

Guide for Human Resource Professionals

What can you do to help an employee returning to work?

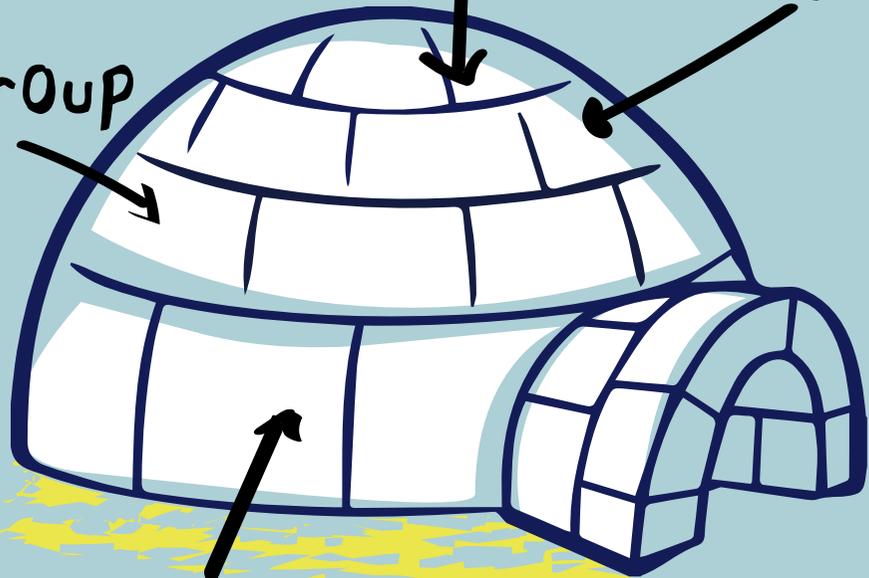
the IGLOO

for returning to work following
mental ill-health

individual

leader

group



organisation

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What can you do to help an employee returning to work?

Many people do not know what to say or do when an employee comes back to work. Your returning team member is likely to be experiencing mixed feelings. They might be looking forward to returning to a sense of normality, but are also likely to be apprehensive about how they will manage work and whether they will be able to maintain their health when back at work. These concerns are normal. In fact did you know that 1 in 6 people experience mental ill health and 1 in 3 'fit notes' signed by doctors are for mental ill-health?

This guidance is designed for Human Resource professionals to support returning employees, and those that work with them, following a period of absence due to mental ill-health. It draws from the latest evidence to outline what works, and what does not, when it comes to helping someone back to work.

We can't do everything on our own. When people have been unwell they often need help from others. Colleagues, friends and family, line managers and others can help the individual build their **IGLOO**. Remember, an employee with strong resources is much more likely to stay in and be productive at work.

What is stress, anxiety and depression?

Mental health is complicated. Everyone's experience of mental health is slightly different. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether someone is experiencing stress, anxiety or depression. A really important sign is a change in the person's behaviour – are they behaving differently? Here are some of the common signs and signals:

- Behavioural signs – struggling with workload, low levels of concentration and focus, difficulty in organising, low productivity, negative attitude, changes in motivation.
- Emotional signs – feeling anxious or irritable, mood changes, changes in how you interact with colleagues, too much emotion, feeling isolated or socially withdrawn.
- Physical signs – tiredness, having sleepless nights, increased drinking and/or smoking, not feeling hungry, headaches.

Most people make a full recovery and are able to fully contribute at work following mental ill-health. But when employees are not supported on their return, they are more likely to relapse and exit the workplace.

Many returners have a different manager on their first day back and many do not have anyone to greet them on their first day. Use this guide to give you examples of ways you could make a returning employee feel safe, welcome and productive at work.



For more details on signs and symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, and the possible impact on work – visit [Every Mind Matters](#)

Understanding your IGL00

We all need other people to help us stay happy and healthy. Everyone has their own set of resources inside and outside of work. We call this your **IGL00**. Your **IGL00** is made up of different resources that help you:

individual resources – like confidence, self-care

group resources – help from colleagues, friends and family

leader resources – help from your line manager, GPs or service provider

Organisational resources – help provided by your organisation, volunteer groups or charities

The IGL00 for returning to work following mental ill-health includes:

At home the following actions help returning employees	Resources	At work, the following help returning employees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prioritising self-care ● Establishing clear boundaries between work and leisure 	Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creating structure in the working day
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding from others ● Receiving non-judgmental support 	Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Receiving feedback on tasks from colleagues ● Getting help when doing challenging tasks ● Being treated as you did before not as someone with mental ill-health
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Having a consistent point of contact ● Facilitating of links to external services and treatment 	Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Agreeing what information about the absence and return is communicated to colleagues ● Continuing to provide support and work adjustments ● Being available but not intrusive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Accessing work-focused counselling 	Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Providing flexible working practices and leave policies ● Providing work-focused counselling ● Demonstrating care through support ● Establishing a culture where mental health is not stigmatised

How strong is their IGL00?

Use the checklist here to see what you can do to help your employee build their **IGL00**.

