Guidance for Long-Distance Commuting (FIFO/DIDO) Workers

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Contents

About this guide 4
What are FIFO and DIDO? 4
What to expect as a FIFO or DIDO worker 5
What are the benefits of the FIFO lifestyle? 5
The challenges
   A harsh work environment 6
   Your physical health 6
   Your mental health 6
   Relationship stresses 6
   Your partner may be having a hard time too 7
   Juggling demands on your time at home 7
   Roles and responsibilities 7
   Do FIFO/DIDO contractors face different stresses from direct employees? 7
   Do managers face different stresses from regular workers? 7
How do you know if FIFO/DIDO is right for you? 8
How can you prepare yourself? 8
   Know where you are going and what conditions will be like 8
Good practice company policies and standards 9
   Talk it through with your partner 9
   Managing impacts on kids 9
   If you live alone 9
Coping strategies when on site 10
   Manage fatigue 10
   Manage feelings of loneliness 10
   Connect with the local community 10
   Stay in touch with friends and loved ones 10
When you come home 11
   Take care of your relationship 11
Useful resources 12
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In addition to interviews with industry professionals, this guide draws on a number of key resources, particularly:

- The 2013 Parliamentary Inquiry into FIFO Workforce Practices in Regional Australia
- The guide by Mining Family Matters, *The Survival Guide for Mining Families: Practical Ways to Keep Your Relationship Health and Your Family Happy*
About this guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide useful information to potential employees considering applying for positions involving long-distance commuting work, including fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) work. Long-distance commuting work has significant advantages for both companies and employees, but may also present challenges for some employees in adapting to the lifestyle and managing personal relationships.

This guide is intended to provide sufficient information for employees to make informed choices when considering long distance commuting work.

The guide:

- discusses what we mean by the terms, ‘FIFO’ and ‘DIDO’
- points out the main benefits and challenges of the FIFO/DIDO lifestyle
- suggests some coping strategies for some of the commonly encountered challenges faced by FIFO/DIDO workers and their families
- provides a checklist of questions to help potential employees decide whether or not the FIFO/DIDO lifestyle is right for them and their families
- lists some useful websites for organisations that provide support to FIFO/DIDO workers and their families
- provides handy in-text references for those wanting to know more about the FIFO/DIDO lifestyle, its impacts and challenges.

What are FIFO and DIDO?

Fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in drive-out (DIDO) are types of long-distance commuting work, in which employees fly or drive on a regular basis to their place of work. FIFO and DIDO practices are common across Australia, but have a high public profile in the minerals and energy sectors owing to the geographical remoteness of operations and the cyclical nature of resource development and expansion, which means that workforce numbers can be highly variable.

The long distances involved in getting to remote locations mean that workers cannot return home at the end of a shift and so they are rostered to stay at work for a set number of days before flying or driving home for a number of days.

During the time at work, they will live on or near site, often in purpose-built villages with quality accommodation, catered meals, cleaning services and recreational facilities provided. In some cases, companies will house FIFO and DIDO workers in rental properties in residential towns, hotels, and motels.
What to expect as a FIFO or DIDO worker

As a FIFO or DIDO worker you can expect to work long shifts on site. Shifts of 12 hours or longer are not uncommon, subject to fatigue and risk management protocols. Rosters vary based on factors including the local amenity of the surrounding region. A typical roster (known in the industry as a ‘swing’) is 14 days on, seven days off (’14/7’), although companies operating in remote locations are also using shorter rosters (eg ‘7/7’) in an effort to improve employee satisfaction, performance and retention.

Starting FIFO and DIDO work usually involves travelling some distance to a project site. In the case of FIFO operations in remote areas, workers may fly on company-funded charter flights, while in other cases workers will travel on scheduled flights before taking a bus or car to the mine village or nearby residential town. DIDO workers should ensure that they begin their journeys refreshed and allow adequate time for breaks (at least once every two hours). In some locations such as Queensland’s Bowen Basin, chartered bus services (BIBO) have been added to commuting options in the interests of safety. You can expect living conditions at workers camps to be of a high standard. The quality of accommodation and site facilities at Australian operations has improved significantly in recent years and many villages offer private rooms with en-suite and air-conditioning, as well as extensive recreational facilities including sports fields, tennis courts, gyms and swimming pools. Meals are served buffet style in a mess and are usually of a high standard, with healthy options available. Medical facilities are also commonplace at Australian minerals and energy development sites, with many providing on-site medical centres and an on-call doctor.

