

Managing the relationship with an injured or ill worker during return to work

Why should you use this guide?

Small and medium businesses can face complex challenges when their workers become ill or injured. Managing return to work processes can be stressful, as you juggle what is best for the business and the worker. Sometimes it may feel like these are at odds with each other. However, providing support to your injured or ill workers makes a big difference to their return to work and psychological health, and sends a message to workers that your business has fair processes.

Who is this guide for?

This guide focuses on the most important relationship: the one between the supervisor and the injured or ill worker. If you are the supervisor or manager of the injured or ill worker, you can help make the return to work process a success by staying in touch with your worker, and following the suggestions in this guide.

If you do not supervise or manage staff (e.g., if you only have a different role, for example if you are the return to work coordinator, or the owner of the business, or the person in charge of HR and administration), please share this document with the supervisor of the injured or ill worker.

Throughout this document we use the word 'supervisor' to refer to someone who has direct responsibility for managing workers. Your business may use the word 'manager', but these documents will still provide a helpful guide.



This guide will help you:

Stay in touch with your injured or ill worker (see 'conversation starters' on **pages 4-11**) and keep the team in the loop (**page 7**)


Make changes to the workplace and/or to the work duties your worker does, to help them return to work sooner (see the guide on **pages 12-15**)



Businesses/employers also have other formal responsibilities related to a workers' compensation claim





These responsibilities depend on where you are, so check with your insurer or jurisdiction's workers' compensation authority. The workers' compensation process usually requires three areas of management:

- the claims administrative process
- the medical management of the claim, and
- your worker and your relationship with them.

This guide focuses only on supporting your relationship with your worker, but being attentive to your legal obligations, administrative requirements and the medical management of a claim also builds trust and improves business outcomes. When broader obligations relating to the administrative or medical processes are mentioned in this guide, they are highlighted in orange and with a .

When should this guide be used, and how?

The return to work process can be challenging for both the worker and the business, but **there are simple things you can do to help**. The return to work process can be divided into four parts.

-  When the worker is first injured or falls ill (p. 5)
-  While they are away from work (p. 6)
-  As they prepare to return to work (p. 8)
-  When they return to work (p. 10)

On the next page you'll find a timeline divided into these four parts, along with key steps for each part. The rest of this guide will help you talk to your worker and make changes to their workplace/to their work duties, to help them come back to work sooner.

The return to work process does not always follow a straight line. Some workers may not even need time away from work, so you might like to skip around the different parts of the guide. We recommend reading the whole guide – you may find helpful tips along the way!



Key responsibilities

As a business, you have specific responsibilities when a worker becomes injured or ill at work. These responsibilities depend on where you are and the workers' compensation laws that apply.

Contact your insurer or your jurisdiction's workers' compensation authority to find out more about your responsibilities and your worker's rights.



As your worker prepares to return to work, development of their return to work plan should begin. This guide will help you support your worker throughout their return to work, but for detailed advice about developing a return to work plan and your role in that process, see [Developing a return to work plan: Guide and template](#).



People who can help you

There are professionals who can help you get started on the workers' compensation process. Who they are depends on your business. It could be your insurance provider, a union representative, industry bodies or a return to work coordinator in your business. Reach out to someone you trust.

As your worker recovers and plans to return to work, a key person is **their GP or other health care professional (e.g., workplace rehabilitation provider, physio, counsellor)**. You and your worker should communicate with the health care professionals regularly, to help manage a gradual safe return to work.



Taking care of yourself and your workers during stressful periods

The return to work process can be stressful for both the injured or ill worker, and for you as the supervisor. There is support available to help during this challenging period.

You can call or visit:

- Your GP
- [Lifeline Australia: 13 11 14](#)
- [Beyond Blue: 1300 244 636](#)
- [MensLine Australia: 1300 78 99 78](#)

Small business owners can also access business specific support through Beyond Blue's [NewAccess](#) mental health support program.



Like this guide and wish it was more specific to your business?

