Managing Return to Work following mental health related sickness absence: A toolkit for SMEs

Employee

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KEY FACTS

Being off work with stress, anxiety or depression is not easy. It is often made even harder by feeling you don’t know what or how to tell your employer.

You are not alone. Mental ill-health affects 1 in 6 people at work in the UK. There are many common concerns when it comes to stress, anxiety and depression. People worry that they will be seen as weak or not up for the job. Some fear that they may never be able to work again...

But did you know that many people successfully manage mental ill-health at work every day? And that:

- For many of us, work is very important. Work not only allows us to earn money, but also gives us a sense of identity and supports our health and wellbeing.
- Many people with mental ill-health want to get back to work as safely and quickly as possible.
- Having mental ill-health does not always affect your ability to work. However, if you feel that it does, you may want to think about asking for some changes to your work in order to return to work and continue to do your job well.
- Taking long periods of time off work can be damaging for self-esteem and make it harder to get back into work.

Take 20 minutes to read through the six steps in this guide. These steps set out what you need to do to:

- meet your duties to your employer
- maintain contact with your employer
- help you feel connected to work.

You will also find exercises, checklists and templates that are designed to provide you with the tools you need to talk to your employer.

What are stress, anxiety and depression?

Everyone’s experience of mental health is slightly different. People with stress, anxiety or depression may display different signs or symptoms and some might not show any at all. Often, we cannot tell by someone’s behaviour alone. A more important sign is a change in the person’s behaviour.

Some signs that you may have noticed in yourself include:

- Behavioural signs - struggling with workload, low levels of concentration and focus, difficulty in organising, low productivity, negative attitude, changes in motivation.
- Emotional signs - feeling anxious or irritable, mood changes, changes in how you interact with colleagues, too much emotion, feeling isolated or socially withdrawn.
- Physical signs – tiredness, having sleepless nights, increased drinking and/or smoking, not feeling hungry, headaches.
- For more details on signs and symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, and the possible impact on work – see Types of mental health problems on the Mind website.
What causes mental ill-health?

- It can happen suddenly, as a result of a specific experience or life event.
- It can also happen as a result of pressures that have accumulated over time.
- It can be linked to another illness such as back pain or heart disease.
- Sometimes there is no obvious reason.

Can work cause or exacerbate mental ill-health?

The causes of stress, anxiety and depression are often complex; but, for some people, work can play a part. The Health and Safety Executive’s Management Standards outline six aspects of work that can cause stress, if they are not properly managed. See the Health and Safety Executive website to find out more.

However, overall research has consistently shown that work is good for our health, so getting back to work is important – as long as the work is well designed and managed.
Step 1: Dealing with initial absence

KEY FACTS:

- All employers are required to record information about employee absences. When contacting your manager/employer, give them as much detail as you can so that they are aware of your situation. Tell them about: your health, how it is affected by your work, and whether it will affect your ability to work. Communications from employers when you are off work can seem formal. This can sometimes make them feel accusatory, but it is usual for employers to ask for relevant information consistent with company policy.
- Your employer has a responsibility to support your mental health while you are off work and on your return to work.
- In severe cases of mental ill-health, you may feel numb and unable to ask questions or ask for help, even with this employee guide as support. If this is the case, ask someone (friend, family, colleague) to help you work through this guide.

WHAT TO DO:

- Tell your employer you will be off work and try to give them an indication of how long you will be off if you can.
- If there are any urgent work issues that you need to hand over to colleagues, try to deal with these straight away.
- Check your company’s absence policy so that you know what they expect of you.
- Agree with your employer how you will keep in contact with one another during your absence. You can suggest how you want to be contacted during your sickness absence. You can also say who is as your preferred contact person within the company (although this may not always be practical depending on the size of the company). There is a template and checklist below to help with this.
- You are able to self-certify your absence for up to 7 days, but will need to get a ‘Fit Note’ (previously sick note) from your GP for any longer absences. Visit your GP early so that you can access the help you need.
- Importantly, take steps to help yourself get better. The next step in this guide (step 2) gives some ideas on this.

WHAT TO SAY:

- Talking about your mental health can be a daunting experience, but many people find they get a lot more understanding and support once they start talking about it. You may decide to tell different people more or less information but finding ways to communicate is vital.
- Still feeling uneasy? Take a look at some of the benefits of disclosure. Or you may find it useful to listen to others talking about their mental health (see personal stories on the time to change website).
- Here are some template emails you can edit and send to your employer and a telephone checklist with examples that may be helpful. Remember, how you feel may change over time, so you do not need to be definite in your decisions at first.

