

Six steps to returning to work after mental health illness

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A new online toolkit to help employers and staff in the United Kingdom talk about mental health has been developed by a team of researchers from Kingston University in London, Loughborough University and Affinity Health at Work.

The [Return to Work](#) website gives British bosses and employees advice and information to help them navigate the return to work process following absences due to stress, anxiety or depression. The site features templates for absence letters, facts about [mental health](#), check lists for each stage of sick leave and a comprehensive guide for returning to work, including exercises such as identifying work priorities.

With mental ill [health](#) affecting one in six people at work, lead researcher from Kingston University Dr. Jo Yarker, associate professor in occupational and business psychology, said managing absence was a challenge for many businesses.

"Recovery works best when employees and employers talk early on, and continue talking," Dr. Yarker said. "Knowing what to say, and what to do, can be difficult, so we have developed the toolkit using the most up-to-date evidence about what works."

Produced with workplace health and wellbeing advocates Affinity Health at Work, the website guides employers and employees through six simple steps to help make returning to work easier: 1) dealing with the initial absence; 2) developing knowledge and skills; 3) maintaining

communication; 4) preparing for return to work; 5) return to work conversation; 6) keeping healthy and productive at work.

The tools go beyond supporting with the initial return to work, with materials included to continue supporting employees going forward, Dr. Yarker explained.

"The toolkit brings together leading resources in mental health, absence management and return to work in one place, helping users to navigate existing information more easily," she said. "It's aimed primarily at smaller business without internal human resource specialists."

The guidance on the website covers each stage of the employee's absence and return. Tips include maintaining good contact throughout sickness absence to support a sense of belonging, and considering a gradual return to allow the [employee](#) to rebuild their confidence in the role. Dr. Yarker said initial feedback about the toolkit had been very positive.

"We've had plenty of interest from organisations, big and small, as well as lots of human resources and occupational health professionals who are keen to know more," Dr. Yarker said.

Loughborough University's Dr. Fehmidah Munir, who helped develop the toolkit, said many people will have experienced working alongside someone with [mental health issues](#).

"The likelihood is that if you work in a large office, a number of your colleagues have been through or are going through mental ill-health.

"There are very few resources out there for employers and employees to help with taking the initial steps to discussing mental health, absences or returning back after leave. The toolkit we have developed is free and has been created in a way that it allows staff and employers to communicate

about successfully progressing back to [work](#)."

All of the advice and guidance pulled together as part of the collaboration between Kingston University, Loughborough University and Affinity Health at Work, has been gathered from evidenced-based research, from employers and employees who have experienced [mental ill-health](#) as well as existing guidance from organisations such as [mental health charity](#) Mind, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and ACAS.

Dr. Yarker is keen for organisations to try out the toolkit and feed back on what works and where there might be gaps. "We are looking for employees, employers and small businesses to trial the toolkit so we can see how well it is working and refine it if necessary. We want to make it as useful and as user-friendly as possible," she said.

Provided by Kingston University, London

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