

buzz

Manchester
Health & Wellbeing
Service



Work and Mental Health

A guide to managing work
with a mental health problem



Produced by buzz Manchester Health & Wellbeing Service
in partnership with Manchester Primary Care Mental Health Team.
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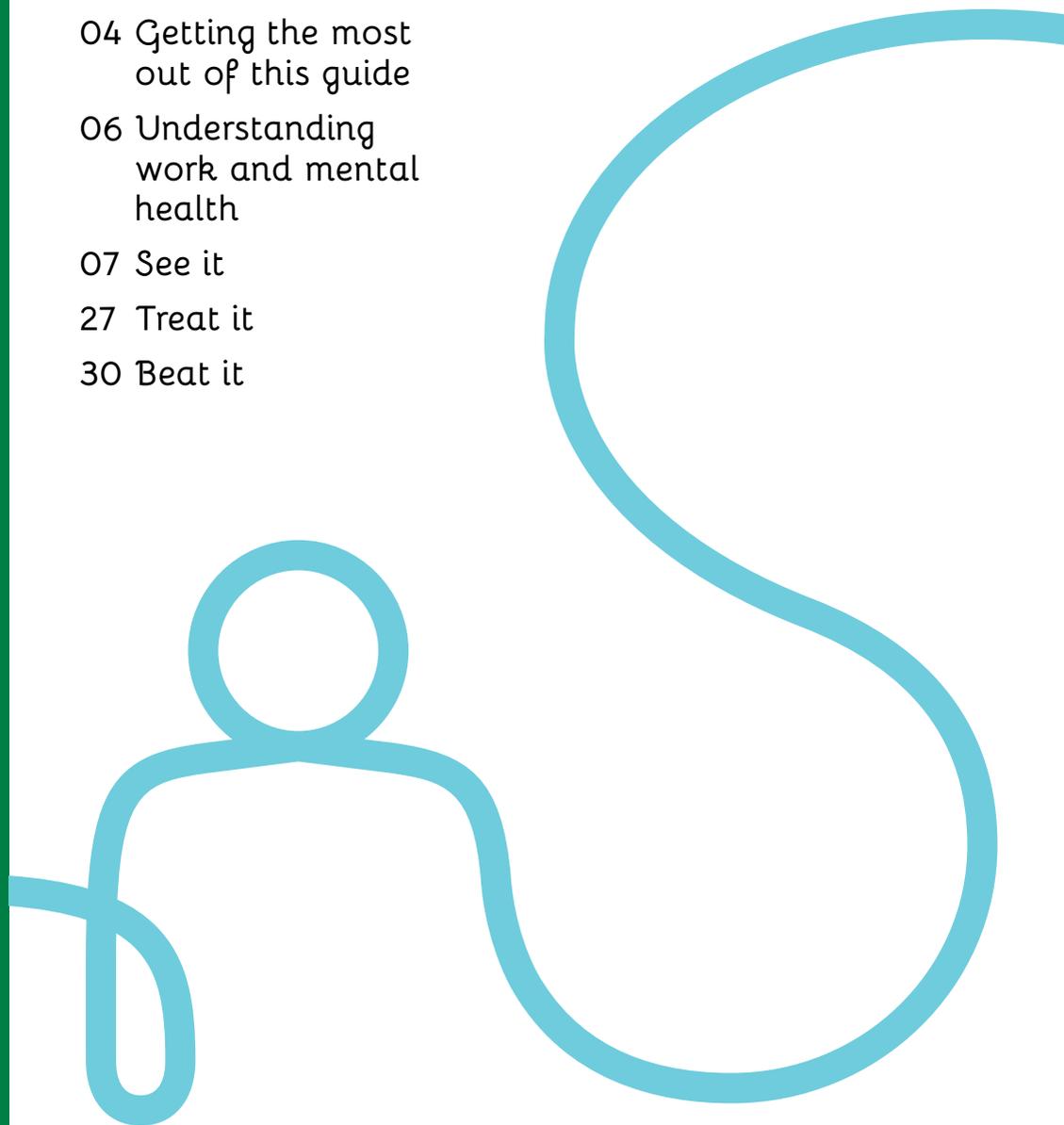
www.buzzmanchester.co.uk

This guide is one of a series about mental health and wellbeing by buzz Manchester Health & Wellbeing Service. You can find more guides at www.mhim.org.uk

‘Work and Mental Health’ is all about managing work when you have a mental health problem. It’s important to remember that poor mental health and wellbeing is very common.

