



SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES RETURNING TO WORK AFTER MENTAL ILL-HEALTH

Just as for physical health, there may be times when a team member needs to take extended leave to look after their mental health. When an employee returns to work after a period of mental ill-health, it is important that employers are equipped with the right tools to provide appropriate support for the employee. This includes having a robust framework in place to make effective adjustments to the employee's work arrangements and providing sufficient resources to ease the transition. This factsheet outlines some key considerations for employers and practical tips to help support employees through this process.

DURING THE EMPLOYEE'S ABSENCE

Regular contact

Stay in contact with the employee and implement regular check-ins. Everyone has different communication preferences, so ask them how they would like to be contacted and their preferred frequency of communication.

Communication preferences and confidentiality

It is crucial to provide reassurance that any disclosures that the employee makes with regards to their mental health will be treated with full confidentiality, except in circumstances where withholding that information could pose immediate danger for the employee or others around them. Discuss and understand whether and how they would like their mental ill-health to be communicated to their team and colleagues during their period of absence.

IN PREPARATION FOR THE EMPLOYEE'S RETURN

Return-to-Work Plan

Develop a clear Return-to-Work Plan in collaboration with the employee. Ensure that the plan sets out the employee's roles and responsibilities and builds flexibility for changes depending on the employee's ability to manage the allocated tasks and ongoing workload. See the resources section below for some return-to-work plan templates and suggestions.

Timing of return

Ensure that the employee is ready to return to work and is doing so under appropriate guidance from mental health professionals. Brief relevant line managers and colleagues on the details of the return-to-work plan so that they are aware of the transition, and how they can offer support.

Easing in

Give the employee the option to come into the office for a few hours before their official return. This provides an opportunity to reacquaint themselves with the working environment and their colleagues in a more casual atmosphere before the return to work.

Flexibility

Make reasonable adjustments for the employees, including adjusting their working hours to provide extra flexibility, or consider alternative arrangements such as flexible working hours, or hybrid working as part of a phased return.

Environment

It can be overwhelming to return to a busy workplace after a long period of absence. Provide a quiet rest space or longer breaks so that the employee can adapt to the work environment during the transition period.

Workload

Review the employee's existing role and responsibilities. Identify any stress factors that could be alleviated, such as their workload, who they work with, or performance targets.

FIRST DAY OF RETURN TO WORK

Support, engage, debrief

Limit work obligations on the first day to ease the employee back into the work routines and environment. Consider arranging optional support for lunch breaks, either with co-workers or a line manager, in case they would like to discuss issues or concerns privately. Schedule a follow-up meeting at the end of the first day to debrief and identify any early issues that require adjustment in the Return-to-Work Plan.

ONGOING SUPPORT

Check-in, review, communicate

Continue to monitor the effectiveness of the Return-to-Work Plan by checking-in weekly to see if any adjustments are needed. Ensure that the employee knows where they can seek support in the office, such as from Mental Health First Aiders or a designated 'buddy' with whom they can have informal check-ins. It is key to create a psychologically safe workplace where the employee can feel free to raise any concerns, make reasonable requests or share their experience. Open and respectful communication is essential to ensure that the return to work is smooth and sustainable.

DON'T

- **assume that the employee is fully recovered** from their mental ill-health because they wish to return to work. Mental health recovery is not a linear journey, but an ongoing process that takes significant time and support.
- **discuss the employee's mental health details** with others without their consent - maintaining privacy and confidentiality is crucial to building trust.
- **assume what may trigger the employee's stress or symptoms or what they may need** - keep communication open and ask the employee for thoughts and feedback on their experience at work.
- **assume that employees are aware of return to work policies, benefits or procedures** - be proactive in communicating the availability of these avenues of support and how employees can make use of them.

CONCLUSION

With non-judgmental empathy, proactive communication and effective return-to-work policies, employers can help to set up employees for long-term success as they transition back to work after time away for mental health reasons.

Policies and procedures developed on this topic should also dovetail with the organisation's wider workplace mental health strategy and would support Standard 4 (increase mental health awareness), Standard 6 (effective people management) and Standard 9 (establish a support system to encourage disclosure of mental health issues) of the [CMHA HK Guide to Thriving at Work](#).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Davidson Morris: Returning to Work After Stress Leave FAQs](#)

[Mentally Healthy Workplaces: Reasonable Adjustments and Return to Work Plans](#)

[Mind HK: Returning to Work](#)

[Mind UK: Wellness Action Plan](#)

[Mind UK: How to Support Staff Who are Experiencing a Mental Health Problem](#)

[MindWell: Supporting Someone Returning to Work](#)

[Return to Work: Return to Work Plan](#)

[Return to Work: Helping employees successfully return to work following depression, anxiety or a related mental health problem](#)

[NZ Mental Health Foundation: Return to Work Plan](#)



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City Mental Health Alliance HK

The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong (CMHA HK) is a not-for-profit membership organisation. We are an alliance of businesses, working together with mental health experts and partner organisations, to achieve our vision that every workplace will protect, support and create positive mental health for their people.

We provide training, events, resources, research and practical support for companies wishing to create mentally healthy workplaces.

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