



### EXPECTANT/NEW PARENTS: WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COVID-19?

**There are currently high levels of anxiety in the community regarding the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, with expectant and new parents (mothers, fathers and partners) especially concerned about the potential impact on pregnant women, babies and young children from both a personal and professional perspective.**

If you're feeling anxious and worried about your own health and that of your family, you're not alone. You may also be feeling anxious about plans relating to your Parental Leave.

For those of you preparing for leave, already on leave, or returning from leave this resource sheet contains practical strategies to help you through this transition in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.



The perinatal period represents a unique period of increased risk to mental health, even without the emergence of the pandemic. With more anxiety in the general population relating to COVID-19, this is magnified amongst expectant and new parents. Having access to quality, trusted information provides much needed reassurance at this time.

DR NICOLE HIGHET / CENTRE OF PERINATAL EXCELLENCE (COPE)





**One size does not fit all.**

It is critical that you communicate with your employer to communicate your needs and discuss options.

**Ask, don't assume!**

**Managing the Parenthood Journey**

To identify practical strategies to help you transition well during this uncertain time, it can be useful to consider the parenthood journey in three distinct phases—Pre-parental, Parental Leave and the Ongoing Seasons of Working Parenthood. The strategies you adopt will differ based on where you are in this journey.

**In this resource sheet, we focus specifically on the Parental Leave phase.**

We provide a list of general strategies, followed by tailored strategies relating to each of the Parental Leave periods: Preparing for Leave; During Leave; and Returning from Leave.

While not the focus of this resource sheet, considerations for the pre-parental journey and the ongoing seasons of working parenthood are also discussed.





Be mindful that this is a time of unprecedented change for Australian workplaces and your organisation may not be able to give you all the answers now. It is important to take the opportunity to open the communication channels before you go on leave and be clear on how you would like to stay connected—and remember ASK, don't assume!

DR SARAH COTTON  
ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST /  
TRANSITIONING WELL

## General strategies for the Parental Leave transition

Irrespective of where you are in the Parental Leave transition, we recommend the following strategies:

### Be informed

- Use trusted sources:
  - > Refer to the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG) website for updated advice and information on COVID-19: <https://ranzcof.edu.au/statements-guidelines/covid-19-statement>
  - > Refer to the PWWP website for an updated list of support and resources, including helplines: <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/covid-19/>
- Be aware of changes to the provision of medical and health services, e.g. appointments now available through telehealth: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-19-national-health-plan-primary-care-bulk-billed-mbs-telehealth-services>
- Attend to your financial wellbeing. See [www.moneysmart.gov.au](http://www.moneysmart.gov.au) for free government support.

### Be connected

- Take opportunities to connect with others and remember, you are not alone.
- In lieu of face-to-face appointments and hospital visits, include partners virtually, e.g. using FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, etc.

### Be compassionate

- Be realistic with your expectations of self and others at this time—recognise what you (and others) can and can't control.
- Take steps to proactively manage your mental health and wellbeing. Refer to **Resource: Strategies for Managing your Perinatal Mental Health**, page 8.
  - > Be alert to signs and symptoms of perinatal depression and anxiety in you, or your partner—it's easy to dismiss them as 'just how everyone feels at the moment' or 'just part of being a new parent. Visit [www.cope.org.au](http://www.cope.org.au) for perinatal information and support.
- Sign up to receive free support from Ready to Cope during your pregnancy, birth and the first year of parenthood.
  - > There is a separate version for mums and dads, and emails contain content that is relevant to the specific stage you are in throughout the perinatal period. Visit [readytocopecope.org.au](http://readytocopecope.org.au) to register.
- Find out about (and use) the support available to you:
  - > Many organisations have an Employee Assistance Provider (EAP). This is a free, confidential phone counselling service that you can access from your home. Check with HR or your manager to see whether immediate family can also use this service.
  - > Use any other support available—your manager, HR, Parental Leave Transition Coaching, COVID-19 resources available on your intranet, relevant policies, e.g. Family and Domestic Violence, Flexibility, Parental Leave.





## Preparing for Leave—Considerations

### WHAT YOU MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING:

#### Personally

- Uncertainty and anxiety about the impact of COVID-19 during your pregnancy, your baby's birth and the postnatal period.
- The physical impact of increased stress and lack of sleep (pregnancy-related and due to increased anxiety and stress).
- Uncertainty over hospital resources available for your baby's birth, and changes to maternity care provision, e.g. partner and visitor access.
- Anticipating less support from your friends and family, e.g. those self-isolating to reduce their risk of infection, or unwell.
- Concerns about relationship stress, e.g. with your partner, other children.

