Back after interval
promoting positive mental health and wellbeing when returning to live performance (COVID-19)
WHAT IS BACK AFTER INTERVAL?

This resource consists of practical, evidence-based tips for looking after your mental health and wellbeing when returning to live performance after time away. While this resource was developed in the context of public health responses and venue reopenings throughout COVID-19, the principles shared can be used after any time away from live performance.

Live performance is at the heart of what we do. Sometimes we experience long periods away, and jumping straight back into it can feel daunting. This resource has been designed to help you and your company thrive when returning to live performance. Whether you’re returning after weeks, months or even years, we hope you find Back After Interval helpful.

For more information on any of the topics in Back After Interval, visit artswellbeingcollective.com.au

WHO DEVELOPED BACK AFTER INTERVAL?

Back After Interval is a resource of the Arts Wellbeing Collective, an Arts Centre Melbourne initiative. The content was created, reviewed and informed by Chris Cheers, Dr Anastasia Hronis, and Dr Jane Miskovic-Wheatley, and many performing arts workers who shared their experiences, challenges, and ideas.

Back After Interval is not a comprehensive guide to every issue you might encounter, and does not take the place of support and information from Company Management, peak bodies, occupational health and safety practices, legal or medical advice, or your workplace policies and procedures.

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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we meet, visit and perform, and pay our respect to Elders past and present.
INTRODUCTION

As COVID-19 restrictions ease and change across Australia, many of us begin - or begin again - a gradual return to work in the performing arts industry. We also recognise that much of our creative community remain without their usual prospects, and others are working overtime to try and reopen those opportunities.

Whether we’re working, training, creating, rehearsing, presenting or touring, we’re likely doing so after prolonged disruption. As we navigate this return to our creative practice and work roles within a new context, it’s normal to feel a range of emotions. This will be a process of change that will be experienced differently by each of us.

Whilst there may be a sense of excitement to return to these spaces, there may also be new challenges that bring on hesitation, stress and anxiety. The good news is that there’s lots we can do to look after our mental health and wellbeing, to support the people around us, and to help get ourselves, and our creative community back on stage.

REFLECTING AND MOVING FORWARD

Time away from live performance can be – in at least some part – challenging for most of us. Particularly through different public health responses to COVID-19, closures, cancellations and postponements can feel seemingly endless. But, we do need to remember that this too shall pass.

Before looking to the future, it can be helpful to take a moment to reflect on a few key questions:

- What was a difficulty you want to leave behind from your time away from live performance?
- What opportunity did your time away give you that you’d like to take forward?
- What new goal do you want to strive for? For example, diversifying your creative practice, managing work-life balance, or enhancing your self-care.
ALL PERFORMING ARTS WORKERS

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Mental health challenges may not be caused directly by a personal experience of COVID-19, but by the impact COVID-19 and the associated public health response may have on our lives. Our mental health and wellbeing can be impacted by many things – reduced freedoms of movement and association, changes to our financial and living situations, concern for loved ones and many other factors that have been amplified through this time. We may not even be consciously aware of the ways in which we have changed in response.

In this context, it makes sense that our responses to re-entering workplaces will vary from person to person, and even from week to week!

CONTINUING TO ADAPT

Restrictions to work and performance in the arts industry vary considerably across Australia currently and may continue to change in unpredictable ways. For some of us, the time away from our creative work and workplaces may be relatively short, for others it may be many months, whilst others may still not be able to return.

Even as we welcome back audiences, it’s important to be aware that we are still navigating change. Nothing about our current situation is yet behind us; we have not returned to normal. We are still learning, adapting and finding our way forward.

Navigating change is not just for a global pandemic – the skills we practise now will help us find our way through other changes in the future. To be well placed to adapt as needed, it is so important to take care of yourself and to recognise the need for support early.

NAVIGATING CHANGE TOGETHER

This is a good time to reflect on what brings us together, and what we share even as our situations differ. Our sense of community in the performing arts is a strength that will help protect us from feeling isolated and alone in our emotional responses. This is a great time to embrace this community. Reach out to your colleagues, friends and peers and support each other in any way you can.