TEMPLATE LETTER/EMAIL:

Letter/email for you to edit and use to tell your employer you will be absent from work.
CHECKLIST:

Checklist for telling your employer you will be absent from work.

WHAT TO DO if you feel your manager is the cause of your mental ill-health

If you have a difficult relationship with your manager, or you think the way your manager behaves towards you is making your health worse, this can make talking about your health even harder. It is very likely that your manager does not realise that their behaviour is upsetting you. They may be under pressure themselves. Or problems in your relationship with them may be due to a misunderstanding about your work priorities. While it is not easy, there are some things you can do to help re-set your relationship.

- To have an effective conversation, you will need to identify specific situations, and describe actions or behaviours that make you feel unhappy. There is no point in saying how you feel about your manager’s treatment of you if you are not able to give specific examples of the behaviour or situations that lead to your feelings. For example, "When I say hello to Jane each morning she ignores me, this makes me feel un-valued" is more likely to lead to a helpful discussion than saying "You make me feel un-valued."
- Consult a different manager or designated colleague, who is trusted by both you and your manager, and ask if they can help you talk to your manager. Or you may want to talk to a Human Resource professional if you have one in your company.
- You could give your manager the employer version of this guide.
- You could seek advice from a conciliation service such as ACAS who have expertise in working with employees and employers.
Step 2: Developing knowledge and skills

This section is for you: you do not need to discuss any of it with your employer. Reading through and completing the exercises provided here may help improve your mental health. They may also help you structure your thoughts about work.

WATCH OUT:

Although informed by evidence in psychology and health, these exercises do not take the place of clinical recommendations. They are intended to be in addition to treatment you may be offered by doctors and other healthcare professionals. Typical treatments for mental health can include medication, psychological therapy or a combination of both. These are often accessed through your GP. Find out more about mental health services in England on the NHS website.

KEY FACTS:

If you are physically unwell you go to bed. But going to bed is unlikely to help improve your mental health. If you are psychologically unwell you need to do more of the things that make you feel good.

Many people feel guilty when they are off work because the things that help us get better are often the things we usually do in non-work time. But the strong recommendation is to give yourself permission to do these things without feeling guilty.

We are all different and different things work for different people. For some, a good rest is sleeping or lying quietly, for others it is going for a walk or spending time with friends. It is important that you find out what works for you – and do more of it!

Having a structure to your day while you are off work is really important to improve your health. When you don’t have work to give you a daily routine, you will find it helpful to create your daily and weekly timetable or ask a friend to help you.

WHAT TO DO:

You are signed off work but how do you spend your time? Do what makes you feel well!

Routine is good for us, whether we like it or not. When you are off work, the routine is lost, and you no longer have any goals to work towards. So, the advice is to:

- Plan your day to make sure you are doing something that is good for you every day.
- Set some goals to work towards – these need to be realistic and achievable. Here is an example of how to set realistic goals for yourself.
- Make sure you are looking after your basic needs – e.g. exercising, sleeping, eating healthily.
- Use the 5 Ways to Wellbeing as a guide to improve your wellbeing. The exercise on this page will help you identify activities that you can do throughout the week to help your wellbeing.
• Try keeping a gratitude diary. Thinking about the things we are grateful for, large or small, can help us to re-programme our brains to notice positive things in our surroundings. This approach has been found to significantly benefit wellbeing.
• Try writing a mood diary, including noting how you feel, what you are doing, when and who you are with throughout the day. Over the week you may start to see patterns in your mood: when you are at your most positive, when you feel lowest. Once you understand your pattern you can start to find ways to help you through the day: for example, doing the most important tasks when you are at your most positive.
• Find support groups, networks and services in your local area.

EXERCISE:
5 ways to wellbeing (For more details see the Moodzone on the HNS website)

EXERCISE:
Gratitude diary, mood diary, mindful/reflective diary

CHECKLIST:
Other important things you can do to improve your mental health
Step 3: Maintaining communication throughout absence

**KEY FACT:**

- Maintaining communication is vital. If you stay in touch with your employer while you are off work, you are much more likely to return to work and stay in work.