#### Professionally

- Intense pressure in some sectors, such as healthcare and retail, may be increasing work-related risks. For example, coming into contact with more people than usual, standing for long periods, lifting heavy items.
- Financial concerns and job insecurity (self and/or partner).
- Concerns about handing over work remotely, as well as remaining connected to the organisation during leave (exacerbated by increased remote working, if applicable).
- Disappointment at not having the opportunity to 'transition out' as expected.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP:

In addition to the General Strategies listed on page 3, we recommend the following:

#### Be informed

- If you believe you need to transfer to a Safe Job, discuss with your manager and/or HR. Refer to **Resource: Legal Obligations of your Employer in the COVID-19 Pandemic**, page 9–10.

#### Be connected

- To optimise safety for you and your baby in lieu of face-to-face appointments and hospital visits:
  - > Use telehealth services wherever possible.
  - > Bring partners into antenatal appointments virtually, e.g. using FaceTime, Skype or Zoom.
  - > After the birth, invite families to connect virtually to 'meet' your baby.
- Reach out to your manager:
  - > Discuss your upcoming Parental Leave and your unique needs. Remember to clearly communicate any concerns or questions - managers are not mind-readers!
  - > Work together to create your Keeping in Touch (KIT) plan for the period you will be on Parental Leave. Refer to **Resource: Staying Connected during Parental Leave**: <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>
- As you get closer to your leave date, discuss your last day arrangements with your manager. Make it official and commit to 'switching off' after that date—this can be harder to do if you are working from home during COVID-19.
- Ask HR or your manager to help you connect with a parent mentor/buddy, and/or join the Working Parent Network in your organisation (if available). Refer to **Resource: How to Set up a Working Parent Network**: <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>

#### Be compassionate (to self and others)

- Take note of the phone number for your organisation's EAP, if they have one. This can be used as you move through all stages of the Parental Leave transition.



## During Leave—Considerations

### WHAT YOU MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING:

#### Personally

- Concerns about your health, your partner's health, and that of your baby immediately after birth.
- Reduced access to postnatal healthcare, e.g. Maternal Health Nurse visits, breastfeeding support.
- Reduced availability of childcare.
- Lack of connection during an at-risk time, e.g. from mothers' groups, grandparents or elderly family and friends who are self-isolating/unwell.
- Physical impact of increased stress and lack of sleep—from caring for a newborn and due to increased anxiety.
- Concerns about relationship stress, e.g. with your partner, other children.

#### Professionally

- Financial concerns and job insecurity (self and/or partner).
- Concerns about how much the organisation will change in your absence, and how you will fit back in (especially considering COVID-19).
- Staying connected with colleagues and the business (in a more virtual world).

### WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP:

In addition to the General Strategies listed on page 3, we recommend the following:

#### Be informed

- If close to returning from leave, understand your legal rights and entitlements. Refer to **Resource: Legal Obligations of your Employer in the COVID-19 Pandemic**, page 9–10.

#### Be connected

- Connect with others and remember, you are not alone. If you haven't spoken to friends or colleagues for a while, take this opportunity to reach out and see how they are.
- Reach out to your manager to reconnect:
  - > Ask how the company is responding to COVID-19. Discuss how you can keep updated with any changes in the organisation.
  - > Review (or create) your Keeping in Touch (KIT) plan. If appropriate, discuss whether/how you might use KIT days in the current environment. Refer to **Resource: Staying Connected during Parental Leave:** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>
  - > If close to returning, discuss with your manager what the COVID-19 situation means for you and your return to work.
- Ask HR or your manager to help you connect with a parent mentor/buddy, and/or join the Working Parent Network in your organisation (if available). Refer to **Resource: How to Set up a Working Parent Network:** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>

#### Be compassionate (to self and others)

- Remember—it's easy to dismiss the signs and symptoms of perinatal depression and anxiety as 'just how everyone feels at the moment' or 'it's just part of being a new parent'. Visit [www.cope.org.au](http://www.cope.org.au) for information and support.



## Returning from Leave—Considerations

### WHAT YOU MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING:

#### Personally

- Feelings of isolation and/or disconnection.
- Disappointment that you may not be able to return to 'normal' working life, with adult socialisation and stimulation outside of the house (especially if working from home).

#### Professionally

- Financial concerns and job insecurity (self and/or partner).
- Concerns about how much the organisation has changed since you went on Parental Leave, and how you will adapt to that in the current circumstances.
- Concerns over being invisible as you transition back (particularly if working from home).
- Pressure to perform as you re-establish yourself, particularly if you are now also juggling children at home (due to the impact of COVID-19 on schools and childcare).

### WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP:

In addition to the General Strategies listed on page 3, we recommend the following:

#### Be informed

- Understand your legal rights relating to Returning from Leave. Refer to **Resource: Legal Obligations of your Employer in the COVID-19 Pandemic**, page 9–10.

#### Be connected

- Look for opportunities to create more visibility for yourself across the organisation. Contact your stakeholders to remind them you're back, ask your manager to formally announce your return, etc
- Set up time to talk with your manager:
  - > Ask for specific (realistic) deliverables and agree what transition success looks like in the current circumstances.
  - > If applicable, how you will manage the juggle of working from home with a baby/children. Refer to **Resource: Transition to Home: What do I need to know about working from home with kids, partners and parents through COVID-19**: <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/covid-19/>
- Ask HR or your manager to help you connect with a parent mentor/buddy, and/or join the Working Parent Network in your organisation (if available). Refer to **Resource: How to Set up a Working Parent Network**: <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>

#### Be compassionate (to self and others)

- Returning from leave at any time is a big transition, let alone during COVID-19. Be extra kind to yourself (and your partner, if you have one) as you navigate these multiple transitions. Refer to **Resource: Strategies for Managing your Perinatal Mental Health**, page 8.



It's important to create communication opportunities for when you come back. Discuss what the non-negotiables are in terms of the business needs and how this fits into your daily juggle (especially in light of COVID-19 with many of our kids at home).

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Supporting the pre-parental and ongoing seasons of working parenthood are also important to consider through this unprecedented transition.

## Other Considerations

Whilst not a focus of this resource sheet, the pre-parental and ongoing seasons of working parenthood are also important to consider through this unprecedented transition including the potential impacts upon:

### FERTILITY TREATMENT

- IVF clinics may close as resources are diverted to attend to COVID-19.
- Delays to treatment may result in some hopeful parents losing the opportunity to conceive at all.
- For more information refer to **Resource: Supporting the Hidden Journeys to Parenthood**: <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>

### ADOPTION AND SURROGACY PROCESSES

- Fertility treatment changes may impact individuals going through surrogacy.
- Travel restrictions may delay or prevent successful adoptions.
- For more information refer to **Resource: Supporting the Hidden Journeys to Parenthood**: <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>

### PARENTS OF OLDER CHILDREN

- You may now find yourself working from home while also caring for children. For school-aged kids, there may be education demands too (home schooling), and the need to emotionally support them through this period of uncertainty.
- For more information refer to resources:
  - > **Transition to Home: What do I need to know about working from home with kids and partners through COVID-19?** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/covid-19/>
  - > **Supporting the Ongoing Seasons of Working Parenthood:** <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/resource-sheets/>

## Resource: Strategies for Managing your Perinatal Mental Health

### **Manage the volume of information you take in—aim to stay informed, but not overwhelmed.**

Be aware of how much news you are reading or watching each day, and this includes social media!

Try to limit this to a once-daily, brief check-in—and have days where you don't watch or read any news at all. Always ensure information you access is from a reputable source as misinformation can heighten distress and anxiety.

### **Stay active**

Nature is a great grounding tool and getting some fresh air can be energising. If you're staying inside, take a look at the vast array of yoga, pilates, or other exercise videos available online.

**Take the time each day to do something that relaxes you:** This may be stretching, mindfulness practice, cooking or reading a good book. Turning off your phone can help you focus on the present moment.

**Take the time each day to do something with your family that is enjoyable:** This may be painting and crafts together, or watching a funny movie.

**Be aware of your level of anxiety and worries:** If you feel it is becoming overwhelming, talk to a friend or family member about how you're feeling, seek help (<https://www.cope.org.au/getting-help/self-help/support-mental-health-conditions/>) from a healthcare professional or call a helpline (<https://www.cope.org.au/getting-help/self-help/types-treatment/>).

**Check in with your breathing:** Breathing is so simple, so effective, and so under-rated! A calm, slow breath regulates the brain and the body, while anxiety does the opposite. Be conscious of your breath and play around with some different techniques to find one that works for you.

**Stay connected with friends and family:** Especially if you are spending more time indoors, or are required to self-isolate, make sure you stay connected with friends through calls, texts and the internet. While you may not be able to have elderly friends and family visit you in person, set up video calls and connect often.

### **Create an indoors list**

Write down all the things you wished you had time for but always found life too busy—like the photo album you've been meaning to create, or spring cleaning the pantry.

On the other hand, if the last thing you feel like doing is being productive—that's OK too.

