Self-Advocacy and Beyond](#) - Variety of materials including webinars and plain language guides in multiple languages
- ▶ Videos: [Self-Determination Channel](#) (Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities)
- ▶ Video: [Virus Safety for People with Disabilities](#) (TRN)
- ▶ Video: [What is Coronavirus?](#) (ASAN)
- ▶ [Coping with Stress During Coronavirus and COVID-19](#) – Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Information on Taking Time Off

The following resources from the US Department of Labor give information on taking time off due to COVID-19.

- ▶ [Families First Coronavirus Response Act: Employee Paid Leave Rights](#)
- ▶ [COVID-19 and the Family and Medical Leave Act Questions and Answers](#)

National Support Groups

These groups hold regular calls to help each other during the pandemic:

- ▶ [SARTAC](#)
- ▶ [TASH](#)

Trainings on Changes in Working and Using Technology

- ▶ [Free trainings from LinkedIn](#)

Resource on Dealing with Job Stress

- ▶ [Employees: How to Cope with Job Stress and Build Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

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