

Return to work

An employee's guide



GROUP BENEFITS

This guide outlines things you can do to help make your return to work smooth and successful. It provides information on steps you may want to consider before returning to work, on your first day back and throughout your return to work period. We believe that taking control of your return to work will not only benefit your health but will also help your employer understand how they can best support you during this transitional period.

Key concepts to help you successfully manage your return to work

1) Work is a key part of your recovery.

- The day-to-day physical and mental demands of work can help to recondition yourself following an absence.
- The workplace provides the structure and routine necessary to facilitate a successful recovery.
- Gradually incorporating work demands into your recovery may help to improve your chances of staying healthy. Work may benefit your overall health by providing structure and routine, social interaction and a sense of accomplishment.

2) Returning to work often requires an adjustment period.

- You may not be able to fully perform the physical and mental demands of your job in the same way as prior to the onset of your condition. At times you may be frustrated, tired and worried about whether or not you can be successful.
- You may require an accommodation to help you gradually reintegrate into the hours and duties required for your job.

How do I get ready for my return to work?

Preparing to return to work may seem overwhelming, especially after being away from the workplace for an extended period of time. To help make your return to work successful, it is important that you engage in the process as much as possible. Stay connected with your health care providers, and your Manulife Disability Case Manager and Rehabilitation Specialist (if one is assigned). Talk to them about how you envision your return to work, your worries or concerns about returning, your motivation, your thoughts about what you can do to prepare and what you will need to assist your transition back to the workplace. They are available to help you.

Helpful tips:

- Clearly understand the return to work plan. What are the hours? What work tasks are you responsible for? Who do you need to communicate with? Be an active participant in the process and planning of your return to work.
- Take steps to address problems early. If there are workplace factors that may affect or exacerbate your condition, take steps to deal with them. This may mean talking to your manager and/or Human Resources representative or developing strategies to deal with stressful situations positively and proactively.
- If you have been away for an extended period of time, it may be helpful to talk to your manager about any training you may need to effectively complete your work tasks.
- Know where to go if you have questions or concerns.
- Establish what, if anything, you will communicate to others about your absence.
- Develop support resources. Take an inventory of your existing support system. Your support system may include your doctors and your Manulife Disability Case Manager and/or Rehabilitation Specialist. It may also include your Employee Assistance Program, your Human Resources representative at work, family, friends and community. Know that you will need extra support during the return to work. This can mean informing family, friends, physicians or other health care providers about your return and letting them know how they may be of help to you.
- Get regular exercise every day and maintain a healthy diet.
- Establish a healthy sleeping routine.

Returning to work following an absence can often be the most critical phase of your recovery. How you handle the transition back to work may determine how successful you will be. Fortunately there are many things you can do to help prepare for a successful reintegration into the workplace.



What kind of accommodations can I expect?

The purpose of workplace accommodations is to help remove return to work barriers for individuals with disabilities. Accommodations should be assessed on an individual basis. They should meet your needs as they relate to your medical condition and they should be based on the resources available to your employer.

Accommodation examples may include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Hours – graduated return to work, flex time to attend appointments, balance work/life, non-standard breaks during the work day.
- Duties – modification of work tasks, elimination of non-essential tasks during the return to work, allowing extra time to complete tasks.
- Modification of work environment – lighting, noise or other distractions.
- Supervision – changing the way direction is provided (e.g., in writing or allowing you to tape record), prioritization of tasks.
- Additional training or coaching – providing a buddy system for additional support.

A “one size fits all” approach will not work. We believe the accommodation for your personal situation should be assessed accordingly.

What should I do on my first day back?

Your first day back at work is a big step in the right direction, especially if you have a plan. Here are some tips that may help make it successful:

- Review the return to work plan with your manager to help ensure you both understand it, including how you will evaluate success and address issues.
- Discuss things like workload, job duties and performance to clarify your expectations and your managers expectations align.
- Discuss any extra training or reintegration time/resources that may be required.
- Validate that you have an easily accessible list of resources should you run into difficulties or begin to feel overwhelmed.
- Try to get back into a regular work routine.

What should I tell my manager?

Your manager plays a critical role in your return to work. Maintain an open and honest approach. Assess your situation and decide what you should tell your manager. A few suggested considerations and reflections are as follows:

- What are you comfortable telling your manager? Keep in mind that saying nothing can lead to problems as they might mistakenly confuse your medical condition with performance problems. Find a balance between your own privacy and helping your manager understand your situation.
- Keep details to a minimum. Use general terms like illness or disability versus the specific diagnosis and/or treatment. It is entirely at your discretion in terms of how much information you are comfortable disclosing to your manager.
- How does your medical condition affect your ability to work?

- How can your manager help? This may involve workplace accommodations, looking out for signs of problems, identifying situations that may be more difficult or challenging, and the best way for them to communicate with you if they have concerns.
- Is your employer able to provide additional support and resources?
- Take the opportunity to reinforce your skills, abilities and commitment to the company.
- Once you have established what you will share with your manager, you may want to consider discussing with them how to approach communicating with co-workers about your situation.

What should I tell my co-workers?

Your approach to talking to your co-workers will depend highly on what you deem to be appropriate. Details of your absence are private and confidential. Only you can determine whether or not you want to share this information, and with whom. If you are unsure of the best approach, talk to a third party such as Human Resources or Employee Health when available.

What if I am having difficulties during my return to work?

Despite being prepared to return to work, you may encounter hurdles along the way. To help avoid a setback, you may want to keep in mind a few of the following considerations:

- Recognize the early signs of trouble. These may include, getting easily agitated or frustrated with others or with tasks, not being able to block out distractions, having difficulty focusing, or simply not performing to the level you are used to.

- Have a plan to immediately deal with frustrations. Take a break or go for a walk. Inform your manager ahead of time so they are aware this may happen.
- Be aware of and use the resources at your disposal – your physician or other health care providers, Employee Assistance Program, your Manulife Rehabilitation Specialist and/or Disability Case Manager.
- If there are workplace factors causing problems, proactively address these with your manager and come up with solutions together.
- Address problems early so they don't negatively impact your recovery.
- Determine if changes/adjustments may be made to the return to work plan.
- It is important to always maintain focus on your recovery. After returning to work, continue with your treatment and see your health care providers regularly, or as needed.

WHERE CAN I GO IF I NEED MORE SUPPORT?

- Understand what resources your employer has available (Employee Assistance Program, etc.).
- Your Physician or Therapist (if you are seeing one).
- Some helpful online resources:
 - www.mentalhealthworks.ca
(Mental Health Works – a great resource for tools, tips and information on mental health and the workplace)
 - <http://www.iwh.on.ca>
(Institute for Health and Work – a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting, protecting and improving the health of workers)
 - <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/chn-rcc>
(Public Health Agency of Canada)