It is important to bear in mind that the quality of accommodation and facilities does vary depending on the company and project site and so potential FIFO/DIDO workers should consider whether living conditions are to their liking before making a commitment to employment. Minerals and energy companies (and major contractors) are very much aware of the importance of good telecommunications for enabling their employees to stay in contact with family and friends at home. This communication is an essential component in helping FIFO and DIDO workers deal with the challenges that result from separation from friends and family for a period of time. As a result, most sites have public telephones, mobile phone reception, free internet, and Wi-Fi.

What are the benefits of the FIFO lifestyle?

• FIFO and DIDO work offers numerous benefits for workers and their families.

• A major attraction is that the FIFO lifestyle allows workers to live anywhere they want while pursuing a career in the sector.

• Skills shortages, particularly in regions where resource developments are occurring, mean that companies are prepared to fly skilled workers in and out of project sites from anywhere in the country. From the worker’s perspective, this means there is greater freedom to choose employers and job conditions, which may improve job satisfaction by providing better opportunities for professional development and career advancement.

• The typical FIFO roster allows workers to spend extended periods of time with friends and family during time off (rest and relaxation, ‘R&R’) – considerably more than with the average nine-to-five job. This allows parents to spend quality time with their children, attending sporting events and visiting the school during their time off. This extended time off also gives workers more time to pursue their interests and life goals, such as hobbies, travel, sport and further education.

• Workers can continue to live in their home towns and communities where they have a support network of friends and family. This is particularly important for couples with children but it applies to all workers.

• By being able to live in a community of their choice, workers can access quality facilities and services, such as well-equipped medical services, schools and childcare.

• Financial benefits are often a reason for undertaking FIFO work. Minerals and energy companies generally pay good salaries, and often provide living allowances and other benefits.

• Changing jobs is much easier because workers are not restricted to employment opportunities in their local community. This has the major advantage of allowing people to travel wherever there are job opportunities, without having to uproot their families and leave friends behind. It also means workers are less vulnerable to the cyclical employment demands of individual projects.

• FIFO and DIDO allow people to work in remote locations while allowing their partners’ career to continue at home.

• By being able to live in a community of their choice, FIFO/DIDO enables people to continue to have an active social life.
The challenges

Although FIFO and DIDO work offers employees and their families many benefits, it can also bring challenges. Before deciding on whether or not to take on FIFO work it is important that you fully understand potential challenges of the lifestyle and appreciate what they will mean for you and your family. This will also help you think about whether you can find ways to manage the stresses associated with the lifestyle.

A harsh work environment

Most people find the remote work environment and periods of separation from friends and family the most challenging aspects of the FIFO lifestyle. If you are arriving on site for the first time you may feel somewhat daunted by the harshness of the environment. The sheer scale of operations can be intimidating, too. You will likely be working with, or around, very large equipment and sizeable work crews. This is the reason why there will be so much emphasis placed on health and safety – your own, and the members of your team.

You will have to work hard, getting used to long shifts and getting to know the members of your team. You may have to adjust to shift work and new sleep patterns. Being on a mine site for the first time involves a huge learning process and you will adjust to the lifestyle much more effectively if you look after your health.

Your physical health

If you are staying in an accommodation village, you will have access to as much food as you can eat in the mess. Despite there being a variety of healthy foods available, fattening foods are always there to tempt you, as you can eat in the mess. Some sites will even have special arrangements that enable partners and other family members to visit you on site. If you have the opportunity to bring your family for a visit, make the most of it. It’s a great way for them to get to know what you’re doing when you aren’t at home.

It’s also important to know you’ve got a plan for the future and how you would manage child’s school, kindergarten or child care centre.

The good news is that most sites make the effort to celebrate occasions like Christmas and there will usually be a special meal at the mess. Some sites will even have special arrangements that enable partners and other family members to visit you on site. You have the opportunity to bring your family for a visit, make the most of it. It’s a great way for them to get to know what you’re doing when you aren’t at home.