**WHAT TO DO:**

- Obtain a Fit Note from the GP for any absence over 7 consecutive days.
- Send the Fit Note to your employer.
- Claim Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) if appropriate. See the GOV.UK website for more details and to understand how to claim SSP.
- Keep in touch with your employer in the ways you agreed (see step 1). Keep them informed of your work intentions as best you can.
- You may find it helpful to arrange to meet a trusted colleague outside of the workplace. You do not need to talk about work, but this can help you to stay connected with work. This can help to make returning to work feel less scary.

**WHAT TO SAY: In your meeting with the GP**

- GPs are experts in healthcare, but they do not always know about your work or employment matters.
- Before you meet with your GP, think about what you are going to say/ask. Make notes and take them with you. The exercise below can help you with this. For more tips about how to talk to your GP about mental health see the Mental Health Foundation website.
- You might find it useful to think about how your mental health impacts on your work, and what might be useful to help you manage this.
- You might also want to take a friend/family member with you if you feel that would be helpful. Many people with mental ill-health find it difficult to remember details, so having someone there to support you can be useful.

**EXERCISE:**

Preparing to talk to your GP

**WHAT TO SAY to your employer:**

Once you have met with your GP or a health professional and have obtained your Fit Note, you can let your employer know. You can use the template email/letter below to edit and send to your employer. Or, if you need to have a phone conversation, you can use the telephone checklist below to help you with this. Try to include as much information as you can.
TEMPLATE EMAIL/LETTER:
Letter/email to edit and use to tell your employer you will be off work, including information following your conversation with your GP.

CHECKLIST:
Checklist for telephone call to tell your employer you will be off work following your conversation with your GP.
Step 4: Preparing for return to work

KEY FACTS:

- All too often, people rush back to work – to the same job, and same responsibilities. This can be overwhelming and usually happens because an alternative has not been discussed. However, others do not return soon enough – and the longer they take off, the more daunting the prospect of returning to work feels.

- A gradual return to work may be an option. If your workplace is able to accommodate it, you are able to combine Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) and paid work: to do this, you need to work for two back-to-back days each week. See the Fit for Work website for further information about the implications of a gradual return for SSP.

- Having a mental health issue does not always affect your ability to work. Also, your mental ill-health may not be due to work, however, if you feel that yours does or is, you can request some changes to your work in order to return to work and continue to do your job well. Keep these in mind as you prepare for your return to work.

- Whether or not you can make changes to your job, or the way it is carried out, being aware of your trigger points is important. This awareness will give you the information to take to your employer, and help you put in place ways of managing your triggers on your return.

WHAT TO DO:

The exercises in this step will help you think about your return to work. You can work through them on your own, or you may find it helpful to talk them through with a friend, family member or colleague. You do not need to show them to your employer. However, you may find it helpful to work through them before you meet with your employer. After doing the exercises, have a look at the ‘Return to Work Conversation’ to help you think about what you want to say, and how you want to say it.

EXERCISE:
Identifying your signs, symptoms and triggers

EXERCISE:
Your readiness to return to work

EXERCISE:
About your work

CHECKLIST:
Checklist to make the first day back much easier
WHAT TO SAY:

When you feel ready to return to work, let your employer know. Use the template email/letter below to edit and send to your employer to help you with this. Try to include as much information as you can.

TEMPLATE EMAIL/LETTER:

Intention to return to work letter/email to edit and send to your employer.
Step 5: Having a Return to Work conversation

KEY FACTS:

- To make sure of your successful return to work, you will need to have a return to work conversation with your manager. You will also need to work with your manager to develop a return to work plan, and a plan for reviewing work and health. The return to work conversation guide can help you do this.
- Poor return to work (RTW) conversations have an impact on the manager as well as the employee. Many managers find discussions around mental health and RTW difficult. Bear this in mind throughout the RTW conversation. Be confident to steer conversations in ways you think are best for your RTW. For example, if the manager is only focusing on policies and procedures, give them a chance to talk about your mental health: it is likely that they are not sure how to discuss this.