An editable version of this guide is available [\[here\]](#). To tailor the materials for your jurisdiction or industry, you could consider:

- Updating the examples to ones relevant to your jurisdiction or industry
- Including further links to relevant external materials for your jurisdiction or industry

Timeline



When your worker is first injured or falls ill



While they are away from work



As they prepare to return to work



When they return to work



‘Staying in touch’ tips

Check in with your worker as soon as you find out that they are away from work due to injury or illness. Tips for keeping the conversation simple and positive are provided on page 5.

Keep in regular contact with your worker. After checking with your worker, you may include the rest of the team as well (see page 7).

Talk to your worker about a gradual return to work. Focus on what they can do – tips for how to do this are included on page 8 and pages 12-15 (suitable duties and workplace adjustments guide).

Set specific goals with your worker, and continue to check in with them regularly. Their recovery may not be a straight line, and it’s important to stay flexible (see page 10).



‘Changing the workplace or work duties’ tips

If relevant, make any immediate changes to ensure a safe and healthy working environment. Ensure steps have been taken so that similar incidents can’t happen again.

The suitable duties and workplace adjustments guide on pages 12-15 will help you think about ways to change your worker’s workplace, and/or their work duties, to help them gradually return to work. You should communicate this to your worker’s health care professionals so that an appropriate return to work program can be developed.

Review the changes you made to your worker’s workplace and work duties. Do they still suit your worker? Be prepared to keep adapting as your worker recovers.



Mental health tips

In addition to the above, there are a few key things to keep in mind for workers managing or recovering from psychological injury.

Contacting your worker as soon as you can is even more important for a worker who is away due to a psychological injury. **You are not expected to be their counsellor!** Just make it clear that their return to good mental health is the priority and that you are available for support.

Mental illness, psychological injury, and medications can affect different people in different ways. Making assumptions is dangerous. Instead, ask your worker ‘what does that mean for you?’

Take the time to understand the support they need. Often workers recovering from a psychological injury are offered flexible work arrangements and reduced hours, but in many cases modified tasks and training opportunities can also be helpful.

The lack of physical symptoms can lead to stigma and scepticism about mental illnesses and psychological injury. This makes it even more important that you have the support of your team for the changes made to the work duties and/or workplace of your returning worker.







Talking to your injured or ill worker

Conversation starters

This section will help you talk to your worker during the return to work process.

It is important to keep communicating with your worker when they first get injured or become unwell, while they are away from work, and when they return. Staying in touch with your worker during the return to work process may save your business money and help your worker return to work sooner.


There are four key times when you should get in touch with your worker.

-  When the worker is first injured or falls ill (p. 5)
-  While they are away from work (p. 6)
-  As they prepare to return to work (p. 8)
-  When they return to work (p. 10)

It is okay if the worker does not want to speak with you. What is important is that they know you genuinely care.

It is also important to keep the rest of your team informed, as everyone's work is likely to be affected by the worker's absence. Suggestions for talking to co-workers are included on page 7.

Conversation starter 1

 When the worker is first injured or falls ill

As soon as you know your worker is off for an injury or illness, contact them. It can be as simple as a phone call or a text message.

Early supportive contact is important: Research shows injured or ill workers contacted by their supervisor within the first few days were twice as likely to come back to work without needing additional time off, compared to those contacted after two weeks.

It is normal to feel anxious about this first conversation. It might seem hard, but it helps to **start simple**:

- ✓ Ask how they are and show genuine care and concern.
- ✓ Actively listen by asking questions that show you care. This can make a big difference to the worker's motivation.
- ✓ Open-ended questions are better e.g. "How are you feeling generally?" "Are you getting the help you need?"
- ✓ If the worker is comfortable talking, let them guide the direction of the conversation as much as possible.
- ✗ Workers can sometimes feel that their injury or illness is being questioned. Don't focus on aspects of the injury or illness at first contact.

Need more advice? The [Fair Work Ombudsman](#) has a guide for having difficult conversations.



