

Mental Health: Returning to Work



“I am the same person I was before you found out I have a mental disorder.”

Anonymous, Healthyplace.com

“Nobody realises that some people expend tremendous energy merely trying to be normal.”

Albert Camus

“Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes... including you.”

Anne Lamott

According to the mental health charity Mind, one in four UK citizens will experience mental health problems each year and the NHS suggests that nearly 50% of long term work absences are due to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and bi-polar disorder. Some people who experience emotional or psychological difficulties may be able to continue functioning at work, and indeed may find work has a positive impact in their lives or provides some respite from worries and negative feelings. Others may find that being at work adds additional stressors and reach the point where it feels necessary to take a break. Mental illness is different for everybody and it is important to recognise when elements of our life, such as work, simply demand too much of us and we need to allow space to re-establish some equilibrium. Just as it is vital that we look after our physical health we also need to take our mental health seriously.

Time off work might be a few days, a matter of weeks, months or sometimes years depending on what your needs are. Whilst the decision to take time off can be a necessary step for our wellbeing, once we feel well enough to return it is natural that we may do so with some trepidation. We wonder how we will cope, what to tell our employers and how to avoid the same pitfalls as before. This helpsheet will take you through some of the steps you can take to prepare for your return and look at ways to remain robust once you are back. If there is anything you would like to discuss further you can speak with one of our trained therapists on the Adviceline.

What is our mental health?

Mental health is a term used to describe our psychological wellbeing. We say we have good mental health when we are able to remain resilient in the face of everyday challenges and life events. This includes our capacity to problem solve, seek support when needed and acknowledge our emotional responses whether they are joyous, sad, angry or fearful. It is about recognising when we feel out of balance and taking steps to re-centre, not necessarily to make things perfect because things rarely are, but being good enough or well enough.

When we feel persistently overwhelmed, are unable to cope or function adequately in daily life it may be that we have a mental health problem. Mental health problems include a range of psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety, panic disorder, OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), eating disorders and phobias. These occur in varying degrees; in some instances symptoms will be severe and in others mild. Sometimes we experience a combination of issues – depression with anxiety, or eating disorders and low moods. We are all different.

Mental health difficulties can be triggered by life events such as bereavement, relationship problems, bullying, work pressure, job loss or they may stem from longer term issues

that derive from events in our childhood. And sometimes we just feel out of sorts without having much understanding of why. When we experience mental health issues they are frequently accompanied by physical symptoms such as disrupted sleep, greater susceptibility to minor illnesses and fatigue.



While you are off

When you are on sick leave it can be helpful to maintain some contact with work; a regular check in with a line manager, member of HR, or a close colleague can help you to stay connected, even if it is just a quick hello to see how you are doing. It can leave you feeling less isolated. If phone calls or face to face meetings seem too much you could keep in touch via email, text or social media.

Use the time away from work to focus on yourself and understand what helps you, reflect on what might have contributed to the difficulties you are facing. This can be done with the support of a professional or you can talk with

trusted friends, family members, read and research your symptoms. Having this insight will help you to become more resilient and will be useful if you experience similar symptoms in the future.

If you can try to go to sleep and wake at similar times to your working day as this will help you to adjust when you eventually return.

Be kind and compassionate with yourself and try to find a good balance of rest, exercise, pleasurable activities and nutritious food.

The Benefits of Returning to Work

Recent research has shown that, although work can be a source of stress, in most cases it is beneficial to health and wellbeing. Work can provide a sense of identity and purpose, a feeling that we are playing an active part in the world, community, friendships and greater financial security. Often re-employment after a period of being out of work leads to an improvement in wellbeing.



Are you fit for work?

You do not have to be 100% better to go back to work, just well enough. Charlotte Walker, award winning mental Health blogger, writes about recovery as an ongoing process and that her own experience was 'there was no point at which I could ever say I was 'recovered'. After all, don't we all recover on an almost constant basis? Recover from a crisis, a panic attack, a wave of anxiety, a few bad days, a few bad months, a bout of insomnia, an unexpected trigger, side effects of medication, a hospitalisation.' When you are considering going back to work the question is whether you feel recovered enough, or resilient enough to manage.

Ideally you will have fewer symptoms, feel stronger within yourself, have developed some healthy ways of coping, gained some personal understanding and are able to engage with life more fully.

If you have been off work for more than 7 consecutive days your GP can assess you for a fit note. As part of this your GP will assess how your condition affects your ability to work and offer advice about returning to work and staying well. It helps to be open with them about any concerns that you have.

If there are factors at work that contributed to your mental health issues it is important to identify what they are and think about how to manage them once you return. For example, excessive long hours, frequent deadlines or difficult relationships may need to be addressed.