WHAT TO DO:

- Make sure you have prepared for the return to work conversation. Use the exercises in Step 4 and read the Return to work conversation guide to help with this.
- Both you and your manager can use the return to work conversation guide to support you through this conversation.
- This conversation should take place in the first week of your return. However, depending on the length of your absence, you may find it useful to have some time to settle back into work first.
- You may want to ask a trusted colleague to sit in on the meeting. You can ask them to take notes or summarise the discussion for you.
- You and your manager can summarise the meeting and agree and write up a return to work plan. Your manager may need to consult other people before agreeing to the actions, so do not be alarmed if they do not agree to a final return to work plan during the meeting.

WHAT TO SAY:

- Try to be as open, honest and specific as you can be. This will help your manager understand what you feel you can or cannot do at work. It will help them to work with you to develop the best way forward.
- Doing the exercises in Step 2 and Step 4 will help you translate your thoughts and feelings in to words and actions. Use these to help you talk to your manager.
Step 6: Keeping healthy and productive at work

KEY FACTS:

Return to work should be seen as a process. It may take some time until you feel back to your old self.

Remember to continue to do the things that made you feel well enough to return to work. This may be: keeping up therapy, practicing mindfulness, treating yourself, using your support networks, including getting others to help you recognise your triggers and signs, and sticking to a Wellness and Recovery Action Plan.

WHAT TO DO:

- Regular check-ins with yourself
  - Are you looking after your basic needs? Eating healthily, exercising, sleeping, taking regular breaks, managing home demands?
  - If not, what action is needed?

- Regular check-ins with your manager or designated colleague
  - Your employer should follow-up with you once you are back, in line with your agreed return to work plan
  - Revisit your work plan - does anything need to be changed?
  - Have any colleagues/manager/family noticed any of your triggers? If so, what action is needed?

CHECKLIST:

Maintaining my health

WHAT TO SAY:

What to say if you are finding work difficult or your mental health is starting to get worse?
If you are finding work challenging or your mental health starting to get worse, it is important to let your manager or designated colleague know as soon as possible. For example, you might say... “Can we bring forward our return to work review? I am finding work challenging and want to take steps to prevent me from falling ill again.” Return to Steps 2 and 4 to develop a new plan.

What to say if you are feeling much better and want to return to your previous workload/tasks?
If you are feeling much better, tell your manager or designated colleague what you would like. For example, you might say... “I am feeling ready to take on more responsibility and go back to my previous workload. Specifically ....”

Long-term disability
If your mental ill-health becomes long term it may be classed as a disability. Under the Equality Act 2010, in the UK (other than Northern Ireland) you are classed as disabled if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities (see the GOV.UK website for more info).

If you need long-term adaptations to your job, the Government’s Access to work scheme might be able to provide a grant.
What happens if I really can no longer do my job?
Unfortunately, a small number of people find they are unable to continue to work in their current job. This may be because the business is unable to accommodate the appropriate work adjustments, or the employee is too unwell to resume work. If this is the case for you, you may be able to seek advice from ACAS or Fit for Work services.

There are many different workplaces and many different jobs. It might take time to find the job that is right for you; but remember, mental ill-health doesn’t have to be a barrier to work. While work may feel some distance away, it is important to keep active, return to Step 2 and try different ways to improve your health.
Where to go for further information:

1. To find out more about mental health:
   Mind- https://www.mind.org.uk/
   Mental Health Foundation- https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/

2. Advice on talking about mental health:
   Time to talk- https://take-time-to-talk.com/
   Encouraging a conversation about mental health at work- https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/sites/default/files/2.%20Tool_Starting_the_Conversation.pdf
   ACAS managing challenging conversations (checklist version)- http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/3/t/Table-Challenging_conversations_and_how_to_manage_them_APRIL-2012.pdf

3. Where to find support and access treatment:
   NHS- http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/mentalhealth/Pages/Mentalhealthhome.aspx

4. Professional advice and support:
   CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development)- https://www.cipd.co.uk/
   IOSH (Institution of Occupational Safety and Health)- https://www.iosh.co.uk/
   HSE (Health and Safety Executive)- http://www.hse.gov.uk/
   DRC (Disability Rights Commission)- http://www.drc.org.uk/

5. Managing mental health at work:
   Fit For Work- http://fitforwork.org/employer/
   Access to Work- https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview
Appendices