Reaching out to your worker as soon as you can is even more important for someone who is away due to a psychological injury. You are not expected to be their counsellor! Just make it clear that their return to good mental health is the priority and that you are available for support, even if that just means an occasional chat.



As part of the claims administrative process or the medical management of the claim, you or someone in your business may be required to ask your worker for more information about their injury or illness. If possible, set up dedicated times for those conversations and ensure you have provided your worker sufficient time to collect the required information. Being respectful of your worker's rights and attentive to your obligations will also support your relationship with your worker.



Make a plan to keep in touch: For example, ask your worker: 'How often would you like me to check in?' 'Do you prefer phone or text?' 'You can call me any time'. It might help to put regular reminders in your phone or calendar to contact the worker.

Date/time for next check in:

Key points:




Take notes on what you talked about, so you don't have to rely on your memory later.

Date:

Key points:

You could also share these notes with your worker, for example in an email, to give them a chance to add anything you missed.

Conversation starter 2

 While they are away from work

While your worker is away, keep in regular contact with them.

Regular contact makes a difference: Research shows that people can really benefit from regular contact with their supervisors and colleagues while they are off work.

The main aim of these conversations is to stay in touch. Make it clear that your worker's return to good health is the priority and that you are available for support. You are not expected to be their counsellor! Just check in for a chat. Some examples are:

- "How are you feeling?"
- "What can I do to help you feel supported?"
- "Your (physical and mental) health comes first. We can talk about work later, when you're ready."

The injured or ill worker might also like to hear about what is happening in the business while they are away.

Tell your worker that while you plan to check in from time to time, you don't want to put pressure on them to talk about the return to work process if/when they don't feel up to it.

Let your workers know about the free and independent support services that may be available to them in your state.

Check in with your worker to find out what they are comfortable sharing with the team. For example, you might say "The team is worried about you and hopes you feel better soon! What would you like me to tell them about why you are away from work?" Suggestions for talking to the team are included on page 7.



Mental illness and medications can affect different people in different ways. Making assumptions is dangerous. Instead, ask the worker 'what does that mean for you?'



Take notes on what you talked about, so you don't have to rely on your memory later.

Date:

Key points:

Talking to the team

Conversations between you and the injured or ill worker must be kept confidential. Respecting your worker's privacy and confidentiality builds trust between workers and the business. However, it may be important to keep the rest of your team informed of relevant details, as other team members work may be affected by the worker's absence.



When the worker is first injured or falls ill

Acknowledge that the team will be affected by the worker's absence. Let the team know that the injured or ill worker will be away – depending on how comfortable the worker feels, you can share more information. You should remind your team that it is a violation of an individual's privacy to discuss their medical information with others without their consent.



It's normal to have a range of different reactions to a co-worker's absence, from concern about the worker's injury or illness to stress about what it will mean for the rest of the team.



While they are away from work

It helps to be up front: This could be a challenging time for the team. Uncertainty about how the worker is going and when they will return can be stressful or upsetting for you and your co-workers. Some co-workers might feel resentful, or curious.

Try to keep the team informed while maintaining the worker's confidentiality, and work together to manage any additional workload or tasks. For example, you might say, "I understand that the uncertainty is hard. John will be away for at least another week for personal reasons. We can talk about how to manage the extra work. How can I support you?"



As they prepare to return to work

Work with the team when planning suitable duties for the returning worker. Explain as much of the context as the worker is comfortable with, and communicate with your team to determine how you will manage the changing duties for the whole team. The 'suitable duties and workplace adjustments guide' on page 12-15 might help you come up with ideas.




If the worker is away due to psychological injury, the lack of physical symptoms can lead to stigma and scepticism. Stigma involved negative stereotyping, and can lead to discrimination and social exclusion. This makes it even more important that you have the support of your team for any changes made for the returning worker.



When they return to work

As the worker is gradually returning, their co-workers will also have a gradual return to regular duties. The team may need to continue to support the worker, even after they come back. This is a period of adjustment and transition for everyone.