It’s also important to know you’ve got a plan and support network for dealing with crises, such as an illness or accident at home, if they arise. It won’t end the crisis but will give you a greater sense of control if you and your partner have pre-planned for emergencies.

Substance abuse

There is a common view that the FIFO lifestyle can contribute to excessive consumption of alcohol and substance abuse. While this is talked about a lot, there is very little detailed research to confirm that the incidence of substance abuse is any higher among FIFO workers than in the general population. However, some people are definitely tempted to unwind after a stressful day at work by having a few drinks. Drinking too much is bad for your health - too much alcohol can lead to de-hydration and poor sleep, leaving you feeling physically and emotionally fragile. This isn’t a great way to front up to work the next day.

Some people manage fine on site but use drugs or alcohol as a way to relax when they get home. It’s understandable that you will want to let off some steam when you get home and party with friends. However, excessive and irresponsible alcohol consumption is likely to make you feel more, rather than less depressed, if you are prone to these feelings, and contribute to relationship stress.

Depression

If not managed properly, stressful situations like family crises or work pressures can trigger feelings of loneliness and depression. People under stress are more likely to abuse alcohol and take drugs to help themselves through the tough patches. However, alcohol, in particular, is a well-known depressant. This means that you can be caught in a vicious cycle of feeling down, drinking to relieve the stress, but end up feeling more depressed, the more you drink. If you are experiencing symptoms of depression, seek assistance.

Relationship stresses

While common in many relationships and not unique to the FIFO/DIDO lifestyle, being away from home for extended periods can bring relationship stresses.
Your partner may be having a hard time too

While you are experiencing your own challenges on site, your partner at home will also find separation challenging, particularly if they have to take care of children on their own. They may also feel tired and lonely, just like you. And it can be tough dealing with a child who is acting up while you are away. Other concerns commonly raised by partners relate to dealing with day-to-day worries, such as car troubles, or needing to find childcare in a hurry.

Juggling demands on your time at home

One of the major sources of relationship stress between FIFO workers and their partners concerns how time is spent at home. Your partner may feel excited because you are finally home so that you can spend lots of time together and be available for all those social activities you can’t attend while you’re away. But, after a long hard swing you may just want to stay home, relax and recharge your batteries. This can be misunderstood by your partner, who may think you are being selfish and uncaring. This can soon lead to arguments, if you don’t talk through your individual needs and how to meet them. Other friends and family will want to spend time with you too, so it’s important to be mindful of these competing demands on your time and get the right balance between rest and socialising.

Roles and responsibilities

Another common problem relates to the difficulties of changing roles in the household, when one of you will be coming and going on a regular basis. This might include misunderstandings about who has responsibility for taking the kids to football practice, mowing the lawn, or even something as simple as putting the garbage out. Your partner may automatically assume that you will take over these tasks as soon as you return home, to ease the workload. However, you may feel that this is your chance to finally relax after a long period away. Agreeing the division of labour and being considerate of each other’s needs is essential if domestic arguments are to be avoided. The problem is summarised in this quote from a human resources professional for an Australian resources company who had previously worked as a FIFO worker:

‘You have the ‘at home mode’ where people are transitioning back. It is a challenge. Employees work on site for 14 long, challenging shifts. And when they come back home they don’t want to do anything - they just want to sleep. They disengage. Then you have the pressure from the husband or wife: you’ve got to drop your kids off at school, take them to football, cricket training, can you please clean the pool, mow the lawn. Come on mate, I just want some me time. So you’ve got the transitioning phase. It is certainly a strain on the relationship.’

Do FIFO/DIDO contractors face different stresses from direct employees?

As a general rule, if you are working for a contractor to a mine or other resource development project, you will face the same challenges and stresses as any other FIFO worker. However, much will depend on the arrangements your direct employer has in place, including any arrangements with the company owning the site. You will need to check out the roster pattern and find out about the accommodation arrangements. It’s also worth checking what support systems your employer will offer you once you’re on site.

Do managers face different stresses from regular workers?

