Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Returning to Work after a Mental Health-Related Leave

While taking time off to work through an emotional rough patch may present challenges, returning to work after a mental health-related leave can be downright daunting. Taking the time to work through your expectations, fears and hopes, however, can help you, or loved one, to be as prepared as possible to tackle these fears smoothly and successfully.



Get ahead. For at least your first week back at work, try to plan as much as you can in advance. If you have children's lunches to pack or clothes to lay out, do it the night before. Stock your freezer and pantry with healthy ingredients for simple, fast meals. Being prepared on the home front will ease daily pressures and leave you feeling more on top of the situation during this potentially stressful time.

Manage expectations. Your boss and colleagues may be so happy to have you back that they've constructed a sky-high "to-do" pile. Or perhaps an overly cautious team—one that's afraid to burden you with too much—means you'll be met by an empty inbox, and spend your first days back at work twiddling your thumbs. As each person's capabilities upon returning to work will be different, it's important to talk clearly and openly about how much you feel you can take on and what you can and can't do. Try to *ease* back into your routine as much as possible. Take on work little by little, constantly assessing if your abilities match your workload.

If the situation feels unmanageable, talk to your team, boss or human resources department to work out a plan that suits everyone involved. If you're having trouble coping, you can contact a professional who can provide you with strategies and tools to deal with the initial stress of being back at work.

Keep an ear to the ground. Gossip can damage reputations, friendships and workplace morale. If you feel your situation is being talked about with sarcasm, scorn or the wrong kind of humor, it's time to act. Start by talking privately to those spreading rumors and if possible, go the source of the stories. Simply, calmly and gently state (only) that you are aware that you're being talked about, and that what is being said is untrue or unfair. Don't justify or explain—this just offers more material for the rumor mill and can often escalate the problem. As upsetting as the situation can be, don't let gossip waste your time or energy. Ultimately, your actions speak louder than negative chatter ever will.

Look on the bright side. Positive thinking is contagious. Though it isn't always easy, seeking out and expecting to find good and favorable results can help you get where you want to be. By being proactive, you instinctively and subconsciously communicate positively to others through body language. This can be a big boost to workplace relations and can help ensure a more satisfying return to work. The more positive your approach, the more likely your colleagues are to gravitate towards you and offer their support.

Reach for a touchstone. You've been dealing with a difficult time—and you're steadily getting through it. Are there images of people, snapshots from places, or mementos of significant experiences that you could bring to work? If you have a space you can call your own—be it an office, cubicle or

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locker—keeping meaningful mementos nearby can brighten your work day or help you get through some of those longer afternoons.

Socialize. Though you might feel like keeping to yourself, or that focusing on your job is all you have time for, re-engaging with co-workers is key to full re-integration on the job. To really be happy at work, most people need to feel connected to their coworkers. By accepting invitations from colleagues, looking for opportunities to socialize, or reaching out to others, you will not only improve your chances of making new friends, but will also bolster your prospects for a successful work experience.

Remember that even though you are returning to something that was once familiar, time has passed and the situation has changed. After a few weeks or months, you'll probably feel like you never left. But until then, you and the people you are close to will likely take some time to adjust. By staying positive, going easy on yourself and remaining realistic about your return to work, you'll not only minimize the stress of the transition and maximize productivity, but you may even rediscover what you once loved about your job in the first place.