Conversation starter 3

 As they prepare to return to work

When your injured or ill worker is improving and is nearing return to work, prepare to welcome them back gradually.

Talking about a gradual return helps: Research shows that injured or ill workers really value efforts by their supervisors to discuss changes that could be made to the worker's workplace, or to their duties, for their safe return. It is also key to [developing a return to work plan](#).

If you've been checking in with your worker regularly, you may have a sense of how ready they are to return to work. It's okay to ask, for example:

- "We would love to have you back, do you think we could pencil in a date?"

 Date/time:

- "I'd like to talk to you about how I can help you gradually and safely return to work."
- "We can make this work even if you can't do everything that you normally do."

You'll need to work together to make a plan that matches their needs. For more advice about the planning process and your role in it, see [Developing a return to work plan: Guide and template](#).



Did you know?

Workers don't have to be 100% well to be back at work: research shows people are more likely to recover from physical injury or illness when they are at work. Staying active after injury also helps – reducing pain symptoms and helping worker's return to their usual activities at home and at work sooner.



Remember that there are professionals – for example health care professionals, your insurer or a workplace rehabilitation provider – who can help you with the medical management of the claim. See the overview (p.1-3) for more ideas.



Tell the worker about any changes you've made to the workplace to help prevent similar incidents in the future. Invite them to offer any suggestions for further changes that would help them return to safe work.

| Changes made | Description of change |
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Your worker's health and what they can do will change over time. Plans and support set up in the first week may not be what they need after a few weeks or months.

Talk to your worker about ways you can support them to gradually return to work – step by step – working towards full recovery. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this conversation, but these ideas might help:

- “I’d like to help you return to work gradually.”
- “You don’t have to be 100% well to come back, we’ll support you to do the work you feel able to do.”
- “Have you talked to a health care professional about activities you’ll be able to do?”
- “We are happy to be involved in your return to work plan.”

It is better to focus on things they can do, rather than the things they can’t. The ‘suitable duties and workplace adjustments’ guide in the next section has more ideas for how to adapt the work environment and the tasks the worker does.



Take the time to understand the support your worker needs. Often workers recovering from a psychological injury are offered flexible work arrangements and reduced hours, but in many cases modified tasks and training opportunities can also be helpful.



Did you know?

Progress is not always a straight line. Some weeks your worker might be feeling worse, rather than better. This is normal.

Return to work planning requires teamwork, but not everyone may be familiar with the process. For more advice, see [Developing a return to work plan: Guide and template](#).



Prepare for the first few days back:


It’s normal for both you and the worker to feel worried about the initial return to work.

Key tips for talking about the return:

- Reassure your worker. For example: “It’s normal to feel nervous on the first day back.” “I’m here to support you.”
- Be flexible. For example: “The first day back is just one step in the process, and progress is not always a straight line. That’s okay, we can be flexible.”
- Include co-workers. Check in with your worker about what they would like you to tell their co-workers on their return. For example: “The team is looking forward to seeing you again! What would you like to tell them about the time you’ve been away?” (see including co-workers page 7)
- Discuss and share the documented return to work plan.

| Time | Activity | People involved |
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Conversation starter 4

 When they return to work

When your worker returns, check in with them about how everything is going. They may need more support to start off with.

Flexibility matters: Continuing to support your worker now that they are back can reduce the chance of them needing more time off and help make their return as sustainable as possible.

Meet with the worker on their first day back. Lots of people find their first few days back challenging, but as the supervisor you can help make things easier. For example:

- **Be positive**, while acknowledging the challenges of the injury or illness for the worker.
- **Take time out together.** For example, you could have a coffee or lunch together.
- **Update them:** Chat with the worker about any important information or activities that might have happened while they were away. This could be a good time to include any co-workers as well. Be careful not to suggest that their absence was a big burden on the team.
- **Highlight that you are there to support their recovery at work:** e.g. “We want you to be able to stay with us. My main aim is to support you to make that happen.”




