

## Step 1: Dealing with initial absence



### KEY FACTS:

- People often find it difficult to talk about mental ill-health and sometimes do not recognise it in themselves. In severe cases of mental ill-health, an employee may feel numb and unable to ask questions or for help.
- It is common for an employee experiencing mental ill-health to take a series of isolated absences of fewer than 7 days, reporting a variety of symptoms. Keep a clear record of everyone's absences so that you spot any patterns. This gives you a chance to support people before the absences become longer. Examples of how to record absence can be found < CIPD> and <HSE>



### WHAT TO DO:

- **Record the employee's absence.** At this stage, you need to know the date and reason for absence. Employees can self-certify their absence up to 7 days without the need to provide a [Fit Note](#) (formerly sick note) from their GP.
- **If they do not contact you, contact them** ([see example email](#)).
  - Send them a note/text/flowers, something meaningful to them.
  - Give them a call to check-in to see how they are.
  - Make sure that any communication at this stage is about the employee and their health rather than when they are coming back.
- Prioritise the employee's recuperation and getting better at this stage, rather than their return to work. If they come back too soon, they are likely to need further time off work.
- Share the [employee guide](#) to help them during their absence and their preparation for returning to work. If possible, offer that someone (HR professional or colleague) sit down and go through the employee guide: this is not to ask questions, but to assist the person's understanding of and engagement with the guide.



### WHAT TO SAY to the employee:

- We are sorry to hear you are feeling unwell, we are thinking of you.
- Take time to look after yourself.
- Could we arrange a time to have a quick hand over of outstanding work – that way you can concentrate on getting better and we can cover your work while you are off.
- Let us know if there is anything you need and if we can do anything to help you.
- Let us know how and through whom you want to communicate with us.
- What, if anything, would you like to be shared with others about your reasons for being absent.



## Do NOT SAY to the employee:

- Where did you put x/ y/ z?
- I know you are off, but could you just answer this one question...
- When are you going to be back? (They are unlikely to know at first. This question would be better in week 2 or 3 if they are not yet back.)



## WHAT TO SAY to others/colleagues:

Employees are often nervous about telling others about their illness and are reluctant for details to be shared with colleagues. **You must not share details of the employee's health problems without their consent.** Sharing sensitive personal data without consent creates a variety of employment law and data protection risks.

If the individual would like their reasons for absence kept confidential you could say: "[employee's name] has been feeling unwell and is taking some days off to get better. I am speaking to them/ will contact them early next week to see how they are and then we will know more."



## TEMPLATE LETTER/EMAIL:

[Example email to edit and send to an employee when they have not notified you of their absence.](#)



## CHECKLIST:

[A checklist of things to say on a telephone conversation with an employee when they have not notified you of their absence.](#)



## WATCH OUT: What if the manager has contributed to the absence?

It is sometimes the case that an employee feels that their mental health condition has been caused or exacerbated by the manager. In these cases, the employee and/or manager should nominate an alternative person as a contact point. This could be a line manager from a different part of the business, or a colleague trusted by both parties.