

Step 6: Keeping healthy and productive at work

It is important that the employee is supported in the long term. Getting back into work is the first part of a long journey in maintaining their health and continuing to work long into the future.



KEY FACTS:

- Many people who experience mental ill-health only ever experience it once.
- Giving an employee too much work too soon can lead to further absences, or to the employee leaving the company. Imagine if you were fit enough to run 2K but were asked to run 5K. By training over time, you can build up to doing it, but if you do it when you are not ready you are likely to injure yourself. Returning to work is just the same: too much too soon can lead to avoidable problems.
- On-going communication and review of the return plan will give the employee the best possible chance of staying at work and staying healthy.



WHAT TO DO:

- **Monitor and review the work plan:**
 - Do not assume the employee is fully functional. This may take some time.
 - Have regular check-ins, in the way agreed during the return to work conversation
 - Review the work plan at the point agreed during the return to work conversation
 - Make sure that the employee has an alternative point of contact in case they feel unable to raise concerns with their manager (or HR).
- **Agree a wellness programme** as a safety net so that you don't need to constantly talk about it. Research shows that 'wellness and recovery action plans, WRAPS' are effective ways to maintain health and wellbeing and are useful for all of us, not just those experiencing mental ill-health. You could encourage your whole team to write one! (See the [wellness recovery action plan on the Mind website](#)).
- **Aim to prevent relapse**

Some people who take sickness absence due to a mental health problem recover and never experience mental ill-health again. Others find that their mental health fluctuates (or varies) over time, and experience periods of good health and poor health. For those with fluctuating mental health, it may be that the employee takes a second or third period of absence. People often get worse because they take on too much too soon. Effective monitoring by both the employee and employer, and open communication, can help to prevent relapse.
- **Create a healthy workplace**

The things that help employees to achieve a successful return, also form part of general good practice. For tips on how to create healthy workplaces, see the [HSE Management Standards on the Health and Safety Executive website](#).

What happens if the employee relapses?

If an employee relapses, it is particularly important that any work-related causes of their health problems were addressed when they returned to work after their first spell of absence. If there are work-related causes and these have not been addressed following the employee's first period of sickness absence, then you, as their employer, are at much greater risk of legal action because the health problems could be seen as 'foreseeable'.

If the employee has further periods of absence, you can repeat Steps 1-6. It may be that at some point you will need to seek external professional advice and/ or re-contract with the employee.

Long term disability

There is always a risk with mental health that the condition becomes long term. Under the Equality Act 2010, in the UK (other than Northern Ireland) a person is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities. For more information on disability discrimination at work please see the [ACAS document on the acas website](#). The Equality and Human Rights Commission provide various guides on their website, for example on [workplace adjustments](#), [disability discrimination](#) and [equality law](#). If you need to make long-term adaptations to an employee's job, the [Government's 'Access to work' scheme](#) might be able to provide a grant.

What to do when things don't go to plan

Unfortunately, despite best efforts an employee may not be able to return to work and resume their duties. In these instances, there are a number of things you can consider including ill-health retirement or exiting the employee. When this is the case, you may wish to seek professional advice.