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Getting the most out of this guide

This guide aims to:

- Help you to stay in work with a mental health condition
- Help you to return to work after being absent
- Help you to manage day to day if you are not currently in work

There will be a number of tools for you to try which aim to help you manage work with a mental health condition and find out what works best for you.

If you find it hard to work through the guide, you might find it useful to talk to someone. This could be a health worker such as your doctor or practice nurse. At the end of the guide there are details about where to get more information, help and treatment.

Understanding work and mental health

This section explores the links between work and mental health.

See it

This section is for people who are in work. They are trying to balance work and mental health.

Treat it

This section is for people who are off sick from work and trying to get better. They are not yet ready to think about going back to work.

Beat it

This section is for people who have been off sick from work for a while. They are now ready to start planning to go back to work.

As you read this guide, it will ask you to think about what is going on in your life and how you are feeling. There are spaces in the guide for you to write things down. You may find that this helps you think more clearly about how you feel.

What you'll need:

- A pen and maybe a notebook for extra notes
- Time for reading and thinking about how you can help yourself
- Somewhere quiet to read and think
- To keep going and pace yourself by taking one step at a time
- Support from a family member, friend or health professional if needed

Understanding work and mental health

Work can help the body and mind by providing a routine and structure to the day which gives you a sense of purpose.

It can become a big part of how you see yourself and your identity. Work gives us financial benefits and security. It can provide a sense of self-reliance and independence.

Work can help you protect your mental wellbeing and prevent you from developing a mental health problem like depression. But, you need to find the right balance and place of work.

Some people worry about work being bad for their health. They worry that stress will make them ill. There is strong proof that working is, in general, good for your mental health. Research tells us that usually the benefits outweigh the risks.

Many people manage a mental health problem and stay in work. Mental health problems do not have to stop you from getting a job or being in work.

You can support your own mental health and wellbeing by taking positive steps. This guide describes some of the steps you could take.

See it

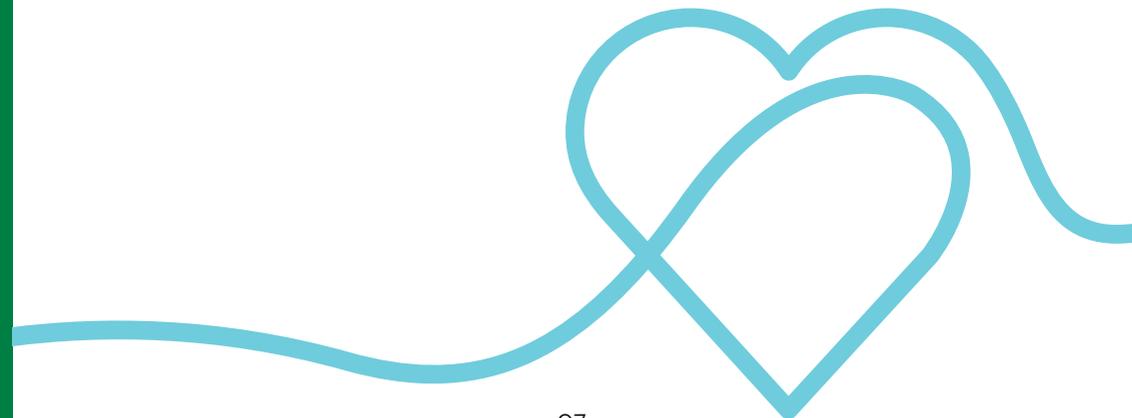
Statement of fitness for work

Nearly three in ten workers will have a mental health problem in any given year.

Mental health problems are now the most common reason for non-manual staff to be off work. One quarter of all UK 'fit notes' are for mental health problems.

Your GP may provide you with a 'fit note' if:

- You are not yet fit for work: the 'fit note' will have advice about what could help you to return to work
- You are fit for work: the 'fit note' will have advice to your employer about how they can help you to manage your health condition whilst at work



Five ways to wellbeing in the workplace

You can take small steps to improve things at work, little changes can make a big difference.

Just as we aim to eat five pieces of fruit and vegetables each day to improve our physical health, there are also five things that we can do to improve our mental wellbeing at work.

1. Connect

Stay connected with your colleagues. Find five minutes for a chat or talk instead of sending an e-mail. This can help you to keep the social benefits of work.

