

Managing an employee's return to work after a mental health leave

When an employee returns to work after an extended leave of absence, there are many factors that need to be considered. It's a difficult time for both employee and employer. The employee may be coping with lingering mental health issues, combined with the anxiety of returning to work and getting up to speed, all of which will have a huge impact on their productivity and how well they transition back into their role at work. It is the manager's role to make the transition as comfortable as possible.

How to make the transition back to work a positive experience

Encourage an early return to work if possible – This will depend on the employee's progress and the physician's assessment. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the longer employees are away from work for mental health issues, the more likely they are to be worried about losing their jobs and become mentally detached from their work.

Meet with the employee before the return date – Take the initiative to schedule a short meeting with the employee a week or so before the return date to bring them up to speed. This is a great opportunity to reassure returning employees of their value to the organization as well as discuss any special accommodations they may need, such as flexible work hours or a quiet area for taking breaks.

Address back-to-work fears – If your employee is concerned about a potential setback after returning to work, address those fears. Reassure the employee that your door is always open, and devise a plan for managing their workload and combating stress.

Suggest a mid-week start date and a gradual return back to work – Who says an employee must return to work on a Monday or even come back full-time at first? Suggest a return date on a Wednesday or Thursday so that your employee can ease back into work as you reduce the stress of first-week jitters. In addition, a part-time schedule at first can help ease stress while allowing the employee to continue or finish treatment. Work with the employee to create a back-to-work schedule that makes the most sense. At the same time, set expectations and revisit this schedule with the goal of getting the employee back to work on a full-time basis.

Set an example for the rest of your staff – Ideally you've already been doing this by squashing rumors, correcting misconceptions, and educating your team about mental illness. In addition to directly addressing the stigma of mental illness, you can set an example by showing how much you respect, value, and trust the returning employee.

Generally, work is beneficial to the health and well-being of your employees. Work brings with it the opportunity to build relationships with others, a greater sense of identity and purpose, and an improvement in an employee's financial security. Helping your employee return to work after a mental health leave is an integral part of their treatment and recovery.

The do's and don'ts of welcoming an employee back after a mental health leave

A return to work after a mental health leave can be daunting for the returning employee and coworkers alike. Here are a few suggestions to make this transition a smooth one:

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.

Do: stay in touch with the employee throughout the mental health leave

Work is a core part of our lives. Not only do we spend a major portion of our lives at work, it can provide meaning, relationships, and an important part of our identity. When taking a mental health leave, employees may miss those connections. Stay in touch by sending an occasional email or forwarding a favorite trade journal along with a brief note. Keep your messages upbeat and pressure-free as you don't want to cause undue stress. For example, you might send an article along with a note that says, "Thought you'd find this article about same-day shipping interesting as you've been predicting this for years."

Do: get the facts about mental illness

"Employees with mental illnesses, even those who have received effective treatment and have recovered, tend to be second-rate workers." Though this type of belief may exist, the facts contradict it. For example, the booklet *A Mental Health-Friendly Workplace: It's in Every Company's Best Interest* explains that employers report these individuals are "as good or better than other employees in motivation, quality of work, and job tenure" and that they are also more punctual and have better attendance than average.

Don't: intrude

Remember, you don't need the details of the diagnosis or treatment plan – and your employee most likely wants privacy. What you do need to know is how you can help the employee successfully return to work.

Do: ask what the employee needs

Determining the level of work and any accommodations requires communication between you, the employee, and possibly, the employee's treating physician. Again, you don't need the reasons behind a request. You simply need to know what would help the employee. If the request is reasonable, by all means, make it happen.

Don't: make assumptions

It's easy to make assumptions about an employee's return to work. For example, you may assume that the employee won't want to interact with others or may need constant supervision. Alternately, you might assume that a return to work signals the employee is ready to assume all previous duties. Everyone's situation is different, so keep that in mind when setting expectations.

Do: work together to create a reintegration plan

Is the employee eager to get back into the workplace full-time or is a gradual transition a better choice? A frank conversation with the employee is in order. Discuss goals, ask about favorite tasks, and draw up a plan together.

Employees can and do return to work after a mental health leave. Your role is an important one in helping employees successfully resume their duties in a positive and productive environment.

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