



Back to work... after stress

This fact sheet is designed to support you with your return to work after absence due to stress. It offers self-help tips to ensure that going back to work is as smooth as possible.

If you have been off work for a while you may feel apprehensive about going back. However, with some preparation, and the support of your employer, returning to work can be a positive step on your road to recovery, boosting your confidence and self-esteem.

Tip: don't push your limits. Remember, everyone has a different recovery rate – you are the best judge, but if you are feeling up to it, you don't have to wait for a sick note to expire or until you feel 100% before returning to work.

Talk about work

Keeping in contact with your employer before you return to work is key so that you can plan your return together and that they can give you effective support. Keeping up-to-date with what's going on in work will help you feel less cut off, more in control and better prepared for managing your work load.

Make a note of anything you think your employer can do to help you return to work and discuss this with them the next time you speak to them. If your stress is work related then working with your employer to find solutions is crucial to prevent it from happening again. When it comes to your job you are the expert and will have a good sense of what help or adjustments you might need to help you get back into work.

If you have been given advice or recommendations by your doctor in relation to your work, remember to keep your employer in the loop, this will help them plan your return to work in the best possible way.

Tip: talk to your GP who will be able to help you plan and support your return to work. Ask about this at your next appointment.

Long periods out of work can cause or contribute to an increased risk of mental health problems.

Stress busting tips

There are a number of things that you can do while you're in work that can help prevent further episodes of stress and improve your mood in general.

Talk to your employer. Your employer should be keen to support you and to ensure that you are able to cope. Having regular dialogue with them is important.

Tip: at first you may find that setting a specific time each day or week to go through things with your employer will help.



Back to work... after stress

Stay relaxed. If you feel under pressure or overwhelmed by returning to work try to take a step back and take some time out. Even a quick walk round the block or making a cup of tea can give you the head space to help you stay relaxed. Speak to your employer who will be able to help.

Tip: try this quick deep breathing exercise for instant relaxation. Take a long slow breath in and then very slowly breathe out until all the breath is out. Really concentrate on relaxing your muscles. Repeat this 5 or 6 times. After doing it a few times you should start to feel more relaxed.

Make time to get active. This is really important as exercise improves your mood – and your quality of sleep. There are lots of easy ways to build activity in to your working day – even short bursts of activity are effective so it's definitely an option for you.

Tip: get active during breaks. For example, go for a walk, walk up the stairs (instead of using the lift or escalators), get off the bus, train or tube a stop or two early, cycle to work, walk to meetings, do a class at lunch time or a brisk walk with a colleague. You are the best judge of the level best for you.

Watch what you eat. Having a healthy balanced diet increases your body's resistance to stress.

Tip: eat plenty of fruit and vegetables to help boost your immune system and make time for breakfast. A healthy nourishing breakfast can boost your energy levels and prepare you for the day ahead. Avoid caffeinated and sugary drinks if you are stressed as they can increase feelings of anxiety. Drink plenty of water instead.

Sleep well. Getting quality sleep is important as it helps your body and mind repair and recover. Adults usually need on average 7-8 hours sleep – but this can be difficult for some people, especially if you have children or work shifts. If this is the case aim to have at least 4 hours of sleep at the same time each day as this can help keep your sleep clock regular.

Tip: if you are having problems sleeping try to **avoid caffeine** after 5pm, **cut out smoking** before bed (or give it up altogether - smoking is a stimulant and can keep you awake), **exercise** – you'll fall asleep faster and sleep longer and more deeply, **steer clear of big meals** just before bed and **avoid alcohol** as it causes broken sleep and dehydration.

Stress signals

Be aware of your own stress signals so that you can act on them and feel more resilient and in control. For example, common stress signals include mood swings, poor concentration and sleeping difficulties.

SOS

If you feel like you are struggling to cope with your return to work don't hesitate to speak to your manager or occupational health service. It is important to work together to find solutions to make your return to work as easy as possible.

Don't struggle on – highlight any problems with your employer as soon as possible.

Remember, for most people return to work promotes recovery, helps with rehabilitation and improves physical and mental well-being.



Back to work... after stress

More information

Mind is the leading mental health charity in England and Wales, and works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress. Contact MindinfoLine on 0845 766 0163, info@mind.org.uk or write to Mind, PO Box 277, Manchester, M60 3XN www.mind.org.uk

If money or legal problems are causing you stress contact the **Citizens Advice Bureau** for free and confidential advice. Visit www.citizensadvice.org.uk or look in your phone directory to find your local office.

The **Health and Safety Executive** produce information and advice on work related stress. Call 0845 34 500 55 or go to www.hse.gov.uk/stress

Samaritans is available 24 hours a day to provide confidential emotional support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair. Call on 08457 90 90 90, email jo@samaritans.org or go to www.samaritans.org

Information on a wide range of health topics, including stress, is available from the **NHS Direct** website at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk; on NHS Direct Interactive on digital satellite TV (simply press the interactive button on your remote control), or by calling NHS Direct on **0845 4647***

This fact sheet contains general information produced by DPP: Developing Patient Partnerships which can be used as the first step to help you decide the best course of action to take when you or your family are not well. In the absence of any examination it is not possible to reliably diagnose and treat a medical condition. Diagnosis can only be carried out by a suitably qualified health professional after a consultation. The advice and guidance in the leaflet is the responsibility of DPP.

© DPP: Developing Patient Partnerships, 2008, Tavistock House, Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JP. Registered Charity No. 1075105. Company No. 3700340. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form without the written permission of the copyright holder.

Please consider your environmental responsibilities and, if printing this electronic fact sheet, recycle the hard copy version once you have finished using it.