Information on stress, anxiety and depression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common mental health problem</th>
<th>Common signs and symptoms</th>
<th>Possible impact on work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Stress** | **Physical** - panic attacks, tiredness, headaches, chest pains, problems | • Unable to concentrate  
| | sleeping/too much sleep, feeling sick/dizzy, constipation/diarrhoea, grinding your teeth/clenching jaw, shallow breathing or hyperventilating. | • Difficulty in making decisions  
| | **Behaviour** - lack of concentration, feeling tearful/crying, restless, increased smoking/drinking alcohol, difficulty in making decisions, biting your nails/picking your skin, snapping at people. | • Avoiding troubling situations  
| | **Feelings** - anxious, nervous, racing thoughts, irritable/impatient, depressed, lonely, having a sense of dread, uninterested in life/not motivated. | • Agitated by colleagues  
| | **Possible impact on work** | • Uninterested in work  
| | • Unable to concentrate | • Tired at work  
| | • Difficulty in making decisions | • Withdrawing from colleagues at work  
| | • Avoiding troubling situations |   |
| **Anxiety** | **Physical** - nausea, faster breathing, sweating, difficulty sleeping, churning stomach, feeling light headed or dizzy, fast/thumping heart beat | • Showing signs of tenseness and nervousness  
| | **Psychological** - feeling tense/nervous, feeling your mind is full of thoughts, feeling restless and unable to concentrate, dwelling on negative experiences. | • Focusing on negative aspects  
| | **Possible impact on work** | • Overthinking/unable to stop racing thoughts which affects concentration  
| | • Late for work |   |
| | • Not able to concentrate |   |
| | • More emotional at work |   |
| | • Not able to cope with workload |   |
| | • Taking time off work |   |
| | • Not able to communicate any feelings about how you feel |   |
| **Depression** | **Feelings** - upset/tearful, hopelessness, restless/irritable, isolated and unable to talk to others, feeling down, no confidence. |   |
| | **Behaviour** - avoid social events that you would usually enjoy, weight loss/gain, loss of appetite/eating too much, difficulty sleeping/sleeping too much, substance abuse/increased alcohol consumption, lack of concentration, unable to face the day |   |
| | **Possible impact on work** |   |
Benefits of telling others about your mental ill health and how it affects you

Research has shown that telling others can bring the following benefits:

- Allows colleagues/manager to provide support.
- Others can try to understand what you are going through.
- Encourages those around you to educate themselves on the Mental Health issue.
- Can reduce the anxiety of unexpected phone calls from your employer. If you haven't disclosed that you are on sickness absence due to your mental health, it is likely that your employees will continue to ring and ask when you'll be back at work. They don't know any different.
- May help when asking for sickness absence. Sickness absence may be discretionary in your organisation. The decision to grant your sickness absence can be affected by your disclosure of why you are asking for it.
- Provides an opportunity to discuss reasonable adjustments.
- Allows other to be aware of your triggers, signs and symptoms so that they can help you look after your future mental health and wellbeing.
- Opens a whole additional support network of people who are also experience ill mental health.
- Medical professionals can liaise with your organisation directly. They can help your employer and develop an action plan your return e.g. gradual phase return to work.
- Mental ill health is a legitimate health issue and sometimes requires sickness absence to get better. Disclosing your mental ill health will legitimise your sickness absence so that your employer understands why you need this time off.
Interactive materials for Step 1:

TEMPLATE LETTER/EMAIL: Letter/ email to edit and use to tell your employer you will be off work

Dear [name of manager/employer]

Re: Sickness absence

I am writing to inform you that I will not be coming to work today/for the next xx days.

I have not been feeling well.
[Here you can continue to describe your health and how this affects your work i.e. in what ways is it making your job more difficult for you or why you need to take some time off work to recover

Or select from:
- I am not clear why I feel like I do but I know that I feel sad and unfocused.
- I feel overwhelmed and like I cannot cope with my job.
- I am more emotional than I am usually.
- I am concerned about aspects of work which is affecting how I think about things.
- My mental health is affecting my work by....

Communication while I am off work

While I recognise that you may need to contact with me for specific purposes, I would prefer our contact to be in the following way if possible:

- Who: with (my line manager / designated colleague)
- How: by (email, telephone, meet ups)
- Frequency: (for example once a week, or after your appointment with the GP)

What to tell others (team, clients)
I would kindly ask that, during this sickness absence, [edit as appropriate]

- The reasons for my absence are kept confidential and are not discussed with all colleagues and clients.
  Or
- My immediate team is told that I am unwell and taking some time to concentrate on my mental health but hope to return soon.

