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

Return to work, friends and routine after mental illness



Those who have had time away from work due to mental or emotional health problems are not alone. Approximately 50 percent of long-term absences from work are attributable to mental health illnesses, and it is important to raise awareness about all aspects of these absences so that those returning to work and those who support them understand how to plan for and facilitate successful return to work and life. During a leave from work for a mental illness, most people experience:

Low self-esteem and shame, and a fear of being judged as “weak”; Feelings of isolation and being misunderstood;

- Feelings of rejection and of being a “bother to others”;
- Uncertainty about what is “normal”;
- Despondency (“life will always be this way”);
- Fear of losing their job.

Contact with the work team during a leave

When an employee is on leave and experiencing these fears and negative emotions, positive contact with members of a work team and/or manager is usually greatly appreciated and can be quite motivating. Even the smallest gestures can have a big impact:

- Acknowledging that the employee is still continuing valued member of the team;
- Extending best wishes;
- Sharing some personal news about team members’ families, vacations, etc.;
- Encouraging the employee to take good care and not to worry about work.

Employees are often afraid to return to work because they fear harassment or that colleagues will think less of them. They may have been present when colleagues made jokes or negative comments about people with a mental illness. Leaders have an obligation to ensure that the employee is returning to a safe environment that is free from harassment and that the employee is treated no differently than they were before they went on leave.

Returning to work

Having a clear understanding of what the return to work will entail before arriving for the first day back from a leave goes a long way towards reducing back-to-work stress. A short phone call with Human Resources or a meeting with the manager to discuss important details about the return and potential impacts on work performance or team can be extremely helpful:

- Expectations and job duties;
- Accommodations needed to get back on the job;
- The optimal pace at which to reintegrate into the workplace;
- Available support;

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- Conditions that might affect work quality or quantity.

If such a meeting is not offered, employees can request that one be arranged.

Many times, a person returning from a mental health leave will be advised to return in a progressive manner, that is, to start with a few shorter shifts and gradually, over time, work back to full-time accountabilities. This has proven to be a very effective way to ensure a successful return-to-work and to significantly reduce the chance of relapse.

On the first day back to work, it is ideal for the employee to meet with their direct manager right away in order to go over any specific expectations again and to get oriented to any changes that may have occurred in the work environment. This will aid in the employee's reintegration into the workplace and will help to ensure a smooth transition.

Returning to family and friends

People may lose touch with some of their friends and extended family when off on a disability leave. They may lack the energy or confidence to interact socially while they are recovering. As with returning to work, taking a 'progressive' approach to reintegrating into the larger social circle is often best. The individual should feel free to:

- Start slowly, one step at a time – restrict frequency and duration of contacts;
- Give themselves time to recover from social encounters – recharge the batteries;
- Lean toward more compassionate friends who are able to express empathy.

Returning to a normal routine

When people who are recovering from mental health challenges are able to return to "normal life", they are often encouraged to regulate their routines. Each person's needs for recovery after a leave are different and there is no correct path that will suit everyone; however, some of the ideas here may be useful:

- Observing the same time to bed and same time to arise every day (even on the weekend!);
- Observing regular meal times, including the most important meal of the day - breakfast;
- Getting regular exercise – tension can accumulate if we are inactive. Get the blood moving with aerobics, walking, jogging, dancing, swimming, yoga, or an outdoor activity such as gardening;
- Slowly easing back into regular pursuits such as membership at the gym, golf or book club;

Additionally, research shows that those who stick with counselling through their return are better able to maintain their balance and relapse 85 percent less frequently than those who discontinue counselling.