Although FIFO employees all face the common challenges of the lifestyle, there are some important differences, depending on your level and role on site. As a general rule, regular employees work four days on, four days off. However, whereas regular employees can look forward to uninterrupted time off between swings, this often isn’t the case for professional workers and managers. If there are major decisions to be made, or a sudden crisis emerges, professionals may find that they are being contacted for advice and to make decisions. This can be challenging, especially if you have a partner who may resent the fact that you are still working, even on break.

Source: Lifeline
How do you know if FIFO/DIDO is right for you?

People from all walks and stages of life are employed as FIFO workers in the resources sector, from young singles to new parents and empty nesters. Many factors influence a person’s ability to adapt to the lifestyle. It has to suit your temperament, your personal life and your interests. When deciding if this is the right choice for you, it may be helpful for you to answer the questions in the box opposite. They won’t make the decision for you, but will help you to weigh up the pros and cons of the lifestyle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weighing up the benefits and challenges of FIFO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• financially rewarding</td>
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<td>• freedom to choose where you live</td>
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<tr>
<td>• extended periods of time off to spend with friends and family and to pursue interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>• maintain access to friends and family</td>
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<tr>
<td>• access to quality facilities and services, eg schools, hospitals</td>
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<tr>
<td>• greater freedom to change jobs without uprooting family</td>
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<tr>
<td>• greater job satisfaction and career progression</td>
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<td>• partners more able to pursue their own careers.</td>
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How can you prepare yourself?

Know where you are going and what conditions will be like.

Do a bit of research on the internet about the location where you will be working, including the climate, nearby communities, and nearby natural attractions you may want to visit on your RDOs. You may be away at work but this is also an opportunity for you to visit and explore new and interesting places that many people never get a chance to visit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is FIFO right for you?</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Do you want a challenging career in the mining industry?</td>
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<td>2. Do you understand the climatic conditions you will be working in?</td>
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<td>3. Are you confident you can cope in the climate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Have you done FIFO/DIDO work before?</td>
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<td>5. Was your previous experience of FIFO successful?</td>
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<td>6. Can you cope with living for extended periods away from your friends and family?</td>
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<td>7. Are you aware that the time you are away from home might not only include your roster, but also the time it takes you to travel to and from site? This time will be in addition to your roster and may not be paid.</td>
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<td>8. Have you ever experienced significant loneliness away from home, such as when on holiday or away on a work trip?</td>
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<td>9. Have you ever experienced periods of depression?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Do you think that being away from friends and family might trigger episodes of feeling down or depressed?</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Do you have a good support network at home that can help your partner out if needed? For example, someone to pick up the kids from school if they can’t make it, or who can give them a break from taking care of the kids all day, every day?</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Are you confident you can manage if you get a call to say there is a domestic emergency? For example, when one of the kids gets sick.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Are you happy with the roster length offered by the company?</td>
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<td>14. Do you have commitments or interests that you would not be able to pursue if you worked a FIFO/DIDO role, such as weekly team sports? How would you feel about missing one out of every two games?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Would you still be able to maintain your sporting commitments if you had to miss one out of every two games?</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. If you have children, how important is it to you that you attend all of their events and special activities, such as parent teacher interviews, awards ceremonies, sporting events and birthdays? Remember, you will be able to do more of this in your time off, however, less during your shift time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Ask yourself, ‘does the company I am thinking of working for offer good practice arrangements for FIFO/DIDO workers’ (see box)?</td>
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</table>
Talk it through with your partner

It is one thing for you to be able to cope with the challenges of the FIFO lifestyle, and another thing for your partner to be able to manage. Speak to your partner and make sure your both agree on you becoming a FIFO worker. Go over the pros and cons of the lifestyle and ask each other if you really understand what it will entail. The money and the time off can be great, but how will you deal with the challenges? Remember that communication is the most important factor in making the FIFO lifestyle work.

Managing impacts on kids

If you have children, it is natural that they will miss you when you are away. Younger kids, in particular, can get anxious and sad as a result of separation so it is important that you and your partner find ways of reassuring them. If your child is displaying signs of anxiety, such as excessive crying and being clingy, having difficulty sleeping etc allow them to talk about what they are feeling and give them extra affection. And remember that the telephone, email, Skype calls and Facebook are a great way of keeping in touch with the kids when you’re away. It lets them know you’re thinking about them when you call - and Facebook is a great way of keeping up with their day-to-day activities.

