



# KEEPING WELL AT WORK

A practical guide for staff experiencing stress, anxiety or depression

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## **REFERENCES**

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# KEEPING WELL AT WORK

Everybody responds differently to the stresses and strains of modern life.

We all need and, to a degree, thrive on **pressure**: it gives us energy, helps with performance and inspires confidence. But excessive pressure can lead to **stress**. Stress may become a problem when someone feels they don't have the resources to cope with the demands placed upon them. Harmful levels of stress can lead to a mental health condition such as **anxiety** or **depression**.

**1 in 4 people experience mental ill health at some point in their life<sup>1</sup>... and they can get better**

Employers have an important role in improving work-life balance and it is generally recognised that work is good for health and wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. But for many, 'work' means overcoming obstacles, excessive expectations and challenging colleagues. For others, though, the causes of stress, anxiety or depression may not be work-related: with difficulties such as bereavement, finance, relationship breakdown, family issues etc causing problems. Indeed, non-work related stress, anxiety and depression cause more sickness absence than work-related difficulties<sup>3</sup>. At such times, work may be the 'safe place': the place where there is support and fulfilment.

## Sounds familiar?

If the above describes the situation you are in, then this booklet aims to give you some very practical information and guidance – and provides spaces for you to make notes so you can make it work for you.

***Keeping Well at Work*** covers:

- **Managing my health at work**
- **Talking to my manager**
- **Returning to work after sick leave**
- **Dealing with questions from colleagues**
- **Sources of further support**

This booklet is a companion to the ***MINDFUL EMPLOYER Line Managers' Resource*** which contains a wealth of guidance and information to help your manager help you. Copies can be downloaded or bought – visit [mindfulemployer.net](http://mindfulemployer.net) for more details.

This booklet is not a substitute for professional medical advice – but it may help complement it.

# MANAGING MY HEALTH AT WORK

Whether you've been off sick or not, it's important to keep yourself well

## Five Ways to Wellbeing<sup>4</sup>

If it's all got too much, this nationally recognised approach could help you find some time for yourself, identify what you enjoy doing and restore your work-life balance.

### Connect...

With the people around you. With family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.

### Be active...

Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance. Exercising makes you feel good. Most importantly, discover a physical activity you enjoy and that suits your level of mobility and fitness.

### Take notice...

Be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.

### Keep learning...

Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for that course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy achieving. Learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun.

### Give...

Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates connections with the people around you.

### And... Relax...

The most common method of managing stress or anxiety is through relaxation techniques. For example, controlling your breathing when you are starting to feel your anxiety build regulates it and reduces your heart rate. You can do this at your normal place of work – and no-one else need know: slowly, breathe in through your nose for a few seconds; and, slowly, breathe out through your mouth. Repeat a few times and you will feel less anxious.

## **Feeling Stressed, Keeping Well**

This easy to use, personal workbook is available free to download from [mindfulemployer.net/support/publications/](https://mindfulemployer.net/support/publications/)

*Feeling Stressed, Keeping Well* covers:

- What I'm like when I'm well
- Things I can do daily to stay as well as possible
- Identifying my stress triggers

So when you're not feeling too good it helps you to remember the things you do to stay as well as possible.

Workways, which runs the MINDFUL EMPLOYER initiative, also runs half-day workshops on keeping well at work. Contact us on 01392 677050 or visit [workways.org.uk](https://workways.org.uk) for more details.

**What do you find helpful to keep yourself well?**

**Use the space below to make some notes...**

# TALKING TO MY MANAGER

"What do I tell them?" is probably the most frequent question asked by people experiencing stress, anxiety, depression or another mental health condition. Knowing what to say or whether to say anything at all can be a difficult area – often because people are afraid of the reaction such disclosure may receive. But it's also important to avoid generalisations about how a manager will react. Not disclosing can result in problems later on and it's often the case that talking about it opens up putting support in place.

## Talking at an early stage is vital. But who starts the conversation?

### If your manager comes to you...

It may be that they've noticed something or colleagues have become concerned and mentioned it. That can be difficult. But it's well recognized that stress, anxiety and depression affects people in different ways. For some it can affect performance, timekeeping or working longer hours. Others become irritable, withdrawn or emotional. So take advantage of your manager's approach rather than see it as a threat – it may well take more effort to keep hiding something than it does to talk about it.