Yours sincerely,

[Your name and signature]
CHECKLIST: Checklist for telephone conversation telling your employer you will be absent from work.

- **Start off as you would with any conversation**: exchanging pleasantries and having an informal catch up.

- **State why you are calling**: “I wanted to talk to you about my sickness absence and the reason I have been off work”.

- **If you feel comfortable, give them the details of your ill-health.** Remember the more your employers know, the more they will be able to support you whilst you are off work and, on your return to work. You can use these to help you:
  - I am experiencing…
  - I am having trouble with…
  - I do not know why, but I feel…

- **Talk about how your ill-health affects your ability to do your job.** For example, “I am finding it difficult to concentrate/ am making mistakes that I do not usually make”.

- **If relevant – talk about how your work has contributed to your ill-health.** This might be an incident for example “Yesterday a client was aggressive, and I feel…” or an accumulation of stress over time “I feel overwhelmed by the amount of work / emails/ tasks I need to do”. If you are specific, your employer may be better able to help you, and help others that might be in your position.

- **Suggest your preference for communication while off.** “So that I can concentrate on my health, as far as possible please could you contact me by (mail, telephone, meet ups), (once a week, after your appointment with the GP). I would feel most comfortable if this was with (my line manager/ Human Resources/ designated colleague)”.

- **Confidentiality**: Tell them whether you would like your reason for absence to be kept confidential to all colleagues/clients or whether you would like your immediate team to be told.

- **Your questions**: Ask your employer to clarify anything you are unsure about, for example sickness pay, whether they will let HR know etc.

- **Closing the conversation**: Thank them for their understanding and let them know what you will be doing to improve on your health and that you will let them know when you are clearer about when you will be back.
Interactive materials for Step 2:

**EXERCISE: Consider the 5 ways to wellbeing (For more details see the [Mind website](https://returntoworkmh.co.uk/)).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The five ways to wellbeing</th>
<th>Do I do enough of this this?</th>
<th>Action to improve my wellbeing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connect with others</td>
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<td>For example, arrange to meet a friend for lunch or a walk, visit neighbours.</td>
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<td>Be active</td>
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<td>For example, walk, cycle, run, go to the gym, take up yoga. Find an activity that you enjoy.</td>
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<td>Take notice</td>
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<td>Take notice</td>
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<td>For example, reflect on what is going on around you. Some useful resources include <a href="https://returntoworkmh.co.uk/">NHS Help page</a>, <a href="https://returntoworkmh.co.uk/">HEADSPACE</a>, <a href="https://returntoworkmh.co.uk/">BE MINDFUL</a>, <a href="https://returntoworkmh.co.uk/">MIND</a> or try the gratitude exercise in this guide: <a href="https://returntoworkmh.co.uk/">click here</a>. Alternatively, you can try a mindful/reflective diary.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Learn</td>
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<td>Learning new things helps us build self-esteem. For example, sign up for a course, learn a new skill from a friend, read a book.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving back to others makes us feel good. For example, volunteer in your community, help others with shopping/tasks, do something nice for a stranger.</td>
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CHECKLIST: Other important things you can do to improve your mental health (see appendix)

Are you:

- **Eating properly?** See the [mind website](https://www.mind.org.uk/) for more information.
- **Sleeping properly?**

- **Doing what makes you feel happy?** Make a list of three things you used to do that made you feel good before you became ill. Can you go out and do them? Maybe ask a friend to come and support you.

- **Doing things you are good at?** What is it that you are good at? Make a list of three things you are good at, things that you enjoy and know that you can do well. Make a plan for how you do more of these.

- **Aware of what you need to improve and protect your mental health?** Consider putting in place a Wellness and Recovery Action Plan (WRAP). See the [WRAP website](https://www.mind.org.uk/wrap) for more information about WRAPs and a [PDF on the mind website](https://www.mind.org.uk/) for a detailed guide on how to create one.
EXERCISE: Gratitude diary

Why: Keeping a gratitude diary has been found to have many benefits. We rarely make time to think about what we are grateful for. Keeping a gratitude diary can help re-programme our brains to recognise the positive things in our lives and our environment. This can kick start a cycle of positive thoughts and improve your mental health.

