

How to Manage Serious Illness in the Workplace

When employees are diagnosed with a serious medical condition, it can affect them on both a personal and professional level. If the diagnosis is recent, they may be reeling from the news and learning how to cope with the reality of their illness. If the condition is ongoing, they may still be struggling to meet the daily demands of the job.

Top tips to minimize the impact of serious illness in the workplace

Educate yourself on the illness

Employee health is a private and confidential matter. If your employee chooses to share information on his/her medical condition with you voluntarily, be sure to keep this information confidential. If able, learn more about your employee's illness. The information can provide you with important insight on how they may be feeling and how to better accommodate their needs. Once you understand the condition and how it impacts those who are affected by it, you will likely feel more compassionate and empathetic to any specific job modification requirements.

Accommodate the affected individual's needs

Employers have a duty to accommodate employees who have limitations due to a health condition. This could include modifications to:

- Job description
- Workstation modifications
- Work requirements or restrictions as defined by the employee's health professional

You may also wish to discuss the situation with your human resources department to ensure you're respecting the employment standards in your state.

Be compassionate to employees with a serious medical condition

Whenever you feel frustrated by the situation, remember that employees do not *choose* to have a condition. Chances are they are simply trying to make the best of it, and are eager to continue to do a good job, even if the parameters of performance have changed. If able, check in with them from time-to-time to see how they are doing, both emotionally and physically, and show them that you care about their well-being.

Offer challenging and rewarding assignments

Even if the employee's job duties have changed, you can still offer them challenging and rewarding assignments or tasks. Give them the opportunity to impress you and to make a meaningful contribution to the team. It will be good for morale and shows the team that the individual still has a lot to offer the group, despite his or her health challenges.

Maintain communication within the team

Team members may not fully understand the situation. When that happens, resentment or frustration can surface that can drive a wedge between co-workers. While it is important to maintain communication within the team, remember that employee health is a private and confidential matter. Focus on team objectives and goals, and provide timely and clear communication on changes in workload and/or responsibilities, so that team members can successfully adapt to new demands.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee Assistance and Work/Life Program can help through a variety of resources. Call your Employee and Family Assistance and Work/Life Program at 1 866 468-9461. Visit shepellfgi.com.

Be a leader

As a manager, it's important that you demonstrate leadership to your team and lead by example. Your team should understand:

- Like all unexpected and expected absences (e.g., vacation or sick days) the team pulls together to ensure work is completed
- Discrimination or harassment will not be tolerated
- All colleagues deserve privacy and fair treatment
- Questions should be directed to the manager

When illness strikes a member of your team, it is important to be human first and to offer your support. While it is your job to make sure that your team is performing, it is also critical that you step away from *business as usual* to respect and accommodate your employee's condition. By being understanding and working with the employee to find appropriate and challenging work, you give them the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the team.

How to Help Employees Return from Sick Leave

Transitioning back into the workplace after an extended medical leave can be tough for even the most seasoned professionals. The leave of absence is not something employees plan for or desire, it is a medical necessity. They may wonder how their return will be received by others, and may also feel overwhelmed, out of touch and nervous about getting back to work.

Six Steps to Ease the Transition Back to Work

Stay connected with employees on medical leave

If you have permission to do so, touch base with employees even before they return. Checking in to see how they are doing sends an important message that you care, and gives you an opportunity to keep them in the loop about what is going on at work. Continuing to communicate with employees while they are away lets them know they are missed and gives them a sense of connection and belonging to the organization.

Work closely with the Disability Case Manager (through the employee's health insurance plan)

The Disability Case Manager will provide you with invaluable support during an employee leave. They will keep you abreast of significant changes in case status and encourage the employee to adhere to treatment to facilitate a timely return to work. Case Managers build a case management plan, and will also assist with:

- Accommodation options based on employee restrictions and limitations
- Establishing a modified return to work plan based on available accommodation
- Return to work facilitation meeting(s)

Create a transition plan

Once a return date is selected, get started on a transition plan to help ease the employee back to work. Then, communicate this plan to your other employees. Based on information provided by the Case Manager, your plan should account for:

- How much of the original job the employee can take on
- What workstation modifications are needed and possible
- How the workload will be redistributed among the team
- What other special accommodations may be required

After the employee has returned to work, you may need to reassess the transition plan, if it is proving to be too much or too little for him or her.

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Welcome the employee back to work

A bouquet of flowers on his or her desk, lunch out with the team or even a simple card sends the message that you and the team are happy to have the employee back. Be kind, considerate and supportive. Although a time for celebration, it is important to keep the employee's privacy and comfort level top of mind. Keep it simple; ask the employee directly what would make him or her most comfortable upon returning to work. Check in with your employee regularly, especially during the first few weeks, to ensure that his or her needs are being met.

Be flexible with your transition plan

Even though employees may be back to work and contributing to the team, there may still be restrictions to what they can do or how long they can work. Understand that it is quite possible that they may require time away from work to attend doctors' appointments. Additionally, what you expect from them and what they are able to contribute may not correlate, so be sure to reconcile this early on with a modified transition plan.

Encourage team work

It is important to understand that employees who return from an extended medical leave will need time to get back into the full swing of things. During this time, it is critical that the team continues to step up and help out where they can. Let your team know you appreciate and recognize their efforts to work together and succeed as a team. Team lunches or tokens of appreciation send the message that you know they are going above and beyond their call of duty.

Welcoming back a team member from medical leave is something to celebrate. Not only do you regain a team member, but your employee achieves an important medical milestone and is well enough to work again. By working together, maintaining the lines of communication and adjusting expectations to a manageable level, the transition back to work will be a success for the employee, the team and the organization.

Resources:

http://www.denvergov.org/Portals/424/documents/2280_89.pdf

[http://www.shepellfgi.com/EN-](http://www.shepellfgi.com/EN-CA/Employees%20and%20Families/Wellness%20Articles/Healthy%20Working/Supporting+an+Employee+Return+to+work.asp)

[CA/Employees%20and%20Families/Wellness%20Articles/Healthy%20Working/Supporting+an+Employee+Return+to+work.asp](http://www.shepellfgi.com/EN-CA/Employees%20and%20Families/Wellness%20Articles/Healthy%20Working/Supporting+an+Employee+Return+to+work.asp)

<http://hiring.monster.ca/hr/hr-best-practices/workforce-management/hr-management-skills/help-employees-return-from-disability-leave-ca.aspx>

<http://www.hrinfodesk.com/preview.asp?article=25726>

http://www.denvergov.org/Portals/424/documents/2280_89.pdf

[http://www.shepellfgi.com/EN-](http://www.shepellfgi.com/EN-CA/Employees%20and%20Families/Wellness%20Articles/Healthy%20Working/Supporting+an+Employee+Return+to+work.asp)

[CA/Employees%20and%20Families/Wellness%20Articles/Healthy%20Working/Supporting+an+Employee+Return+to+work.asp](http://www.shepellfgi.com/EN-CA/Employees%20and%20Families/Wellness%20Articles/Healthy%20Working/Supporting+an+Employee+Return+to+work.asp)

http://www.sykesanderson.com/Employment/articles/sick_leave.asp

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