

Returning to Work After a Disability Leave

Most people look forward to returning to work after a disability leave. It's a chance to reconnect with co-workers, re-engage with work, and get back to old routines. But the transition back to work can also be difficult. You may be returning with new priorities in your life or new restrictions on what you can do. Whatever your situation, there are ways to help smooth your return.

Find out what to expect when you return

Returning from a disability leave is a big change in your life. In addition to the adjustments in your daily routine, you may not be returning to work exactly as you left. Your job or your capacity for work may be different now. As you prepare for your return, it will help to gather as much information as possible.

- *Talk to your doctor about what to expect as you are recovering.* Be clear about what you are currently able to do, and how that impacts your work. If your job requires lifting, will you be able to do this work? If you need to stand or sit for hours, you may need a break at regular intervals.
- *If you will need accommodations in the workplace, talk with your leave co-ordinator.* The person responsible for managing your leave may be in human resources, a case manager outside the company, or your union representative. Together, review your current abilities and job description. Identify changes that will allow you to return safely to productive work. You may be able to return to full-time work, but need a schedule change to accommodate ongoing medical treatments. You may need a different chair, computer screen, or a wrist rest at your desk. Or, you may need to be temporarily reassigned to a job that requires no travel.
- *Talk with your manager about what you expect, and about what is expected of you.* Even if there are no tangible accommodations to your work environment or schedule, it may take you a while to get “up to speed.” Be clear about what you will need to feel confident about your work. Together, plan how much work you will be able to do when you first return.
- *Talk to others who have experienced a similar injury or illness and who have returned to work.* Ask them about their experience. What can they tell you about the first few days of work? Ask which supports proved helpful to them over time.

Finalize your arrangements for personal and family needs

As your return date approaches, do what you can to prepare yourself and your family for the transition back to work. Your return will be smoother if you have had a chance to address your personal and family needs.

- *Firm up any medical arrangements you need to make before your return.* Schedule appointments for physical therapy or other medical treatments. Make transportation arrangements. Refill prescriptions that are running low.

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- *If you need child care, finalize plans now.* You may need to start up child care again or adjust existing care to your new work schedule. Plan back-up child care as well. A trial run of the new arrangement during your last week of leave will help you and your child adjust to the new transition.
- *Establish routines at home for the beginning and end of the day.* It may help to have a checklist to follow, both for you and for other family members who share in household responsibilities. Think, too, about what you can do the night before, and what needs to get done in the morning.
- *Take care of errands and household tasks.* Before you return, you might prepare and freeze several meals. Do you need a haircut? Are there bills to be paid? Any tasks you can complete in your final days on leave will help make things easier at home as you make the transition back to work.

Work with your company's leave co-ordinator to make any special arrangements for your return

As you approach the end of your leave, your leave co-ordinator can help with the timing of your return. Finalize plans to assist in your transition back to work, as well.

- *Identify any physical or emotional limitations that affect your work.* Are you taking medication that affects your ability to perform certain tasks at work? Will you be able to handle the walk from the parking lot to your company's building? Be clear about what you can do and what you aren't yet able to do.
- *Think about any special schedule requirements you may have.* Will you need to leave work for medical appointments? You may need to take time out from work for physical therapy exercises. Find out if you can return to work on a reduced schedule until you are fully recovered.
- *Plan to evaluate your changing abilities as you recover.* In time, most people who return from a disability leave are able to work at full capacity. Plan to make adjustments to your schedule or other accommodations as needed.

Plan your return with your manager

Hopefully, you have been in touch with your manager throughout your leave, and have found ways to stay current about what's going on at work. As your return date approaches, you'll need to touch base more often with your manager.

- *Demonstrate commitment and talk about special concerns.* Show your commitment to the company and your work group by initiating a conversation with your manager about your return.
 - Let your manager know as early as you can about any schedule adjustments or other accommodations you may need. Your company's leave co-ordinator can help you make those arrangements with your manager.
 - The details of your medical situation can be kept confidential. Only your company's leave co-ordinator or human resources department needs to know about your medical condition. If you choose to keep your condition confidential, you should decide what to say to your manager about your absence. Think, too, about what you would like your manager to say to others at work.
 - Some employees do find it helpful to share information about their situation with their manager, as a way of setting expectations. You might photocopy an article, for example or a few pages from a

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book about your condition. A piece written by an expert may explain what you are going through and help your manager understand the realities of your situation.