**Remember this too shall pass:** Although this is a stressful and worrying time, things will eventually settle down and life will return to normal.

Source: COPE (Centre of Perinatal Excellence) [www.cope.org.au](http://www.cope.org.au)

## Resource: Your Employer's Legal obligations in the COVID-19 pandemic

Advice current as at 1 April 2020



HR Legal

Employers have a legal obligation to provide a safe and healthy work environment for all employees, so far as is reasonably practicable, but a number of other considerations now arise specific to COVID-19, particularly for expectant/new parent employees.

### LEAVE ENTITLEMENTS

#### Personal leave

A pregnant employee may take personal/sick leave entitlements if unwell. Pregnancy is not considered an illness or injury, however if a woman experiences a pregnancy-related illness or injury, sick leave can be taken.

#### Special maternity leave

A pregnant employee who is eligible for unpaid Parental Leave may also take unpaid special maternity leave where she has a pregnancy-related illness.

#### Parental Leave

The National Employment Standards provide that employees who have completed at least 12 months of continuous service with their employer are entitled to up to 12 months' unpaid Parental Leave. This includes casual employees who have been employed on a regular and systematic basis over at least 12 months.

This unpaid leave must be taken in one single, continuous period. Employees can request one extension to this leave for an additional 12 months and employers can only refuse this request on reasonable business grounds.

During the unpaid Parental Leave period, employees are able to utilise any paid leave, such as annual leave or long service leave.

Parental Leave can commence at any stage in the six weeks prior to the date of birth, however this can be brought forward by agreement. Pregnant employees may wish to consider requesting an earlier commencement to Parental Leave given the current risks of contracting COVID-19.

### TRANSFER TO SAFE JOB WHILST PREGNANT

If it is unsafe for a pregnant employee to continue working in their usual position, the employee is entitled to be transferred to a 'safe job'. Given the rapid rate of infection, it may be reasonable to transfer women in an alternative role where they have a high risk of catching the virus, i.e. medical health worker.

If there is no appropriate safe job available, the employee is entitled to take paid 'no safe job leave' for the risk period, and be paid at her base rate of pay for ordinary hours worked during the risk period.

An employer may require medical certification or other evidence in support of an employee's request to be transferred to a safe job.

### CHANGE OF WORK CONDITIONS

The issues surrounding COVID-19 has created unforeseen challenges for the community, including for many businesses. This has led to many businesses having to implement changes such as stand downs, reductions in hours and possibly redundancies.

## Resource: Your Employer's Legal obligations in the COVID-19 pandemic

Advice current as at 1 April 2020



### Stand downs

Employers are standing down their employees where there is a stoppage of work that is beyond the control of the employer, and the employees cannot be usefully engaged. This is commonly occurring where businesses are temporarily ceasing operations due to a government direction, e.g. closure of a business, inability to adhere to social distancing requirements, etc. Employees are stood down without pay.

Where an employee is stood down due to COVID-19 they will not be penalised in applying for the government paid Parental Leave as long as they document:

- How many hours they worked in the 13 months before the birth.
- How many hours they would have worked but for the COVID stand down.

This information will need to be provided to Centrelink.

A stand down will not necessarily impact employees if they are on unpaid Parental Leave. However, if they are stood down upon their return from Parental Leave, they will not be paid.

### Reductions in hours

COVID-19 is unusual in that it is likely that most Australian businesses (and most teams within businesses) will be impacted and many employees will be subject to changes in their working conditions, most likely a reduction in hours.

Where an employer decides to make significant changes to an employee's job, e.g. to status, pay or location, while they're on unpaid Parental Leave, they are obliged to:

- Discuss these changes with the employee; and
- Give them an opportunity to talk about these changes.

This will be particularly important for employees who are due to return to work after Parental Leave in the near future.

Additionally, many awards and enterprise agreements have a consultation process for when there are major changes to the workplace, such as redundancies.

### RETURN TO WORK AFTER PARENTAL LEAVE – WHAT IF THERE IS NO WORK TO BE PERFORMED?

Where an employee's job does not exist anymore or it has changed after they return from Parental Leave, then they should be offered a suitable available job that:

- The employee is qualified and suited to work in.
- Is nearest to their old job in pay and status.

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 and business closures, an employer may no longer require the employee's role to be performed anymore. This will usually result in redundancy unless stand down applies.

In the event of redundancy, the employee will be entitled to a redundancy payment and notice in line with their employment contract or the National Employment Standards. The redundancy payment will be based on the employee's base pay for ordinary hours of work for their pre-parental leave role.