This is also our opportunity to look after ourselves and each other as we adapt together to our changed environment. Just as we became used to the restrictions and behaviours needed to keep us COVIDSafe such as keeping our distance, wearing masks and washing our hands, we are well equipped to develop and implement new ways of working to better support each other as we return to work and to work-sites.

The experience of COVID-19 has highlighted a need for change that has been long established in the arts community, such as flexible work practice, managing illness and injury while continuing to work well, and feeling safe and supported to disclose mental health concerns. If this experience has taught us anything, it has taught us that physical and mental health are paramount for a safe and sustainable industry, so let’s not let that lesson go to waste.
THERE IS NO ‘NORMAL’ RESPONSE

Just as these challenges are varied and unpredictable, so too are the emotional responses of those around you. For some people, anxiety may be heightened as spaces that were previously enjoyable now feel odd, uncomfortable or confronting. The experience of lockdowns and restrictions may also encourage a constant, low level of worry about possible closures and cancellations.

For some people, this may show up as anger, stress, and for others as lack of motivation or apathy. Other people may be coping with low mood and a sense of loss related to cancelled work, or the loss of creating work the way it was originally imagined. With so many varied responses, it is important to show compassion, empathy and understanding to those around you, and also toward yourself and your own emotional responses. Whatever you feel or experience during re-entry to work or the pursuit of work, your reactions and emotions are valid. They are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation, and you are not alone. Try to allow time and space for these emotions to just exist, and practise kindness to those around you but also to yourself.

POSSIBLE GUILT ABOUT WORKING

Some people might be returning to work while others remain unemployed, some theatres may be open; and others closed. This may result in possible guilt about still having a job when others do not. Acknowledge that the situation is unfair, but also recognise the bigger picture; remember that we are in a health crisis and that health must come first. No one chose this situation and it is no one’s fault.

If you’re feeling guilty about returning to work while others are not able to, accept that this is a normal way to feel, and allow yourself to experience your emotions. Try to remember that some people must work to ensure the future of the work. Our industry is hallmarked by feast versus famine and work instability at the best of times, so take time to work out what you need to do to support your life and work.

REMEMBERING THE BASICS

It’s more important than ever to be taking care of your body, head, and heart, and be asking for help. Give yourself the best chance at feeling good by focusing on the basics – eating and sleeping well, exercising, doing things that you enjoy, staying connected, and asking for (and accepting!) help and support. We have complex problems to solve, so remember to keep it simple. Lots of small, simple strategies done consistently is the key to sustainable self-care.

You’re probably already aware of what gives you energy, but knowing what you’re supposed to do is different to actually doing it! Prioritising self-care takes more than simply understanding its importance. Identifying the motivation or learning why these strategies are so important helps keep you on track. Ensure that you have routines and boundaries in place to make self-care a habit, not a chore or a bonus that you get to if you have time. If you are pressed, do 15 minutes on a self-care strategy rather than an hour – it is better to be consistent than perfect.

GIVING YOURSELF A RUNWAY

Before a plane takes off, it gradually gathers speed. If you can, ease your way back into professional life by thinking about and setting some achievable goals - don’t try to ‘take off’ before you are ready. Your first weeks back might feel overwhelming. If possible, move at a pace that is comfortable for you, but also challenges you to try something different regularly – each day or every couple of days. This helps build your tolerance to things that might feel overwhelming if you do them all at once.

Take note of what you’re achieving and celebrate ‘wins’, no matter how big or small. Keep a growth mindset during this time by trying to view this as a period of learning and development, rather than of 100% competency and perfection. If you do start to feel overwhelmed, try to focus on rest and connection. Pay attention to your energy levels and aim for a balance between time spent alone and time spent with others. Managing your commitments effectively will give you more time and space to do the things that give you energy.
**REMEMBERING WHAT’S IN YOUR CONTROL**

The actions we have taken as a community have contributed to where we are today, and generally, people have been willing and responsible in complying with public health directions. As we return to work, we might experience different behaviours from those around us. While you can’t control how other people behave, you can control your own behaviours.

Ensure you’re familiar with your workplace COVID Safety guidelines, and role model the behaviour you wish to see. Find ways to express concerns in a constructive way (for example, journaling or speaking with someone), and tell someone if you see behaviours that negatively impact or endanger others.

