

Mental illness in the workplace: return to work

Sally and Marcia both needed disability leave for mental health issues. Both women ultimately returned to work after treatment. Sally's transition was marked by fear and insecurity.



On the other hand, Marcia had her fair share of pre-return jitters, her transition was well-planned and managed successfully. Here are their stories:

Sally's story

I worried about my job throughout my absence. Even though I was getting the treatment I needed, I just knew I'd lose my job. I sometimes thought that would be for the best though because a bigger worry consumed me: What is everyone going to think?

My first day back was awful. I wasn't expecting a welcome back party or anything like that but no one really talked to me. Some wouldn't even make eye contact! We hadn't seen or spoken to each other in months, so I thought maybe we could catch up a little. A few said 'hi' and then scurried back to their desks.

My boss was sweet, but she expected everything to go back to normal. I walked into my office only to be greeted by an overflowing inbox and an entire week's worth of appointments in my appointment book. We also had a working lunch that day. I had been looking forward to a few minutes to regroup just as my therapist had suggested. I didn't have the opportunity.

While I was gone, they upgraded the office. Everything was brand-new including the computer system, copy machine, and even the paper towel dispenser in the restroom. I felt like an idiot because I couldn't figure out how to use the microwave. I didn't want to ask for help for such a menial task, especially since I had already bothered several coworkers for help with the new software.

I went home in tears and could barely drag myself back the next day. I didn't know what normal was. I feared that every day would bring a monumental struggle just to fit in. I quit a few weeks later.

What Sally's boss had to say about her return to work:

With Sally's return to work, I thought that meant she was back to normal. It didn't cross my mind that she'd need any special help. In fact, I purposely kept her busy thinking that would make her feel valued and productive.

Marcia's story

I was definitely nervous about returning to work, but knew it would work out. My boss had kept me informed throughout my absence and met with me the week before my first day back on the job. He suggested a progressive schedule so that I could ease back in. A few of my coworkers kept me in the loop as well and were truly excited to welcome me back.

Everyone was so supportive. My boss encouraged me to continue to focus on getting better and do what I could at work. He told me that he gained a new appreciation for what I do. He also asked me what I needed to make the transition a success. When I suggested flexible hours, he made that happen – company-wide. I love my job and have found greater balance overall.

What Marcia's boss had to say about her return to work:

I tried to put myself in her shoes and asked myself how I would want to be treated if I were in a similar situation. I also conducted research on managing and supporting an employee's return to work. Turns out, my instincts were largely correct. Learning more helped me be aware of things that I would not have thought of my own including a zero-tolerance policy on gossip that helped me manage the office rumour mill.