2. Be active

Exercise helps to keep your mind and body active. It can also boost your 'get up and go' outlook. Look for easy ways to build in a bit of exercise easily. You could take the stairs, or go for a walk at lunch. If you work at a desk, every 40 minutes or so, get up and take a short walk around. It can help to just have a stretch or change position. Cycle or walk to work if you can. Get off the bus one stop early or park a little farther away and walk the rest.

3. Take notice

Take a moment to look around. You could look up, look out of the window, or check out the weather. You could see if you can make your workspace better. Plants and photos can brighten a desk, as can keeping it tidy and clean. Take notice of how the people you work with are feeling and reacting.

4. Learn

Learning keeps your brain active. It is good to set goals and work towards something whilst in work. It can raise your self-esteem. It can also help you to feel like a useful member of your team. Being up-to-date in your knowledge can make you feel more confident. You may be able to do this by reading expert websites. Being able to shadow another member of staff means you can learn from them. It can improve your CV and chances for promotion.

5. Give

Take time to ask the people you work with how they are. Helping others can boost your mental wellbeing. It can also improve the workplace as a whole.

If you want to find out more about the 'five ways to mental wellbeing' you can download a free copy of the guide 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' from www.mhim.org.uk

Work/life balance

We all have different priorities when it comes to our work/life balance. Everyone has their own values, interests and work demands to deal with.

You need to create your own balance. It doesn't have to be a neatly divided balance of time. This is not possible or needed for most of us.

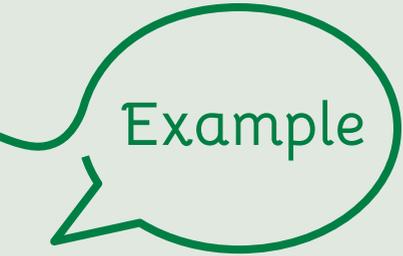
A balanced life can include:

- Work
- Family life
- Relaxation
- Leisure time
- Personal space
- Social activities
- Spirituality

Top tips:

- Aim to do a little of the things you find most helpful, as often as you can
- Try to work smart, not long. Rank your tasks and then focus on each one in turn
- Take proper breaks e.g. half hour lunch. Try to get out of the office every once in a while. You could go for a walk or go out for lunch
- Try to stick to your hours as far as possible. Working long hours can have an increasing, harmful effect on your wellbeing
- Being responsible for your own work/life balance is vital. When demands are too high, it may help to discuss this with your manager. Ask them about any ways in which they can help. Find out if you can make any short-term changes to your job role

Creating a work/life balance



Example

Have a look at the example below to see the differences between the work demands and the out of work activities.

Notice how in this example they are evenly balanced.

Work pressures

Illness

Tiredness

Paperwork

Finance

Workload

Meetings

Out of work activities

Sport

Walking

Reading

Cooking

Cinema

Music

Your situation



Exercise

Now think about what demands you currently have in work and then compare this to any out of work activities that you do.

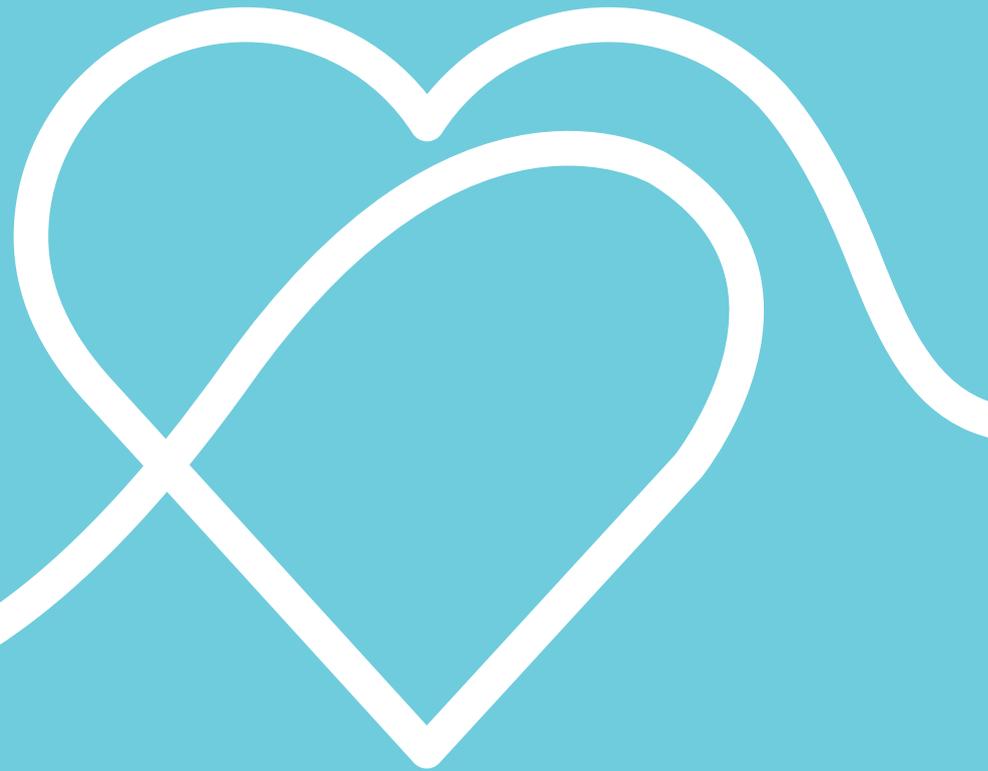
Think about what could help you create a better work/life balance. There might be some things that need to change.