**SETTING BOUNDARIES**

Now could be a good time to consider the boundaries you keep at work.

- How often do you check work emails, and at what time of the day?
- What hours do you work?
- How much work do you do for free?

It could be useful to see your re-entry to work, and to working on-site, as an opportunity to set new boundaries, especially those that prioritise you and your self-care. It is best to set a boundary at the beginning of something if you can, as they can be easier to remember and stick to this way.

Setting reasonable boundaries within the requirements of our work roles is a self-valuing move. Maintaining healthy boundaries sends a message to your unconscious that you matter and that your personal time, relationships, and other priorities are as significant as work. Even though your mind might tell you otherwise, you are not being unreasonable when you stick to a work-life boundary. Remember: ‘No’ is a complete sentence. You also tend to be more focused, creative and productive when you are feeling your best, so setting boundaries is a win-win for yourself as well as your collaborators.

**ASKING FOR HELP**

- It is ok to ask for help. If you, or someone you know is having a rough time, don’t carry on alone. Ask for help and accept it.
- Ask for help from a professional, a peer, colleague, employer, company manager, stage manager, supervisor, mentor, friend – you are not alone.
- Remember, support is for prevention as much as it is for crisis.
- If you are worried about someone, ask if they are ok, and if you are still concerned, stay with them and connect them with other supports. If you feel like you are in crisis, reach out and do not be alone.
- If you or someone you know is at immediate risk of harm to themselves or others, please contact the Emergency Services on 000.
- Free, confidential mental health support is available 24/7. See page 11 for options. Don’t ever worry that you’re not distressed or upset enough. Navigating the performing arts industry can be tough, and you’re only human.

**Support Act Wellbeing Helpline**

24/7 phone counselling service for anyone who usually works in the creative industries.

1800 959 500 (24/7)

First Nations Support: 1800 959 500 (Option 3)
Manager Support Hotline: 1800 818 728

National Relay Service is available for people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment. Chat options are also available. Visit artscollective.com.au/get-help for more information.

People who do not use English as their first language can get free translation support from the Translating and Interpreting Service tisnational.gov.au
PERFORMERS AND CREATIVES

INTRODUCTION

As we transition towards COVIDSafe settings, we'll see our theatre capacities slowly increase from 0% to 100%. However, for those of us who are returning to rehearsing, performing, auditioning, and creating, we might not have had the chance to build up our mental and physical strength slowly. Unlike our theatre capacities, we might go from 0% to 100% very quickly.

If we continue pushing ourselves at 100% before we're ready without taking action to protect ourselves, we may be creating a recipe for burnout. If the somewhat sudden return to the intensity of the world of the performing arts has left you feeling overwhelmed, you're not alone.

The mental and physical strain of performing was well-known before COVID-19. It hasn't suddenly become easier now that our theatres are reopening. Add to that the complex and sometimes competing emotions of excitement, gratitude, sadness, frustration, and many more that we might be feeling, it's no surprise that we might be looking for some tips and techniques for navigating this unusual time.

RETURNING TO PERFORMANCE

It’s normal to feel a bit rusty and out of form after a long period of reduced practice and performance. Getting back into these routines can be difficult, particularly if we're constantly comparing how we're feeling now to how we felt at our peak. Instead of being overly critical, harsh, or judgemental to yourself, aim to treat yourself with kindness and compassion.

• Remind yourself of just how difficult the impact of COVID-19 may have been for you, your peers, colleagues, friends, family and others.
• Remind yourself that nothing could have prepared you for the scale of the pandemic and its consequences.
• Speak to yourself the way you would to a good friend or family member who is struggling – gently and with kindness.

For many of us, self-compassion might not come naturally and can feel a bit self-indulgent or uncomfortable. This means we actually have to consciously practise being kind and loving to ourselves.

Self-compassion involves validating our emotions and accepting them without judgement. Rather than telling ourselves that we ‘shouldn’t’ feel a particular way, or that we’re overreacting or being too sensitive, self-compassion invites us to recognise and acknowledge our own emotional experiences, and to make space for them rather than trying to push them away.