There are numerous techniques parents can use to comfort children who are missing Dad or Mum. A good resource for FIFO/DIDO families that covers some of these techniques is the Mining Family Matters publication, ‘Survival Guide for Mining Families’. Contact details for this helpful organisation are listed in the resources section of this guide.

If you live alone

Maintaining contact with family and friends can be even more important if you live alone. For some, coming home to an empty house can be depressing experience, after a work environment with lots of people and activity. For others, the peace and quiet between swings is something to look forward to. Either way, it’s important to stay connected with friends and family – in your own time and in a way that works for you.

In the interests of your own health and safety, it’s good to have someone to check on the mail in your absence or leave a few basic food items in the fridge for your return. And you will appreciate having someone looking out for you.

Getting together with friends and family may not always be easy, especially if they have regular ‘nine to five’ jobs. You may find it’s often up to you to initiate contact and plan the get-togethers. But it’s definitely worth the effort of staying in touch.

Does the employer offer?

- flexible rosters
- quality accommodation facilities with en-suite, air-conditioning, television and internet access. Accommodation should be well insulated for sound and temperature
- sporting and recreation facilities, e.g. pool, gym, tennis/basketball courts, as well as organised team sports
- mobile phone reception and free Wi-Fi
- 24 hour on-site medical facilities, with Doctor on call
- initiatives to develop closer interaction between employees and inhabitants of nearby communities, such as sponsored sporting events
- the opportunity for site visits for partners and family so they can see where you work and gain a better understanding of your work life
- quality fresh food in the mess with lots of variation and healthy options available.

Good practice company policies and standards

Many companies are very proactive in trying to relieve the challenges and stresses of the FIFO lifestyle. These companies realise that good policies and conditions help them attract and retain employees. Before committing to working for a company, carefully consider what their policies and conditions for FIFO workers are, and see if these are the best fit for you. The following arrangements are considered good practice in the Australian resources sector.


Coping strategies when on site

Manage fatigue

Fatigue can be an issue for FIFO workers and can impact on your emotional wellbeing and performance at work. Fatigue is not only caused by the nature of the work but also by poor sleep patterns. There are a few simple things you can do to manage fatigue while on site.

First, keep alcohol, coffee and energy drink consumption to a minimum. Second, get some exercise. A swim or a session at the gym before dinner can mark the transition between work and relaxation time. Finally, try not to watch TV until you fall asleep – instead, try reading. Mastering relaxation techniques or meditation can work for some people, too.

Manage feelings of loneliness

Be proactive about tackling loneliness:

- Get involved in social events and sports activities. This will help you to make new friends and form bonds with other workers on site. Most sites offer a range of social and sporting activities.
- Be productive – try to use your free time on site on worthwhile activities. Take some good books, do some further study, plan a project around the house, or check out holiday destinations. Doing these things is much easier if you have a laptop, iPad/tablet or Kindle with you.
- Be mindful of feeling lonely – this might sound counter-intuitive, but simply noticing you are experiencing negative feelings like loneliness can help you deal with them.

Connect with the local community

One of the great benefits of FIFO work is that it gives people a chance to work on resource projects in diverse and unique parts of Australia. There might be nearby towns with a real sense of community and unique history. Or they might be near spectacular natural attractions and interesting places to visit or activities to experience.

Many companies are encouraging greater interaction with local communities, for example by supporting local community events and opening up camp sporting facilities to the broader community. If opportunities exist to get to know the locals, try to get involved – it may be a good way to make a rewarding connection with the area and its people.

Stay in touch with friends and loved ones

Communication is the key to making the FIFO lifestyle work. Whether you are single or partnered, it is important to stay in regular touch with friends and family and to talk through any issues you are dealing with. For those with partners, establish communication guidelines that both of you agree to, for example speaking on the phone or skyping on a regular basis at a set time. However, if you set regular times to call make sure that this doesn’t become a burden. If there’s nothing new to talk about, you might create unnecessary pressure to talk for the sake of talking. If this happens, consider just sending a text message to stay connected and to show the other person you are thinking about them.