### Or let's say it's you...

That may seem like a really big step to take. And you wouldn't be alone: many people feel uncomfortable talking to their manager about their mental health condition for fear it will go against them<sup>5</sup>. It's natural to feel reluctant about talking about it. However, a MINDFUL EMPLOYER survey found that the most likely response to such disclosure is one where the manager listens, is supportive and is understanding – and not the negative response that is often feared<sup>5</sup>. So, if you do take that step – well done, that's a big achievement.

### Trust is important

If you've got a good relationship with your manager then that will make a big difference. If it's not so good or you find it hard to talk to them you may like to find someone else to speak to initially – perhaps a more senior manager, Human Resources, a union representative, a trusted colleague or an independent service.

Your manager isn't there to be a therapist or a counsellor – they have a business to run, a service to deliver. They're human too and won't necessarily have any knowledge about mental health so perhaps you can give them some information about your condition to help them understand a bit more.

## Let's talk

Your manager doesn't need to know everything, but they do need to know something. Before you meet, make some notes about what you want to say and what you want to get out of the meeting.

- If it's to do with work – talk about what's happening. It may be that it's a long-running thing that no-one has ever dealt with or it may be something new. Talk about what both of you can do to help the situation.
- If the issues are outside work – then it's up to you how much you say. Obviously, you may not want to reveal very personal things but it is helpful to say something even if only a few words (e.g. 'We're having real problems with our children', 'My partner's lost their job and we're in a financial mess'). That will make a difference and will be helpful for your manager.
- Talk about how long things have been difficult and whether you think it's a short-term or a long-term issue.
- Talk about whether you are receiving medical help (e.g. counselling, medication, seeing your GP).
- Ask about help available through your employer (e.g. occupational health, employee assistance programme).
- Talk about ideas you have that may help (e.g. adjusting work times, temporary alteration of duties).
- Try and distinguish between what is urgent and what is important.
- Talk about who else needs to know – and who needs to know what. Remember that your manager will only be able to help you if you let them get some advice for themselves.
- Do your colleagues need to know anything or not? If so, what would you like them to know?
- Give consent for your employer to contact your GP or other healthcare professionals – you have a right to see their report before it's sent in.

When you talk to your manager, you may like to take a colleague or a union representative with you. Make sure one of you takes written notes and that each of you has a copy afterwards. And agree how you're going to review the situation – when are you going to talk again?



As a result of a number of incidents at and away from work, Jenny, who has experienced depression and anxiety for a number of years, was absent without leave for two weeks and did not contact her employer.

A Domestic Assistant in a large general hospital, there had been other occurrences of non-contact. “When I’m depressed I find it difficult to contact my employer even though I know I should do,” Jenny says. This culminated in a disciplinary hearing at which both Jenny and her employer were supported by an NHS vocational service. The hearing and other meetings enabled Jenny to talk about the various factors that had caused these events to affect her.

Through regular reviews and meetings with Tim, her manager, and supported by HR, her supervisors and the vocational service, Jenny was able to address some interpersonal conflicts in the workplace and make lifestyle changes, all of which have led to a vast improvement and no further absences or timekeeping problems.

“Jenny has come through a difficult period and learnt to talk about issues before they get out of hand,” Tim says. “She’s done really well and I’m pleased that all seems to be OK now.”

*Names have been changed*

**Are there things you need to talk to your manager about?**

**Use the space below to make some notes...**

# RETURNING TO WORK

## **A short period of time off may be helpful & it's important to stay in touch**

Some people may not want to be contacted while they are off sick because they feel anxious, embarrassed or ashamed about the way that they feel – and sometimes it's because the manager has been part of the reason why they've become unwell. We've already considered the importance of communication – but managers worry that contacting someone who is off sick may be seen as harassment. However, lack of contact can actually make staff feel less valued and less able to return. The overwhelming view from people who have experienced a mental health condition is that appropriate contact is essential.

People who are off sick also have a responsibility to keep in contact and if the employer has made all reasonable efforts to communicate they cannot be expected to anticipate what might help the staff member to return to work.

If you are off sick, early and regular contact with your employer can be a key factor in enabling an early return. If the prospect of such contact causes you concern – why not tell your employer your preferred method of keeping in touch such as telephone, letter, e-mail or text. If you can help them, then they can help you.

## **Most people recover completely & resume work successfully**

Talking, keeping in touch and effective planning between you and your employer will maximise the chances of a successful return to work.