Fill in the spaces with how your work and life balance out.

Work pressures

Out of work activities

“Little changes
can make a
big difference.”



Make work, work for you

Good work can have a positive effect on your health. It can aid your recovery from a mental health problem.

What is 'good work'?

Good work is when you feel valued. It is good to be involved in making decisions about your work. It is helpful when your employer can understand what you need to work well. When work can be flexible to suit you, it can support and improve your health.

Your mental health can benefit from work if you:

- Feel that you have a sense of control over your work
- Feel that you are not overloaded with work
- Feel safe in your workplace
- Are listened to and your ideas are taken seriously and included in decision making processes
- Feel clear about your role and responsibilities
- Your vocational aspirations are supported
- Feel that you are respected by others
- Receive feedback about your work

The workplace can support your mental wellbeing and help you to maintain your mental health and resilience, if it is a good environment. It can also assist in the recovery process.

It can help to know the common causes of work related stress so that you will be more able to recognise it. You can then learn how to manage it appropriately. There are some examples on the next page.

Common causes of stress

Work is too challenging:

- Look into training to improve your skills and confidence to deal with work challenges
- Set realistic goals related to what you want/need to learn more about
- Discuss with your line manager what you are finding yourself unprepared to deal with
- Learn to delegate (discuss how with your line manager)

Working long hours:

- Discuss the overtime you are working with your line manager
- Keep a record for at least two weeks
- Use time management strategies e.g. list your job tasks and assign them in order of priority
- Learn to delegate
- Consider asking to reduce your hours
- Set an unbreakable going home time
- Take proper breaks

Work is not challenging enough:

- Look into extra training
- Discuss taking on new challenges with your line manager
- Ask about shadowing someone for a day

Workplace bullying:

- Tell someone what is happening don't try to manage alone
- Keep a diary of incidents
- Try to resolve it informally, with someone supporting you. Tell the person you feel bullied by, what you are not happy about in the way they are with you
- Go to your line manager to discuss the issue (or their manager if it's your line manager you feel bullied by)
- Talk to your trade union rep or go to the ACAS website
- Get advice from your human resources department
- Go to the hse.gov.uk website and visit the section on bullying advice for individuals

Treat it

Getting better and support

Thoughts of being unable to cope are common with mental health issues. It's best not to make any big life decisions when you are unwell.

If you are not feeling ready to go back to work or aren't well enough to even think about going back yet, don't resign or quit your job. Even if you feel unable to do your job right now, it could change once you feel better.

You may be at a low ebb, finding it hard to concentrate, unmotivated and you may not feel very confident but you are best spending your energies getting yourself better and not worrying about work. You can learn some ways to manage your mental health in the 'Unwind Your Mind' self-help guide. You can download it free from www.mhim.org.uk

Remember to keep sending your 'fit notes' to work on time. When you are feeling better and planning to go back to work, think about what would help you to carry out your job when you return. You may be able to sort out some adjustments to your job role if it would help.

Formal workplace meetings

It is vital to attend these meetings when you can. It is a good idea even if you are not ready to return to work. You can use them to show how you want to return when you are well enough.

You can let them know what treatment you are getting. You can tell them about the way you are working with the health professionals supporting your recovery. Your union rep or a work colleague can go with you.

Make sure you are getting all the treatment, support and help you need.

Getting support in work

Colleagues

Informal support can come from your colleagues. Choose to talk to people with whom you feel most comfortable. However you don't have to share all the details with them about what you are coping with if you don't want to. Even just spending more time with them at work could help relieve stress or worry.