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i IBID
ii Mining Family Matters, The Survival Guide for Mining Families, Practical Ways to Keep Your Relationship Health and Your Family Happy pp12-13
iv Mining Family Matters, The Survival Guide for Mining Families, Practical Ways to Keep Your Relationship Health and Your Family Happy pp12-13
When you come home

Finally, make sure your family understands you need to get some rest. It’s good to be productive at home and to catch up with friends but if you spend your entire break on the go, you will return to work exhausted and feeling flat.

Take care of your relationship

Trying to juggle competing demands on your time when you come home can be difficult. However, there are a number of things you and your partner can do to reduce the likelihood that this will become a source of conflict in your relationship:

- come to an agreement with your partner on the number of nights that you will spend together or apart
- don’t organise a large number of social activities for when you first come back home
- if there are stresses over demands on your time, speak openly about these being a symptom of the FIFO lifestyle and not of the quality of your relationship

One good idea is for the partner at home to organise a welcome home celebration. This can be as simple as cooking a favourite meal or setting aside uninterrupted time to be together. If you have kids, this routine will make them feel happy and reassure them that their parents value each other.

Some couples find it works best to let the FIFO partner sleep late on the first day back and give them a bit of space for the first few days. In return, the partner at home should have some time for themselves, such as getting a break from the kids. If you are one working away, do something special for your partner when you are home. Take the initiative and organise a date night.

Communication tips

- Phone calls, text messages, videos and Skype calls remind your loved ones you are present in their lives, even if you’re not physically there.
- Facebook is a great way of keeping up with friends and of letting them know when your will be back in town.
- Electronic communication is great – just don’t forget your phone charger when you head off for the next swing!
- Arrange a set time to communicate with your partner. Try to arrange a time when you can talk privately about the personal things that are important to you both.
- Sharing music, photos and jokes are a great way of connecting with kids.
- Be creative and use Skype to talk about those tricky homework problems.
- Kids love receiving letters, too. Don’t forget ‘snail mail’ as a means of communicating with them.

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Mining Family Matters, The Survival Guide for Mining Families. Practical Ways to Keep Your Relationship Health and Your Family Happy
For workers

Employee assistance programs

Virtually all Australian companies with FIFO and DIDO employees provide some kind of support for workers, such as employee assistance programs. Most employee assistance programs are free services that enable employees and (usually) their immediate families to access confidential counselling from an external service provider.

Other employees

Other employees, including managers and superintendents can help you adapt. These people will have a relationship with you and the ability to help you work through problems before things escalate.

R U OK? Foundation

A suicide prevention group, the R U OK? Foundation has launched a campaign, R U OK? Afield, aimed specifically at FIFO workers. The aims of the campaign are to prompt employers and employees to have regular and meaningful conversations and to inspire behavioural change so that all people in the workplace ask ‘are you ok?’ of anyone struggling with life.

Family support

Mining Family Matters


Mining Family Matters provides practical, professional information, services and support to families in the mining and resources sector.

FIFO Families


FIFO Families runs an online social and support network for FIFO parents and partners.

Parentline: 1300 301 300 (QLD & NT only)

8am and 10pm (AEST), 7 days a week

FIFO connections

http://www.meetup.com/FIFOconnections/

A meetup group operating in the Brisbane region that offers families and partners of FIFO workers the opportunity to connect and share experiences regarding the FIFO lifestyle. The group offers friendship and support, and the chance to meet others in a similar situation.

Mental health and crisis support

Lifeline Hotline: 13 11 14

Telephone crisis support, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Lifeline provides all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to online, phone and face-to-face crisis support and suicide prevention services

MensLine Australia: 1300 789 978

Telephone crisis support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

MensLine Australia is a professional telephone and online support, information and referral service, helping men to deal with relationship problems in a practical and effective way.

Beyondblue helpline: 1300 224 636

Crisis support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

http://www.beyondblue.org.au/

Beyondblue works to increase awareness and understanding of depression and anxiety in Australia and to reduce the associated stigma. As part of its mission it offers information and support for those dealing with depression and anxiety

Good luck with your decision.
If you choose to commute, FIFO can be a rewarding lifestyle.