Your employer may have an Occupational Health service or an Employee Assistance Programme – if they do, take advantage of that support. Do give your employer permission to contact your Doctor or other healthcare professionals involved in supporting you. It may be helpful for them to see your job description and have a good understanding of the work issues so they can provide an informed response. As mentioned before, you can ask to see their report before it's sent to your employer.

It can also be helpful to involve other support services – for example, the Disability Employment Advisor (DEA) at the local Jobcentre Plus office or a specialist vocational service (such as Workways). They can provide help and support for you and your manager. Some mental health charities and other employment-focused organisations may also be able to assist.

## Planning the return to work

Before going back, it's important to meet up with your manager (at a location that feels comfortable for you) to discuss:

- Any factors at work that contributed to your absence that could realistically be changed or accommodated.
- Things that can be changed about the work and the workplace and those that can't.
- What's happening at work – social aspects as well as the work itself.
- The Return to Work Action Plan – see page 9.

Think about whether any of the following may help:

- Reducing hours for a period of time.
- Arranging for job sharing or re-assigning tasks to other colleagues.
- Starting your shift earlier or later or doing work at home.
- Increasing 'personal space' in the working environment.
- Asking for additional time to reach performance milestones.
- A private space to rest, cry, or talk with supportive co-workers.
- Allowing a job coach to come to the workplace.
- Support from others in meetings.
- Other staff to receive mental health awareness training.
- Software that gives prompts throughout the working day.
- Additional supervisory sessions, training or instruction on procedures.

Those are just ideas. Your employer has a duty to consider what is reasonable and practical – but not everything will be possible. Remember also that the 'Fit Note' you get from your Doctor may, with the agreement of your employer, also enable you to return to work gradually.

And remember, you don't have to be 100% well to go back to work.

## Still worried?

That's fine – it's only natural. Our survey found that the most common reason for someone not disclosing a mental health condition was fear it would go against them, yet the least common response by their employer was disciplinary action. The second most common reason for not disclosing was the belief that nothing would happen, yet the outcome of 'did not do anything' is low down on the list of responses. Lack of trust is the third most common reason for not disclosing, yet the response of a manager telling other people without permission is second from the bottom. Overwhelmingly, managers responded by listening, supporting and understanding.<sup>5</sup>

## THE RETURN TO WORK ACTION PLAN

- Consider adjustments to ease your return (see page 8 for some ideas).
- Visit the workplace – taking that first step back can be a daunting one: why not pop in simply for a coffee and to say ‘hello’ to colleagues.
- **A Phased Return** to normal hours within a fixed timescale is a key way of returning to work. There is no single pattern that suits everyone and your employer may have their own policy about the availability, duration and nature of such an arrangement.  
The crucial things are a gradual ‘stepped’ approach and regular reviews – here’s an example for someone who works 30 hours per week:

	<b>At the end of the week...</b>
<b>Week 1</b> – 3 hours per day for 3 days per week	Meet to Review progress and adjust accordingly
<b>Week 2</b> – 4 hours per day for 3 days per week	Meet to Review progress and adjust accordingly
<b>Week 3</b> – 5 hours per day for 3 days per week	
<b>Week 4</b> – 5 hours per day for 4 days per week	Meet to Review progress and adjust accordingly
<b>Week 5</b> – 6 hours per day for 4 days per week	
<b>Week 6</b> – normal hours	Meet to Review progress, discuss overall situation and set next review

It’s important to stick to the agreed days and hours. Hopefully, as you get used to being back at work, you will feel better – but you do need to resist the temptation to work longer hours.

Discuss any impact a phased return will have on your pay and whether you need to take annual leave to cover the non-working periods.

Agree duties in the phased return – are there aspects of your work that cause you less difficulty than others?

- Talk about what colleagues will be told about the return and agree how they will know you will not necessarily be doing your full duties – the rest of the team will need to respect that and not make extra demands upon you.
- Recognise that coming back to work will have its difficulties. You may, for example, experience additional fatigue, sleep disturbance or worry about remembering how to do your job. These are natural and normal responses for anyone who’s been off for a while – and it doesn’t automatically mean you’re becoming unwell again.



Five years ago, Carmella Jones was in a car crash that left her with a major back injury. She now has to undergo back surgery every three years for the rest of her life.