How:

- Write down three things that you are grateful for. You can be grateful for anything – it is your diary. But try to be as specific as you can.
- Repeat every day for at least three weeks and see if you notice a change!
- You might find it useful to print this off and complete it at the same time each day – many people like to do it just before they go to bed each night or before breakfast each morning.
# Gratitude Diary

**Start Date:**

Write down three things that you are grateful for. You can be grateful for anything – it is your diary, but try to be as specific as you can.

**Example:**

1. That I was able to meet Jane for lunch today.
2. For my sister phoning me today and asking me how I am.
3. That it didn’t rain today while I was out.

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<tr>
<th>Monday:</th>
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<th>Saturday:</th>
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<th>Reflections:</th>
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EXERCISE: Mood diary

**Why:** Understanding when you are at your best – and worst – can help you organise your day. You can then do the most important things when you are at your peak and develop ways of managing the times or tasks you find difficult.

**How:**
- Write down what you are doing and how you are feeling every two hours over a week. It doesn’t matter if you miss some, or if you fill it in a few hours late. The aim is to reflect on what you are doing and how you feel over the week.
- Print out the diary and keep it with you – perhaps in your pocket or in a prominent place around the house.
# Mood Diary

**Day:**

**Instructions:**
Think about what you do throughout the day, who are you with, how do you feel, what tasks are you doing? Rate every 2 hrs:

😊 😞

**Today's Schedule:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 AM</td>
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<td>8 PM</td>
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**Reflections**

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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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**Closer to Your Goal**

**Water**

[Water icons]
EXERCISE: Mindful/reflective diary

Why: Psychological health has been found to influence by mindfulness activities. This can help you be aware of your thinking patterns, for example if you have repetitive negative thoughts. This diary helps you to be mindful of your day in terms of what went well. It reduces negative thoughts by thinking about ways to improve on things that were challenging.

How:

• Write what you think went well today. Also write down what didn’t go so well today and what could be done differently tomorrow. This diary aims to get you to think about things that been positive as well as challenging. It also aims to help you think about how you can improve in the future.

• Print it off and complete it for the week. Keep it somewhere that you have easy access to. It can be completed at the end of each day.
Interactive materials for Step 3:

EXERCISE: Preparing to talk to your GP

Preparing to talk to your GP

What are your symptoms – changes to your thoughts, feelings, behaviour?

Key personal details – any recent events at home or at work?

Other medical information:

Questions you would like to ask:
TEMPLATE LETTER/EMAIL: Letter/ email to edit and use to tell your employer you will be off work, including information following your conversation with the GP

Dear [name of manager/employer]

Re: Sickness absence

I am writing to inform you that, after seeing my GP, they have recommended/signed me off work for xx days.

The GP has provided me with some more information about my mental ill health and how my work might be affecting it.
[Here you can describe your mental ill-health and how this affects your work as described by your GP, i.e. in what ways is it making your job more difficult for you or why you need to take some time off work to recover].

Communication while I am off work
As previously stated in my last letter/email, I would prefer our contact to be in the following way if possible:

- Who: with (my line manager / designated colleague)
- How: by (email, telephone, meet ups)
- Frequency: (once a week, after your appointment with the GP)

What to tell others (team, clients)
As previously stated in my last letter/email I would kindly ask that, during this sickness absence, (choose one of the following as appropriate or give guidance on what you want to be said)

- my mental ill-health is kept confidential to all colleagues and clients.

Or

- my immediate team is told that I am unwell and taking some time to concentrate on my (mental) health but hope to return soon.

Yours sincerely,

[Your name and signature]
CHECKLIST: Checklist for telling your employer you will be absent from work following your conversation with your GP

- **Start off as you would with any conversation**: exchanging pleasantries and having an informal catch up.

- **State why you are calling**: “I wanted to talk to you about my sickness absence having seen the doctor and they have recommended that...”.

- **If you feel comfortable give them the details of your ill-health after visiting the GP and update your employer.** Remember the more your employers know, the more they will be able to support you whilst you are off work and, on your return, to work. You can use these to help you:
  - I am experiencing...
  - I am having trouble with...
  - I do not know why, but I feel...

- **If you discussed details about your work with your GP talk about your discussion and how your ill-health affects your ability to do your job.** For example, “The doctor suggested there may be certain aspects of my job might hinder my mental ill health....”

- **If relevant – talk about potential contributors to your ill-health as discussed with your GP.** This might be an incident “Yesterday a client was aggressive, and I feel....” or an accumulation of stress over time “I feel overwhelmed by the amount of work / emails/ tasks I need to do”. If you are specific your employer may be better able to help you and, help others that might be in your position.