If you’re feeling out of practice and not up to the performance standard you previously held, self-compassion may sound something like, “It sucks that I’m out of practise. I feel frustrated than I'm not at the level that I was at before. I know that with consistent effort and practise, I'll be able to do well, just like I've been able to do in the past."

Other support services
BeyondBlue: 1300 22 4636 (24/7)
Lifeline: 13 11 14 (24/7)
Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467 (24/7)
SANE Australia: 1800 187 263 (9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday)
QLife (LGBTQI): 1800 184 527 (3pm to midnight)
Butterfly Line (support for disordered eating) 1800 33 4637 (8am to 12am AEST)
Mensline: 1300 789 978 (24/7)
Griefline: 1300 845 745 (12pm to 3am)
DirectLine (alcohol and drug counselling) 1800 888 236
Gambling Help: 1800 858 858 (24/7)
Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (24/7)
Feeling nervous before performing after a long period away is very common. Whether your time away is because of closures and cancellations, holidays, parental or caring responsibilities, recovery from illness and injury, or any other reason, there are techniques for addressing performance nerves, should you experience them.

We know that the more we do something, the easier and less anxiety provoking it becomes over time. So naturally, the more often we are performing, the more our nerves and anxiety should ease.

The opposite is also true – if we have a period of time without performing, it’s possible that nerves and anxieties about performing may creep back in – even if we’ve never experienced them before. Nerves in and of themselves are not a bad thing. We don’t need to aim to get rid of them, but to channel them in a way that is helpful.

If you find your performance anxiety is becoming unmanageable or impacting on your life, work and relationships, please seek professional support.

Start small and build up

If you can, ease yourself back into performing. You may want to consider starting with smaller performances, for example, smaller crowds, performances for friends and family.

If you utilise social media, you may want to consider doing live streams either instead of or alongside a smaller performance. Some people find the distance that social media provides helps them feel somewhat ‘invisible’ on the other end of the screen.

Seeing the number of viewers in a tiny box can be less intimidating and overwhelming than performing in front of a crowd of hundreds or thousands of people.

Be aware of your thoughts

In general, anxiety tends to be driven by our thought processes. If we’re thinking about all the things that may go wrong, negative reviews, harsh judgement, or the possibility of not getting another gig, it makes sense that we’d feel anxious, worried, or overwhelmed.

The problem with this is that our feelings influence what we do and how we perform. This sort of negative anxiety is less likely to help us perform at our best.

Instead of focusing on these worrisome thoughts, try to think of the helpful and realistic things that you know to be true.

Write it out

Write yourself a list to help prompt you of all the times you have had successful performances.

Think about times where you’ve had meaningful engagement with your audience, great chemistry onstage, electric moments where the words simply jump off the page, kind audience responses, great feedback, difficult parts of songs/dances/roles that you’ve been able to nail, skills that you’ve tried and mastered.

Remind yourself of all of the hundreds of hours you have put into learning and exploring your art form, the training, the practise sessions, time spent analysing character, physicality, voice, movement, story. Remind yourself of why you perform, what you love about it and why you keep going.

Keeping your positive prior experiences front of mind helps channel your nervous energy in a positive way and enhance your performance, rather than overwhelm you with anxiety. You know how to do this. You have these skills.

A great tip is to write out these things in advance, and read over them before a performance, as it can be hard to remember all of your wonderful achievements, learnings and accomplishments when emotions are running high.

Revisit routines

Routines are important when we’re trying to establish a pattern of behaviour. Whether conscious or unconscious, you would likely have had some routines when performing regularly.

• How much sleep were you getting?
• How often were you rehearsing?
• What kinds of foods were you eating?

These may have changed during COVID-19, and may need to be adjusted as you re-enter the routine of performing.

As well as your physical habits, what mental patterns did you have? Maybe it was a pre-performance “pep-talk”, or a piece of music that helped get you in the zone. This is a great opportunity to revisit old patterns that worked for you in the past, and also develop new ones.

• What have you learnt about yourself and your practice from the time away?
• What did you miss?

