

Returning to Work After a Long-Term Absence

- Find out what to expect when you return
- Finalize your arrangements for personal and family needs
- Talk with co-workers
- Get the help and support you need

People often look forward to returning to work after a long-term absence. 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—parental, personal, or medical leave—there are ways to help ease your return.

Find out what to expect when you return

Returning from a long-term absence 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 it. There could be a new employee, updated systems or technology, or changes in processes. 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.

If returning following an illness or injury:

Talk with your doctor or other health care provider about what to expect as you recover. Be clear about the physical requirements of your job and what you did before your absence. If your job requires lifting, will you be able to do this work immediately upon your return? If you need to stand or sit for hours, should you take a break at regular intervals? If returning from a mental health or physical leave, it is considered best practice for the individual to return in a progressive manner—starting with a few shorter shifts and gradually increasing to full-time capacity over time. This can depend on the length of time away from work and what the work is.

Avoid returning to work too soon. Conscientious employees sometimes make the mistake of pushing for an early return to work. However, this could jeopardize your recovery and make the process take longer. If you're eager to work, you could ask your doctor and a human resources (HR) contact if you could work from home part of the time.

If you need adjustments at work, talk with your human resources (HR) or other contact. The person who manages your leave may be an HR representative, a case manager outside the company, or your union representative. Together, review your current capabilities 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 different working hours to accommodate medical treatments. You may need a different chair or wrist support at your desk or an anti-fatigue mat for extended periods of standing. Or, you may need a temporary project that requires no travel. You

may find it helpful to check with your doctor or do an Internet search for "ergonomic tools" to get ideas for devices that will help you get your job done.

Talk with your manager about your expectations and others' expectations of you. Even if there are no tangible accommodations to your work environment or work pattern, 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.

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.

Finalize any medical arrangements you need to make before your return. Arrange appointments for physical therapy or other medical treatments. Make transportation arrangements. Arrange for prescriptions refills.

If you need childcare, finalize plans now. You may need to resume childcare or adjust existing care to your new work pattern. Plan backup childcare as well. A trial run of the new arrangement during your last week of absence will help you and your child adjust to the 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 others who share household responsibilities. Think, too, about what you can do the night before and what needs to get done in the morning. Before you return, you might consider preparing and freezing several meals and any other tasks you can complete in your final days at home to help make things easier as you transition back to work.

Work with your company contact to make any special arrangements for your return

As you approach the end of your absence, your contact can help with the timing of your return and with the transition.

Identify any physical or emotional limitations that affect your work. Are you taking medication that impacts 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 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. Find out from your HR contact if you can return to work on reduced working hours until you are fully recovered. If you are a nursing mother returning from maternity leave, ask HR about resources and policies and what amenities are provided for nursing mothers, such as a clean, private place to pump during the workday and a refrigerator in which to store expressed milk.

Plan to evaluate your changing abilities as you recover. In time, most people who return from a long-term absence are able to work at full capacity. Work with your doctor or other health care professional to adjust your work pattern or other accommodations as needed.

Plan your return with your manager

If you have been in touch with your manager throughout your leave, you have probably found ways to stay up to date with what is going on at work. As your return date approaches, you'll need to touch base more often with your manager.

Consider what you would prefer to keep confidential. Prior to your leave or return, check in with your manager on how you would prefer to announce your leave and/or return to work.

Let your manager know as early as you can about any adjustments (accommodations) you may need. Your contact can help you discuss possible special arrangements with your manager. Some companies allow employees to do some work from home during their leave if they have their doctor's approval. If you're interested in any sort of flexible work arrangement, make sure to discuss this with your HR or company contact so that you meet all return-to-work requirements.

Before you return, find out from your manager and co-workers about process and personnel changes. The more prepared you are, the less likely you are to feel overwhelmed by changes.

Consider the possibility of returning to work midweek, rather than the start of the workweek. That way, your first week will be more manageable, and you will get an opportunity to see how you do and what changes you might need to make to your routines.

Remember that you can keep medical information confidential. Only your HR contact needs to know about your medical condition. If you want to keep some information confidential, decide what to say to your manager about your absence. Also, consider what you would like your manager to say to others at work.

Try to see things from your manager's point of view. Your manager must balance the needs of everyone on the team and see that the work gets done. You are the person closest to the work your job requires, 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 solutions that meet everyone's needs.

Follow up with regular meetings. After you go back to work, update your manager regularly. This will give you both a chance to reevaluate your workload, see how you are managing, and determine whether business needs are being met. Regular meetings will also help you feel like part of the work group again. As you make progress toward recovery, you and your manager can adjust your responsibilities to reflect this.

Talk with co-workers

Try to create partnerships both with your manager and your co-workers. Winning the support of your team can make a key difference in getting back up to speed. Co-workers 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 capacity increases. Whether or not you share details of your condition with co-workers, it is important for them to know your current capabilities.

Get in touch with your team members before your return. You may have been in touch with your manager or some co-workers via email or phone. Before you come back, tell your manager that you'd like to drop a line to each of your team members. Send positive, individual hellos. You might say, "I'm looking forward to coming back and picking up my share of the load. Thanks for bearing with me during my absence."

Realize that co-workers may feel overworked. If you sense that team member resentment is affecting your work and that of your team, talk with your manager. You may be able to defuse the tension by helping them understand what you are going through. Just explaining your struggles may help. Be sure to express your appreciation for their continuing support. Keep in mind that you may need your manager's help if team members feel overworked. Your manager might discuss work assignments with them, making it clear that what they see as special treatment is the company's normal response to an employee with an illness or disability. Your co-workers may someday need the same flexibility.

Work with your manager if co-workers want to keep your work. You may have a co-worker who is reluctant to give up a task assigned while you were on leave. If a junior employee has taken on higher-level responsibilities in your absence, they may worry that your return will involve a "demotion." Your manager is responsible for dealing with these situations, but you can help. Discuss possibilities and your own preferences with your manager.

Consider suggesting a team meeting. Once you and your manager have decided which tasks you are resuming and which are being reassigned, suggest that your manager discuss any changes at a staff meeting. Use the meeting to communicate and clarify plans for managing these tasks and responsibilities.

Get the help and support you need

Many people can help with your transition back to work, including:

Your partner. Your home routines may have changed as a result of your injury or illness. You and your partner may need to talk about your changing responsibilities. If one of you feels burdened by cooking every night, you might buy ready meals or takeout food a couple nights a week or share the cooking differently.

Friends and family. Those close to you can help you get the rest, exercise, and emotional support you need. Loved ones who are willing to help may not know how, so you may need to let them know what support you need. At the same time, be mindful that those who have supported you may need a break. Make sure they have time to "recharge." Let them know how much you appreciate their efforts.

Co-workers. The people you work with can be a great help on the job, and some may even offer to support you in other ways, such as providing an occasional ride home from work or getting something you need while they're out. Remember that co-workers may need some time to understand and adjust to your new limitations.

Your organization. Some companies offer training or one-to-one guidance for employees in your situation. Your company may sponsor, be able to help organize, or refer you to support groups of people with similar conditions. Check with your HR department about what is available.

Returning from a long-term absence can be an enormous transition. With the help of your doctor, your HR contact, and your manager, you can set up a plan for a smooth and successful return to work.

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