- *Talk about job responsibilities and your work schedule.* Discuss with your manager how the work you are responsible for will get done. Talk about which tasks you can take on right now, and which, because of your medical condition, you may not be able to manage until later.
 - If you can't take on all of your former responsibilities right away, you might offer to gradually increase your workload.
 - Talk about your schedule and whether some flexibility might help in the transition back to work. If flexibility is necessary for a medical reason, your leave co-ordinator can help you work out the details with your manager.
 - As you have these discussions, try to see things from your manager's point of view. Your manager must balance the needs of everyone in the department and see that the work gets done. You are the person closest to the work, and you can play an important role in helping your manager come up with business alternatives and staffing solutions. Work with your manager to find "win/win" solutions that meet everyone's needs.
- *Follow up with regular meetings.* Once you are back at work, continue to meet regularly with your manager. It will give you both a chance to re-evaluate your workload, to see how you are managing, and to determine whether the business's needs are being met. Regular meetings with your manager will also help you feel like a normal part of the work group, rather than an "outsider" with an unusual schedule or special condition.
 - Use your meetings to honestly assess your workload, to be sure you aren't trying to take on too much too quickly.
 - As you make progress toward recovery, you and your manager can adjust your responsibilities to reflect your improving capabilities.

Talk with co-workers

Co-workers, too, need to know what to expect from you as you return, and how your work will fit in with theirs. If you are returning at less than full capacity, your manager will play a key role in explaining how tasks will get done. You may either want to speak with co-workers yourself about your limitations and work capacity, or help your manager in explaining this to them.

Ideally, you want the people around you to understand what you can and cannot do, both when you first come back and later on, as your abilities change. Whether or not you share details of your condition with co-workers, it is important for them to know your current capabilities.

- *When co-workers feel overworked.* If you sense that co-worker resentment is affecting your work and the work of your team, talk with your manager about the problem.
 - You may be able to defuse this tension by helping co-workers understand what you are going through. Perhaps just explaining your struggles will help. Be sure, too, to express your appreciation for their continuing support.

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- It may be that you need your manager's help. Your manager might discuss work assignments with your co-workers, making it clear that what they perceive, as "special treatment" is the company's normal response to accommodate an employee with a disability. They may one day need the same flexibility.
- *When co-workers want to keep your work.* You may have to deal with a co-worker who is reluctant to give up an interesting task assigned while you were on leave. Your manager is responsible for dealing with these conflicts, but you can help.
 - If a subordinate has taken on temporary responsibilities during your absence, that person may worry that your return will mean a "demotion" to a more limited role. You might see if your manager could use your return as an opportunity to expand that employee's role. Perhaps the employee can keep some or all of the responsibility taken on during your leave.
 - Once you and your manager have decided which tasks you are resuming and which are being reassigned, suggest that your manager set up a meeting with your department or work group. Use the meeting to communicate the plan for managing these tasks and responsibilities.

Get the help and support you need

The more help and support you get, the easier the transition back to work will be. Look for and accept help from whatever sources are available to you.

- *Your spouse.* Your home routines are likely to have changed as a result of your injury or illness. You and your spouse may need to talk about your changing responsibilities. Rather than letting resentment build up, talk about ways you might share tasks at home more fairly.

Getting the facts out in the open will help you both come up with solutions. If one of you feels an undue burden from cleaning or preparing dinner every night, you might decide to buy take-out food a couple of nights each week, cut back on your housecleaning for a while, or share the chores differently.

- *Friends and family* can help you get the rest, exercise, and emotional support you need. You can help by making your needs known. If you wait for those around you to offer their help, you may be setting yourself up for frustration and disappointment.

Remember, too, that the people around you who have been giving support may need rest and support themselves. Make sure the people who help you have time to "recharge."

- *Co-workers* might help run errands for you, or provide transportation to work.

Your company may also offer training programs for employees in your situation. It may sponsor, be able to help to organize, or refer you to support groups of people with similar conditions. Check with your employer's human resources department to review what is available.

Returning from a disability leave can be an enormous transition. With the help of your doctor, your leave co-ordinator, and your manager, you can set up a plan for a smooth and successful return to work.