She was also diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To help cope with the aftermath, she has used Nationwide's support services, EmployeeCare, Bodycare and Occupational Health (OH).

"I suffer from severe chronic back pain and I'm now limited in what I can and cannot do," Carmella says. "My lifestyle has changed dramatically. My job requires me to speak with customers over the phone, so I spend many hours sitting, which can exacerbate the pain. Bodycare has been very helpful by building a chair to my specification and adding special features, such as moveable arms. Just as importantly, EmployeeCare has provided me with specialised counselling 24/7. It's nice to know I can talk to someone when I am feeling down.

"The OH service also has been valuable in that the OH doctor provided a report explaining why my work hours needed changing. I encourage all to find out more about these services offered through Nationwide as they can be extremely valuable."

Perhaps your employer has access to similar support services?

### **What if I can't return to my job?**

If it's becoming clear that returning to your current job isn't going to be possible then there may be some options for you and your employer to consider:

- Redeployment to another role – talk to your employer about other possible jobs within the organisation. But bear in mind that employers can't simply create a job if one doesn't exist.
- Retiring on health grounds – although nowadays a lot of employers can't offer an 'ill health package' it is worth asking what the procedure may be if this is the option that needs to be taken.
- Resignation – you may decide you wish to resign from the job. This may affect a claim for Jobseekers' Allowance (JSA) (often known as 'The Dole') but if you can demonstrate that you left so because of your health (e.g. having a letter from your GP or other health professional) then this may be accepted by Jobcentre Plus. If you continue to have 'Fit Notes' from your GP you may be able to claim Employment & Support Allowance (ESA) (what used to be called Incapacity Benefit).
- Dismissal on grounds of capability – in some cases, the employer will go through a process that determines you are no longer able to do the job for which you are employed on grounds of ill health. In these cases, the word 'dismissal' is used but it doesn't mean you've done anything wrong.

- Settlement (compromise) agreement - this is a legally binding agreement either during or following the termination of your employment, and which brings your employment to an end in return for which you agree not to pursue any claim or grievance you may have in an Employment Tribunal. You must take independent legal advice from a solicitor on the agreement and your employer will normally pay for the cost of this.

It's helpful to get advice when considering any of the above options – contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau, union representative, solicitor or the ACAS helpline at 0300 123 1100

## **DEALING WITH QUESTIONS FROM COLLEAGUES**

Whether or not you've had some time off sick, it's important to think about what you will say in response to the inevitable 'How are you?', 'What's wrong?' type of questions you will be asked by colleagues and customers. It can be helpful to decide on a set phrase to use – as with your manager, they don't need to know everything but it's helpful for colleagues to know something. What you say is up to you but it may be as simple as 'Some good days, some bad days', 'I've had a difficult period – would you mind if I didn't talk about it at the moment?' or 'I had a breakdown but I'm feeling a lot better now.'

It also depends how comfortable you feel about naming anxiety, depression or talking about what you've experienced. You may be surprised how many people will respond to your own disclosure with an insight in to their experience. People who have been off sick because of a mental health condition worry about how their colleagues will react – and are often surprised when they are greeted so warmly.

**Been off for a while? What would help you get back to work?**

**Use the space to make some notes...**

## **THERE'S PLENTY OF HELP OUT THERE...**

Visit [mindfulemployer.net/contact](https://www.mindfulemployer.net/contact) for details of organisations near you who can support both you and your employer.

Contact your local Jobcentre Plus office for help from the Disability Employment Advisor.

Further information about conditions, treatments and recovery at [www.nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

Mental health awareness training and information for your manager and colleagues may also be helpful – visit [mindfulemployer.net](https://www.mindfulemployer.net)

**Who else may be able to help you?**

**And now make a plan...**

**What do you need to do? When do you want to do it by? Who can help?**

## DOES YOUR EMPLOYER USE THIS LOGO?

MINDFUL EMPLOYER<sup>®</sup> provides employers with easier access to information and support in relation to supporting staff who experience stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions.



The logo shows that an employer is a signatory to the Charter for Employers who are Positive About Mental Health. The Charter is completely voluntary. It is not an accreditation nor is it a set of quality standards but using the logo shows they want to build on existing good practice and improve those areas which need to be done better. It doesn't mean they're getting everything right – but it does show a willingness to work towards better practice.

[mindfulemployer.net](http://mindfulemployer.net)



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