Your line manager

Your line manager is usually the person you should go to first. You can tell them about health issues that affect work. In most situations, they should be your first point of support. They can discuss your work place needs and situation with you.

Occupational health worker

In some places of work, you can have your health and workplace needs assessed. This may be by self-referral, or at the request of your manager.

An occupational health nurse or an occupational health doctor will usually see you. They can recommend and arrange treatments. This can include treatments like counselling. They will write a report for your line manager. A copy should be sent to you. It may outline whether your health condition comes under the Equality Act. It may have advice on how your employer can support you in work. This is your chance to let your work know what you find hard to do. You can also suggest what changes they could put in place to help you.

Please note:

These roles are not the same as that of an occupational therapist (OT). OT's will often work for the NHS or privately.

They offer treatment and work related rehabilitation. The next section 'Treat it' has more details about how an OT can help.

Human resources representative (HR rep)

Your line manager may be able to speak to an HR rep. They can advise on the local and legal steps for supporting staff that have health issues that impact on their work. They can also tell you about how your work deals with sickness absence. They often go to formal workplace meetings about sickness absence.

Trade union

If you are in a trade union, they can offer support. Your union rep can give you advice. They can help when you are in work, off work or ready to return to work.

Your union rep should be able to join you at formal workplace meetings and occupational health meetings. However some employers only let union reps into formal grievance meetings or disciplinary meetings. It is still worth asking if a union rep can go with you to meetings about your sickness absence.

Out of work support

There are plenty of areas to receive support out of work too.

Your friends and family can provide support as can your GP. You can also access a range of mental health support services such as Primary Care Mental Health Teams/IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) services.

If you are interested in finding out more about these services, speak to your local mental health team and see if they have an occupational therapist.

An occupational therapist can offer specialist support with work issues, such as:

- Assess what you are able to do at work
- Identify any barriers to working
- Suggest possible reasonable adjustments to your job role if needed and if your workplace is able to accommodate this
- Advise you and your employer about your health condition(s) and how your health may affect what you can do in work

- Help you set goals to improve your confidence and readiness for work
- Decide when you are ready to return to work
- Help you to make a return to work plan

There are also a range of self-help services available in Manchester for individual or group support.

You can also download more self-help guides, just like this one, from www.mhim.org.uk to help with any other issues you may have.

Some examples include:

- Stress: 'Distress to De-stress'
- Anxiety: 'Unwind Your Mind', 'Distress to De-stress'
- Depression: 'Improve Your Mood'
- Self-esteem: 'Build Yourself Up'
- Sleep: 'Sleep Well'

“With the right support and resources you should be able to work well.”

Getting support



In the boxes below there is some space to write down what treatment you are currently getting and what else you think could help.

What help or treatment am I getting?

What else could help?

Dealing with negative thoughts about being off work

'I can't be seen out by people who know me through work'

Things to consider

You are allowed to go out. Many people worry about being seen by someone who knows them but, you need to spend time out of the house in order to get better. You also need to meet your daily living needs like shopping. You should not expect yourself to go from being at home all the time to going back to work. It's unreasonable for you to stay indoors all day. Therapeutically, getting out of the house helps to build confidence and reduce anxiety. It helps to do this in a step by step way.

Things you could try

When you feel ready, go for a short walk in the area of your work place. It can help break down barriers that build up when we are off work for a long time. To keep in touch, you could meet up with a colleague for coffee near work.

'I feel guilty about being off work'

Things to consider

Many people worry about this however worrying about it has a negative effect on how quickly you get better. You may need to get treatment and have time off work. This is just as valid a reason as a physical health condition.

Things you could try

Try to give yourself the right to take time off for a health problem. Reassure yourself that you are off for a valid reason. Share this concern with someone you can confide in. Think about how you would advise a friend who was off sick and had this worry.

'People might not believe I'm really ill'

Things to consider

Mental health conditions are just as real as physical health ones. Many health conditions are not visible to others. However, we can feel that health problems need to be obvious to others. Keep in mind that one in four of us will have a mental health problem in our lifetime. Most people know someone who has or they themselves have had a mental health problem. People are kinder than we think. We are hardest on ourselves. It's what your GP and line manager think that is important.

Things you could try

Negative thoughts are common with depression and anxiety. Try reading the guide 'Unwind Your Mind' it has ideas to help you to deal with unhelpful thoughts. You can download it free from www.mhim.org.uk

'What do I say to colleagues if they ask about my health or what's been wrong?'