The lack of physical symptoms can lead to stigma and scepticism about mental illnesses. This makes it even more important that you have the support of your team for the changes made to the work and/or workplace of the returning worker.



Did you know?

Each return to work journey will be different, and it may not end up as expected. Communicating regularly and openly with your worker is the most important thing you can do.

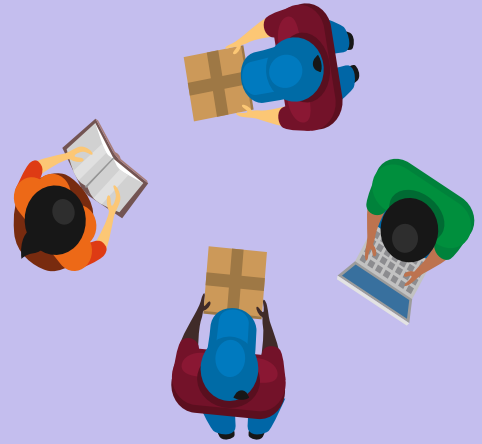
Things to do once the worker has settled in

 Time frames for recovery can be hard to anticipate, which is why it is important to remain flexible. Once the worker has settled in, there are a number of things you can do to support a sustainable return to work.

- Check in again regularly: Set up regular meetings in advance, to dedicate time to review how things are going.
- Ask whether the changes to their workplace or their work have been helpful. Highlight your commitment to a flexible approach, and remind your worker of the possibility of a gradual return to work.
- Acknowledge the positives: Recognise how the worker has adapted to their new working arrangements, and celebrate when they achieve goals in their return to work plan.
- Check in on worker wellbeing: injury and illness often have secondary psychological impacts. You can ask questions like:
 - » “How have you been coping with the changes in your work life?”
 - » “How can I support you?”
 - » “What strategies can we put in place to ease the stresses of your injury or illness?”
- Talk to your worker about some realistic goals you can set for a sustainable return to work. Set timeframes and actions to meet those goals.
- Remember to review and reset goals regularly. Have a conversation about what has and hasn't been working, and make adjustments as needed. Revisit any suitable work arrangements you have put in place.

| Goal | When are we checking in about this? | Actions to get there |
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Getting the best from your worker with suitable duties and workplace adjustments



This section will help you come up with ways to make the work and the workplace suit your worker as they recover. When a worker returns to work following an injury or illness, you may need to change the type of work they do and how they do it. This is referred to as 'suitable duties'. Changes to the workplace, processes or practices are referred to as 'workplace adjustments' and may impact how others work and the broader work environment.

Coming up with suitable duties and workplace adjustments with your worker leads to better outcomes for everyone – recovery at work reduces time away and the chance of further psychological or physical injury.

How can I support my worker to return to work?

There are no hard and fast rules, but these are some common steps:

1. **Identify the most important parts of your worker's job** – think about what work needs to be done, why, when and how.
2. **Consider what your worker can do** – talk to them to identify their strengths, and draw on advice from any health care professionals involved in their return to work.
3. **Consider what changes can be made to your worker's duties or to the workplace** – if appropriate, involve the rest of the team so they can help support the changes. Check out the suggestions on the next page.
4. **Support drafting a return to work plan** – for more advice about the planning process and your role in it, see [Developing a return to work plan: Guide and template](#).



You should know:

- There is no one-size-fits-all approach and this can be challenging for everyone
- Be flexible and communicate regularly – what your worker can do will change over time
- Work with your worker to come up with clear, realistic and achievable goals that are flexible in case things change
- Remember that recovery from injury or illness will not always be a straight line and there may be setbacks

Throughout the process, talk to your worker. Research shows that injured or ill workers really value efforts by their supervisors to discuss changes that could be made to the worker's workplace, or to their work duties, for their return.