Communication with Employer

After you have met with your GP it is advisable that you arrange a meeting with your line manager or occupational health advisor to discuss your return. Under the Equality Act (2010) your employer has a legal duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' to your work; these are changes that are designed to support you to be at work and carry out your everyday duties. Your employer is not obliged to make these changes but must give them due consideration. There are many changes that are easy to make with little cost or impact on the organisation.

Transparency with your employer will make it easier to assess how best to support you. Even if they have a good understanding about mental health issues you are still the best expert on your particular issues. Before you meet with them think about what would really help to make your return as smooth a transition as possible. Be honest with yourself about what the potential struggles or triggers might be. Here are some examples of potential adjustments:

- **Phased return to work.** If you would like to start working again but don't feel ready to work your standard hours you could plan a phased return to work. This is especially helpful for those who have low energy, sleep disturbance, impaired concentration or if you are worried about how you will adjust to being back in the working environment. You could work shorter hours in the initial week or weeks of your return e.g. mornings only and build up gradually to a full working day over an agreed period of time.
- **Lighter duties.** Agree with your line manager that you can begin with lighter duties and take on more challenging responsibilities once you are back into the swing of things

again. This allows you to reacclimatise to the working environment and build up your confidence again.

- **Have a later start.** If you are having difficulty sleeping and find it hard to wake early, or if you find rush hour traffic makes you anxious you may prefer to begin the working day at a later time to allow you to catch up on sleep.
- **Have a buddy or a mentor.** Being able to turn to someone and talk to them about how you are getting along can be a great support.
- **Change your work area.** Do you work best surrounded by colleagues and lots of stimulation or on your own in a quiet location? Discuss whether you can move your desk or work station to another part of the office that is more agreeable for you.
- **Equipment.** Certain equipment may be beneficial. For instance, if you experience SAD (seasonal affective disorder) you could request having a lightbox near your desk or work station in order to reduce symptoms during the darker winter months, or you could ask to sit near a source of natural daylight.
- **Regular breaks.** If you are worried about becoming overwhelmed, panicked, overcome with powerful feelings or it is difficult to concentrate you could ask to take regular breaks throughout the day. Having a 5 or 10 minute break can be a great way to take a breather and re-focus.
- **Regular meetings.** Have regular meetings with your line manager, HR contact or Occupational Health Advisor to review your progress and ensure you feel fully supported.

Remaining Resilient

Once you are back at work it is important to remember to take care of your mental and physical health. Here are some ideas that may help:

- Take care of yourself. The stronger and fitter you are physically the more resources you will have to face the challenges that life brings you. Practice healthy habits. Get enough rest, eat a healthy diet, get regular exercise and make time for things that you enjoy. The more you do for yourself the more resilient you will feel during times of challenge.
- Know your triggers. Are there particular triggers that send you spiralling? An aggressive boss, demanding client, morning traffic, too much caffeine or a looming deadline? Acknowledge that these are difficult and be prepared for them.
- If you tend to panic, catastrophise and imagine the worst ground yourself by telling yourself 'I'm in this difficult situation but now I'm going to start managing it the best I can.'
- Take 3 deep breaths and let your breath out slowly. The long outbreaths stimulate our parasympathetic nervous system which calms us down and helps us to relax.
- Begin regular meditation. This does not have to be a large commitment. There are numerous apps that guide you through short meditations that you can do on a bus or train on the way to work. Buddify or Headspace are just a few you can choose from.



- Take action. When you are faced with a setback or challenge the sooner you start acting the sooner you take control of the situation and the better you will feel.
- Express gratitude. Neuroscientists have discovered that when we mentally try to think of things we are grateful for we boost the neurotransmitters dopamine and serotonin, just as many anti-depressants do. Even if you struggle initially to find things to be grateful for the very act of you searching for things makes a difference. Gratitude has an added benefit in that when we express it to other people it strengthens relations and social interactions. Let people know when you are grateful to them.
- Draw strength from others. Spend time with people who make you feel good and avoid those who criticise you or leave you feeling drained.

Further Resources

Purple Persuasion, blog by Charlotte Walker
purplepersuasion.wordpress.com

Mind
www.mind.co.uk

Rethink
www.rethink.org

Sane
www.sane.org.uk

Mental health online tools:

Moodgym, offers a range of CBT based programs – www.moodgym/anu.edu.au

Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations
www.well-online.co.uk

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline, providing emotional and practical support.

(This helpsheet is intended for informational purposes only and does not represent any form of clinical diagnosis. While every effort has been made to ensure that the content is accurate, relevant and current, CiC accepts no liability for any errors or omissions contained herein. The list of books is provided for interest only and CiC is not responsible for their availability, accuracy, or content.)