Things to consider

Often people are not sure how to support a colleague returning to work. They can find it hard to know whether to say something or not. They may wonder how to word this question. They are often trying to do the right thing but people don't always get it right.

Things you could try

Try to think about what you would want to say when asked about this. Rehearse a sentence that includes only what you want people to know. This can be as broad as you want. You do not have to give specific detail. Examples may be 'I've been poorly but I'm on the mend now', 'I've had some tough times to cope with this year but I'm getting there now.' It's nice to have a rounding off phrase at the end of your statement. This can close the discussion e.g. 'Thanks for asking'.

Beat it

Plan your return to work

You don't have to be 100% better to go back to work. Returning to work can be part of your recovery. It works best when you can plan and time it well.

To get yourself ready to go back to work, you may need to get used to what work is like. This is called building your resilience to work. You may also need to build up your confidence.

To build up your confidence and resilience to work demands you could:

- Get back into your work routine: get up in the morning and go to bed at night at 'work times'
- Eat at work times
- Think about the tasks you do in a typical day or week at work. Try to think of ways in which you can practise these tasks at home
- Walk nearby your place of work
- Increase contact with colleagues
- Get an update as to what is going on at work. The best way is to get an update from your manager. You can ask for a copy of recent meeting minutes



In the boxes below write down daily tasks that you would usually do in your job.

Think about how you could put them into practice at home. You can slowly build this up in the weeks leading up to your return to work to help increase your focus.

Try to set daily tasks e.g. spending time on the computer, doing spreadsheets, driving on the motorway, organising tasks.

What are the work tasks involved in my job?

How could I practice or simulate these tasks at home?

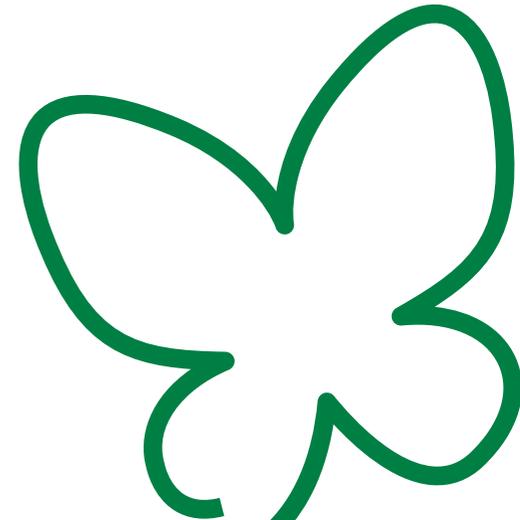
Formal return to work planning

It helps to plan your return to work with your manager. You are best doing this before you go back. These are some ideas to consider:

- Try a phased return to work
- Shadow someone else at first
- Have an update meeting. Try to identify anything new you need to know about. You could also look at any training that you might need to attend
- Have regular meetings with your manager in the first few weeks of going back. That way you can check everything is going okay
- Discuss any need for time off to attend treatment sessions
- Have a quiet place to go if you feel anxious or stressed

People often start to plan their return to work a few weeks before they are due to return. Planning meetings can be with your line manager and someone from human resources. Occupational health services can assess your needs.

Often people go back to work on a 'phased return' This is where they go back to work on reduced hours. They then slowly build up to their normal hours over an agreed period e.g. four weeks.



Here are some ideas about phased returns to work:

- Go in for three hours or more at a time. This will give you enough time to get used to being there again
- Think about phasing in duties as well as hours. If there are some stressful aspects to your job, you may be able to wait until after the first couple of weeks before starting these tasks again
- Some people have built up holiday entitlement whilst they have been off. They use this holiday time to extend their phased return to work
- When you go back to work, try to have a good long stretch of time to settle back into work. It is better than booking a holiday too soon after your return to work. It can seem a good idea to look forward to a holiday. But, if it is too soon it can feel like going back twice

Treatment

Some people still have treatment when they return to work. They will need to go to appointments to complete treatment. Some people may be on a waiting list for treatment.

If this is the case, you need to let your manager know how long you are likely to need treatment. Your occupational health service may also need to know.

It is vital for you to finish your treatment, for your own health. It shows that you are doing everything you can to get better. Sometimes a letter from the person treating you can be helpful. It should say what treatment you are getting. It should also give some idea of how long you will need the treatment.

