

## Helping Employees Return After Stress-Related Absence

If someone in your team has had time away from the workplace because of stress, it is important to help them manage their return to work as sensitively as possible. The following hints and tips are designed to help you ensure this is the case.

### Welcome the employee back

Taking the first few steps through the door of the organisation can seem a daunting process for an employee after a period of stress-related absence. As a manager, consider what you could do to help make this easier. This might mean arranging to meet your team member at a coffee shop across the road beforehand, or waiting in reception to welcome them back and help to boost their confidence.

### Arrange a quick catch-up

Even if you have been in regular contact with your employee throughout their absence, it is important to sit down with them early on their first day, and ask them how they feel about their return to work. This will allow you to gauge how best to help them ease back into their role. If anything has changed in their absence, e.g. a new product or way of doing things has been introduced, be sure to give the employee a quick overview and, if relevant, arrange for someone to sit down and go through this properly with them.

### Take a phased approach to their return

It is a good idea to have some specific work for your employee to get started on when they return. The nature of the work should be sufficiently taxing so that the employee doesn't feel patronised, but it is equally important not to load up their in-tray. This could quickly lead to them feeling overwhelmed. Instead, it is a good idea to gradually introduce bigger tasks, projects or increased responsibility, and to review each step with the employee as you go along. It can be helpful to set everything down in a return to work policy which sets out expectations for both parties, e.g. nature of duties, working hours while allowing for some flexibility in line with changing circumstances. (Your HR department or occupational health adviser, if you have one, can advise you on this). As a manager you should also be prepared to make [reasonable adjustments](#) with regard to particular activities that are likely to cause your employee further stress.

### Reflect on what you could do differently

People become stressed for a variety of reasons, some work-related, some personal. If you are aware of the underlying causes of your team member becoming stressed, it is important to reflect on what you, as a manager, could do differently to help. For example, if your team member has struggled with a heavy workload, is there someone they, or you, could delegate some of their work to? It is also a good idea to discuss these questions with the employee as part of the return to work process. Ask them for their thoughts about what could be done differently to help and support them in the short and longer term and act on these where possible. This might be something as straightforward as having fewer team meetings, to enable your employee to feel more in control of their workload.

It goes without saying that if you know or suspect that conflict or bullying has played a part in your employee's stress, you take steps to investigate this properly – preferably prior to their return, but as soon as possible after, if you feel this is more appropriate.

### Have an open-door policy

Once your team member has had a chance to settle back in, let them know that you are there if they need to talk to you. You might wish to schedule regular catch-ups with your team member to ask them how they are feeling, or leave it up to the employee to approach you when they feel they need your support. This will enable you both to identify any issues or problems at an early stage and prevent them from causing feelings of stress. Avoid the temptation to keep asking your team member if they are OK, as this can be disconcerting for them.

### Arrange for some informal support

Team members can be a valuable source of support to returning employees, particularly if a lot has changed during their absence. In this instance, you may wish to pair the employee up with a buddy from your team, who can help them to get back in the loop. You should also ask other team members to be on hand to give their support as and when required. It is important to note here, though, that you must respect employee privacy and confidentiality at all times, not just on legal

grounds but to reduce the risk of gossip, which can cause anxiety for your employee.

### **Signpost other forms of help**

As well as offering managerial support, you may wish to remind your employee of any additional resources available within your organisation. Examples might include coaching, stress management training, an employee assistance helpline (if you have one) or websites such as [The Stress Management Society](#).

### **Set a good example**

As a manager, you can have a direct influence on the attitudes and behaviours of those around you. Being positive, open and honest at work will encourage your team members to do the same. Demonstrating a good work-life balance by avoiding long hours, taking your full holiday entitlement and taking an active part in any health or wellbeing initiatives that your organisation is running can all help to send out the right signals.

### **Get some advice before you start**

When planning for the return of an employee who has been off with stress it can really help to get some initial advice from others. It is a good idea to speak to your HR department or occupational health adviser, if you have one. It is important to do so if you are putting together a return to work plan for your employee. Colleagues who have been in a similar position can also be a valuable source of information and support.

### **Related Items**

#### **Related Resources**

- Cary Cooper on Stress (Highlights)
- How to Manage Stress in Your Team
- Common Causes of Workplace Stress