- Reassure your worker that your priority is their good health. For example:
 - » “We want to make sure that your return goes smoothly. Let's discuss if there are ways that we can make changes to the work you do.”
 - » “We want you to be able to stay with us, my main aim is to support you and make changes to your work to make that happen.”
- Check on any specific things that will need to be changed. For example:
 - » “As we are planning for your return, what do you feel comfortable and confident doing?”
 - » “Have you got ideas about parts of your job you may be able to do?”
 - » “It would be helpful to know if there are specific things that you might have difficulty doing.”
 - » “Did your doctor recommend any ways to manage your pain/fatigue?”

Keeping the worker involved in this process by talking with them regularly about what they can do is key to making sure the changes work. The 'conversation starters' section (p. 4) of this guide provides more suggestions for talking to your worker, and for involving their co-workers (p.7).



Be sure to communicate appropriately with any health care professionals or workplace rehabilitation providers involved in managing the worker's illness/injury.

They will be able to advise on the types of work duties and workplace adjustments that are suitable for your worker, and may provide a certificate of capacity.

Suitable duties

Changes to your worker's duties could include:

- Changing work tasks to match your worker's abilities as they recover. Have in mind their duties need to match the information you're getting from their first certificate of capacity. Ask your insurer or visit your jurisdiction's website for more information on the certificate of capacity.
- New training opportunities to support their current role or a new role.
- Less physical work duties, including more breaks and time-limited tasks.
- Temporary or permanent adjustments to work hours. This could mean working half days or part-time for a period.

Workplace adjustments

Changes to the workplace might include:

- Support for working flexibly/remotely. Think about whether there are parts of a worker's job they can do from home. This may be particularly relevant for workers with a psychological injury who find the workplace challenging.
- Changes to the workplace/workstation to make it easier to use.
- Provision of equipment.
- Additional mentoring or support to take on new tasks.

Managing physical and psychological injuries

Physical and psychological injuries can both lead to a worker needing time off work. In both cases, providing suitable duties and workplace adjustments that are meaningful and fit in with the team can make a big difference to the worker's recovery and return to work. This section provides separate sections with some specific guidance for helping workers recovering from physical and psychological injuries.



For workers recovering from physical injuries

for example, neck or back pain, sprains or strains, occupational overuse syndrome.

Keep in mind:

- Recovery is often gradual - this means it can be helpful for the worker to return in a partial capacity and slowly build up capacity.
- Changes to the workplace might be appropriate - particularly if aspects of the environment contributed to the injury. For office work this could include workstation adjustments, whereas for physical work this might include jobs that do not require lifting.



It is important that workers return to a safe environment where physical and psychosocial hazards and risks are managed, as required by work health and safety laws. It also reassures the worker they have been listened to and their workplace is committed to their recovery.



Questions to think about.

| Question | Answer |
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For workers recovering from psychological injuries

for example, depression/mood disorders, anxiety disorders, PTSD.

Keep in mind:

- Mental illness and medications can affect different people in different ways. Making assumptions is dangerous. Instead, ask your worker about how they are affected.
- Focus on the outcomes, goals and deliverables, not the location and time that work gets done.
- Think about who is the right person to stay in touch with your worker (i.e. consider workplace relationship issues that may have given rise to the injury).
- Take the time to understand the support they need. Ask them what they need and what will help.
 - » Often workers recovering from a psychological injury are offered flexible work arrangements and reduced hours, but in many cases modified tasks and training opportunities can also be helpful.
- Finding the right tasks takes time. Communicating clearly that you care about getting it right can make a big difference to your worker. Some ideas are:
 - » For people with anxiety disorders, consider reducing exposure (at least initially) to stressful situations like large risky projects and outward-facing contact (e.g. meeting with stakeholders, clients and senior executives) and other potential triggers. For online meetings consider letting the worker 'sit-in' with their camera and microphone off.
 - » For people with depression, consider how to break the job down into clearly defined tasks (that are still meaningful) and look for opportunities to provide positive feedback.



Unresolved workplace disagreements or conflicts can delay recovery, undermine working relationships and lead to further harm. It is essential to address them for a successful return to work.



Questions to think about.

| Question | Answer |
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