- **Remind them of your preference for communication while off.** “So that I can concentrate on my health, as far as possible please could you contact me by (mail, telephone, meet ups), (once a week, after your appointment with the GP). I would feel most comfortable if this was with (my line manager/ Human Resources/ designated colleague).

- **Confidentiality:** Tell them whether you would like your reason for absence to be kept confidential to all colleagues/clients or whether you would like your immediate team to be told.

- **Your questions:** Ask your employers to clarify anything you are unsure about, for example sickness pay, whether they will let HR know etc.

- **Closing the conversation:** Thank them for their understanding and let them know what you will be doing to improve on your health and that you will let them know when you are clearer about when you will be back.
Interactive materials for Step 4:

**EXERCISE: Identifying your signs, symptoms and triggers**

Being aware of your signs, symptoms and triggers can help you identify when your health is starting to get worse so that you can take action to protect yourself. Telling friends and close colleagues about these means that may be able to help you recognise the signs and triggers.

**Signs, Symptoms and Triggers**

Additional resources:
- [Wellness & Recovery Action plan](https://returntoworkmh.co.uk/) (WRAP)

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**EXERCISE: Your readiness to return to work.**

Looking at the line below, where would you place yourself? Think about what this means for how you return. If you are not feeling 100%, try to explore whether you can return gradually. If this is not possible, take time to think about how you will manage when you go back to work – what are your signs and triggers of ill-health? What can you and others do to manage the impact of these?

- I cannot think about going back to return
- I am ready to get back to work but not quite 100%, I could definitely do parts of my job
- I am ready to get back, I feel great.
EXERCISE: About your work

Sometimes we spend a lot of time worrying about something that others do not see as important. Working through these questions will help you when you discuss your return to work with your manager.

1. **What tasks/ parts of your job do you feel you could comfortably do now?**

2. **What tasks/ parts of your job do you feel worried about being asked to do?**

3. **Is there anything that would make it easier for you to manage these on your return?**

4. **What are the most important parts of your job to get done?**

5. **If you could change the things about your work that caused you distress, what would they be? How would they change?**
CHECKLIST: Checklist to make the first day back much easier:

As you approach your return:

- Consider meeting up with a colleague for a chat. Find somewhere neutral/away from work for an informal catch-up if you think this would be helpful.

- Tell your family or friends that you are returning to work so that they can be there for you in the morning/after work during the first week.

- Arrange for a friend or colleague to pick you up on your first day or meet you in the car park so that you can walk in together.

- Ask your employer for a clear plan of what will happen on your first day (for example, who when, where will you meet and what work you will be doing). See the example intention to return to work email/letter below to give you an idea of what you can suggest.

- Ask your employer when your return to work conversation will happen. Depending on the nature/duration of absence this could be on day 1, 2, 3 etc. Think about whether you would like a colleague to join you to support you and take notes.

- Complete the exercises in this section to help you prepare for your return to work conversation.
Dear [name of manager/employer]

Intention to returning to work (Where appropriate)

I feel that I am ready to return to work and would like to return to work on [date].

To delete as appropriate depending on your length of absence and mental health needs:

While I am keen to come back to work, like many others in my position, I am a little apprehensive about what has changed while I have been away and what will be required of me on my return. To help make the return as straightforward as possible, it would be useful to have: [amend as appropriate]

• A shorter first day to settle back in to work
• A clear plan of what will happen on the first day:
  o Who will I meet, where, when for an update of any changes/ what has been going on while I have been away
  o What will I be expected to do
• A date for when we will meet to have the return to work conversation

While I could manage a number of aspects of my job, I would like to discuss some adjustments to my work that may support me to continue to do my job well and protect my mental health.

• [Describe the changes you would like to help your working condition and explain how these changes can help you perform well
• Note if they have been discussed with the GP/ another health professional]

I recognise that these may not be possible or may only be possible in the short term while I gradually return to work, but I would welcome your consideration of them.

Yours sincerely,

[Your name and signature]
Interactive materials for Step 6:

**CHECKLIST:** Maintaining my health

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>My health</th>
<th>Am I looking after myself?</th>
<th>What can I do to improve my health?</th>
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<td>Eating</td>
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