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 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.