See if you can use some of these learnings to create new routines that serve as regular reminders of all those things you love about performance.
Performing to smaller audiences

Due to the actions that venues and theatres are taking to keep us and our audiences safe, there may be times when we’re performing to fewer people than we’re used to in a space. You may not be able to see their facial expressions if they are wearing masks, or, it may be that people are unable to sing and dance along, or engage with immersive performance in the same way as pre-COVID-19.

This can be disappointing and difficult to navigate, especially if the ‘vibe’ of the show typically came from people singing, dancing and getting involved in the performance. Fewer people might even simply mean that the applause is not as loud or as full as we may like!

Dealing with these realities requires one important thing: acceptance. Acceptance requires us to shift from emotional states of frustration, anger or resentment, and allows us to ‘let go’.

Acceptance helps us acknowledge that certain things are out of our control, and that no matter how much we wish they were different, we cannot change them.

Focusing on things that are out of our control can be upsetting and frustrating. Instead, it can be more helpful and empowering to focus on things that are within our control, and that we can influence and change.

There is so much in your control – how you show up to rehearsals, the way you treat other people, how you role model COVIDSafe practices, your attitude to learning and creating, and the energy you bring into a space, just to name a few.

Not performing as much as you’d like

As the performing industry recovers from the impacts of COVID-19, there may be fewer opportunities and less work for people in the performing arts and entertainment industries.

This might result in feelings of frustration, disappointment, anger and resentment for you. Again, acceptance that these situations are out of our control is key, and focusing on what we can control will help us feel more empowered.

It is easy to become disheartened in these circumstances. To maintain motivation and momentum, keep reminding yourself of why you do the work you do.

If you need to, write it out and keep it somewhere handy to read over. Have reminders of highlights of your career so far somewhere where you can see them, whether they be photos, promotional materials, reviews or thank you cards.

Recovery for our sector will take more time than we’d like it to, so aim to balance both your long-term goals and your short-term needs.

What can you learn or explore within, and beyond, your work that will help you get through today and set you up for the future?

Asking for help

You are not alone – ask for help and accept it from a GP or other professional, a peer, colleague, employer, company manager, stage manager, supervisor, mentor, or friend. Remember, support is for prevention as much as it is for crisis.
Effectively preparing our teams, companies and organisations as we return to work and to work-sites is critical to promoting positive mental health and wellbeing. Fortunately, there are plenty of preventative, proactive steps to take to ensure our people are given every opportunity to do their best work as we rebuild and recover the performing arts industry.

Reopening during COVID-19 demands interpreting complex rules, restrictions, guidelines and the daily 'new normal'. Promoting positive mental health and wellbeing shouldn’t feel like an optional extra, or a pain to add on, but something that is good for everyone if prioritised, planned for and implemented.

SELF-CARE IS NON-NEGOTIABLE

COVID-19 is a rollercoaster, and many leaders are experiencing depleted energy and the risk of burnout. Think about ways you can lead by modelling good self-care and promoting structures in your workplaces that support individual self-care on an ongoing basis. Consider the after-effects of this time much as you would a physical injury or illness - time, kindness and extra care will need to be taken to support ourselves, and our teams.

It is the old adage of, 'fitting your own oxygen mask first,' or that it's impossible to pour from an empty cup. If you are not well, and prioritising your own self-care, you will not be able to take care of others.

If your teams are struggling, their work will suffer. Self-care, and enabling others to prioritise their self-care can really only have positive outcomes!

MOVING FORWARD TO BETTER

Move forward to better, not back to normal. In our eagerness to get back to work, we may inadvertently return to practices that weren’t serving us pre-COVID-19, and which will likely be even more difficult to navigate now.

Taking the time now to think about our ways of working and setting ourselves up for the future will pay dividends in both the short and the long term.

This might involve implementing more secure forms of work to give people greater financial certainty, addressing schedules that were causing burnout, or shining a light on problematic systems and structures that had previously gone unexamined.

ALLOWING TIME AND SPACE

Allow time. We are so accustomed to working to a deadline in the performing arts that it’s easy to forget that we’re often the ones who have set the deadline in the first place! While there are certainly deadlines out of our control, which ones might be in our control? Can we allow more time?