### APPLYING FOR GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Services Australia has announced that it will temporarily expand its eligibility for JobSeeker Payment for job seekers so that permanent employees will now be able to access JobSeeker if they have lost their job or have been stood down.

However, these employees cannot access employer entitlements, such as annual leave or sick leave, or income protection insurance at the same time as getting JobSeeker Payment.

Additionally, on 30 March 2020, the Australian government announced the 'Job Keeper' scheme to encourage businesses impacted by COVID-19 to retain staff. The subsidy will be paid to businesses at a flat rate of \$1,500 per fortnight for each eligible employee. This will also apply where workers have been stood down without pay.

Services Australia will pay a temporary fortnightly \$550 Coronavirus Supplement from 27 April 2020 where employees are getting an eligible payment.

A one-off Crisis Payment is available if employees are in severe financial hardship and either:

- Need to self-isolate.
- Are caring for someone self-isolating.

The Jobseeker and Youth Allowance payments are tapered, meaning if employees are earning nothing for the fortnight they will receive the full welfare payment.

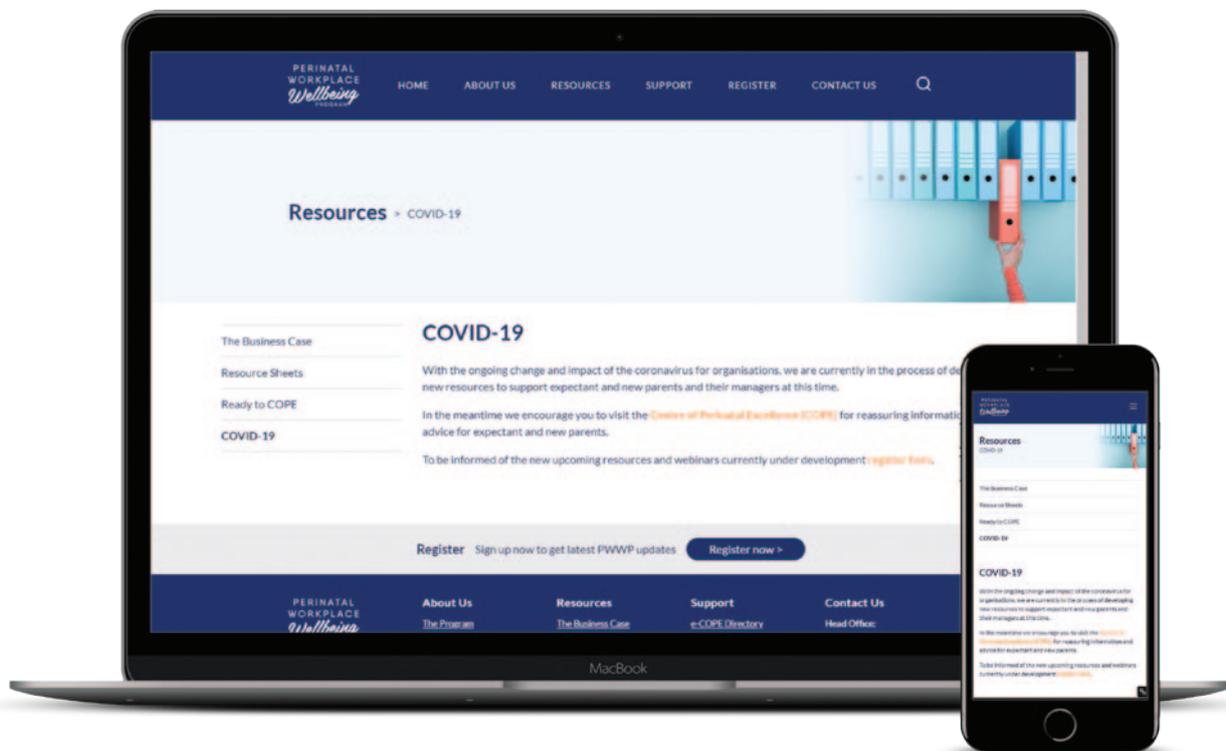
Where employees are on a reduced wage as a result of COVID-19 (but remain below the income threshold) they will receive a portion of the payment.

## Resource: Useful Resources Relating to the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the situation with COVID-19 is rapidly changing, we have created a dedicated page of resources to support you during this time.

This page is being regularly updated.

Please visit <https://pwwp.org.au/resource/covid-19/> for further information.





## For more information about the PWWP

**W** [www.pwwp.org.au](http://www.pwwp.org.au)  
**E** [info@pwwp.org.au](mailto:info@pwwp.org.au)