1. Look at the checklist. Read the statements in the 'Do I...' column. Think about whether you would answer 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes'. Mark your answer in the column.
2. Use the checklist here to test the strength of your contribution to your employee's **IGL00**. If you answer yes to these questions, you help your employee build a strong **IGL00**. If you answer 'sometimes' or 'no' think about whether they might like your help.
3. What else could you do? If you answer 'sometimes' or 'no' what could you do to make this part of their **IGL00** stronger? It may be something you need to do, you need someone else to help you do, or you need to ask for.
4. How do you make this happen? Think about what you can do to make this happen. Need help and advice? Ask colleagues, GP, Human Resources, Occupational Health, charities/support groups or union reps.

Remember...

Returning to work is not always easy, but having support can make a huge difference. If you are not sure what your employee would find helpful, ask them. Talk through the checklist with them and identify some concrete actions that you can take to help them build their **IGL00**.

Resources	Location	Do I...?	Do I... Yes, No, Sometimes	I need to... <i>If you answered "sometimes" or "no", what else would be helpful?</i>	I can make this happen by... <i>Need help and advice? Ask, Occupational Health, colleagues, line managers, charity/support groups, union reps</i>
Individual	Work	Help the employee create structure in the working day? E.g. divide up tasks in to smaller components, diarise meetings.			
	Home	Enable the employee prioritise self-care by ensuring the employee leaves work on time and by allowing flexibility for exercise, appointments etc?			
		Ensure the employee has clear boundaries between work and home?			
Group	Work	Encourage the team to provide feedback on tasks to build confidence?			
		Encourage the team to help out when doing challenging tasks?			
		Encourage the team to treat the employee the same as before, not someone different or who is experiencing mental ill-health			
	Home	If there was any conflict before the employee was absence, do we ensure this is addressed or processes are changed before the employee returns?			
	Home	** While you can't influence how friends and families behave, if you know that the returning employee is experiencing difficulties outside work, this could make the group support in work even more important for them.			
Leader	Work	Ensure line managers discuss and agree what information is to be communicated to colleagues so that the employee feels in control of what is said about them?			
		Ensure line managers have the skills and resources to provide support and work adjustments, even beyond the first month?			
		Ensure line managers have the skills and behaviours needed to make themselves available but not intrusive so that the employee knows they are there for them?			
	Home	** While you cannot influence the support the employee is able to access from their GP, if you know that the employee is finding access to support difficult it might be appropriate to direct them to occupational health support.			
Organisational	Work	Ensure that our employees are clear about the policies and practices relating to flexible working, work adjustments and absence?			
		Support the employee to access flexible working and work adjustments that are outlined in the organisations policy?			
		Provide work-focused counselling, and if so, do we make it clear where employees can find it?			
	Home	** While you cannot influence the support offered to the employee outside of work, if you know they want but are not able to access support it may be appropriate to direct them to Occupational Health, HR or your workplace EAP.			

What next?

Managing a returning employee is not always easy, but the policies and practices used by an organisation can make a huge difference. A compassionate absence management policy, access to work adjustments and a supportive line manager can be the difference between someone returning and staying at work, and continuing to have a productive working life; and someone feeling overwhelmed and relapsing soon after their return only to struggle to regain employment. Share the employee, colleague and line manager guides to help ensure that your returning employees are given the best opportunity to stay at work on their return.

Where to go for further information

Mental health

Every Mind Matters

Mind

Mental Health Foundation

Time to talk

www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters

www.mind.org.uk

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

take-time-to-talk.com

Professional bodies

CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development)

www.cipd.co.uk

IOSH (Institution of Occupational Safety and Health)

www.iosh.co.uk

HSE (Health and Safety Executive)

www.hse.gov.uk

ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service)

www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1461

DRC (Disability Rights Commission)

www.drc.org.uk

SOM (Society of Occupational Medicine)

www.som.org.uk

Managing mental health at work:

ACAS Managing staff absence guide

www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4199

ACAS Mental health at work guidance

www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1900

Mental Health at Work

www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

Access to Work

www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview

Biographies

Professor Karina Nielsen is Director of the Institute of Work Psychology, University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on the design, implementation and evaluation of organizational interventions in the field of organizational health.



Dr Joanna Yarker is Director of Affinity Health at Work, a workplace wellbeing consultancy. Her work uses evidence based approaches to improve health and wellbeing at work for employees, teams, managers and organisations.



About these Guidelines

These guidelines have been developed by a research team from Sheffield University, in partnership with Affinity Health at Work. The research was funded by the Productivity Insights Network, a multidisciplinary network funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Supported by a diverse steering group of subject matter experts, practitioners, policy makers, employers and employees who have returned following mental ill-health, the research team followed 38 employees who had returned to work following a period of absence, and 20 line managers who had managed a returning employee. Using thematic analysis, the team identified the resources that employees reported helped them stay and be productive at work. Once the interviews had been analysed the steering group supported the design of the guidelines presented here.



The University Of Sheffield.



productivity insights network