Restrictions may ease, and recommendations may change, but these are circumstances not catalysts for change. No one will win a prize for reopening first, or getting all team members back onsite, or the most audience in a space. Allow time for adjustment, reflection and processing to reopen stronger and smarter than before.

Allow space. Space is key, both literally and figuratively! COVID-19 requires us to think in terms of square metre rules and physical distancing, but it also offers an opportunity to consider the idea of space.

What opportunities exist for phased returns; for hybrid working models; for digital tools and integration; for planning work-spaces to support our teams to connect and to do their best work?

COVID-19 has upended notions of flexible work. Let’s ensure we plan our spaces to be enablers of creativity, connection, compassion and innovation.

This is our opportunity to think differently about work-life balance. Examine working from home and flexible work arrangements through a lens of trust, compassion, and what people need to do their best work and thrive in their work and home lives.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

During a rapidly evolving global health crisis, uncertainty is unavoidable, but we can mitigate some of the negative mental health and wellbeing impacts of this uncertainty through good communication.

Sharing information regularly and transparently contributes to psycho-social safety and helps avoid gossip, misinformation and guesswork. As we work through COVIDSafe events, you may feel a pressure to give people a sense of certainty, by planning for or outlining every possible outcome. Crisis planning requires us to pay attention, follow guidance and keep up with new information as it arises.

However, sometimes there are factors that are simply outside of your control. Be honest and open about decision making and considerations, and don't be afraid to say, “I don’t know. Let’s work it out together.”
OFFERING CLARITY

If you are in a position of leadership, you may also have to mediate between people who have different ideas of risk and the importance of COVIDSafe procedures. In these situations, it is important to be clear and authoritative regarding COVIDSafe guidelines and procedures that are non-negotiable and explain these using clear and relevant examples.

You may also like to reflect on your own attitudes toward the COVIDSafe procedures and how this may impact the way you communicate them to others. If you are struggling to understand or keep across requirements to operate safely, slow down and seek assistance. It is better to be sure that you are bringing your team and audiences back safely than to risk the consequences of getting it wrong.

CELEBRATING

Even in our changed circumstances, there is much to be celebrated about the reopening of theatres and venues, having work on our stages again and the inimitable magic of live performance.

Do not miss opportunities to celebrate and validate your teams, artists and audiences. Offer regular, small moments of celebration which give people time to savour the joy of being together, creating and making again. Have fun with ‘welcome back’ packs, COVIDSafe gatherings, or simply a short surprise speech from a member of the company to acknowledge the moment.

Take the time to re-experience the joy of a live audience, embrace their joy in seeing live theatre again, and take a moment when you can to thank them for coming back and to encourage them to come back again!

SEEKING SUPPORT

You are not alone. Support is available for you, your team, and your company. Encourage your team members to seek support (a GP is a great place to start), and role model help seeking yourself.

The Support Act Wellbeing Helpline is a free, confidential phone counselling service available 24/7, Australia-wide for anyone who usually works in the creative industries. Simply phone 1800 959 500 to make an appointment, or request to speak with someone immediately about any aspect of your mental health and wellbeing.

The First Nations Dedicated Support Line is a free, confidential phone counselling service available 24/7 Australia-wide for First Nations performing arts workers. Call 1800 861 085 to make an appointment with a First Nations counsellor.

The Manager Support Hotline is a free, confidential phone consultative service available 24/7 Australia-wide for all arts leaders needing assistance supporting performing arts workers, companies and teams. Simply phone 1800 818 728 to make an appointment.

All of these services are completely confidential and free of charge.

OFFERING SUPPORT

The broader conversations in the community about mental health through COVID-19 have ensured that wellbeing is well and truly in the spotlight.

Take this opportunity to have an explicit conversation about mental health and wellbeing with your team. There are so many freely available resources and services now, and accessing psychological care (via Helplines, online resources, organisational EAP’s etc.) is more possible than ever.

Make the time, pull together the resources, and start – or continue – the conversation.

Additional resources

The Arts Wellbeing Collective team has developed several resources that you can draw on, or you can contact the team to discuss your unique context.

Visit artswellbeingcollective.com.au for more information.

Don’t feel like you must implement everything all at once – never underestimate the power of small, cumulative actions.

As always, let’s look after ourselves, and look after each other.