

Returning to work after a period of absence with stress

Employees who have been absent with stress and are returning for work are often unsure whether they are ready and how it will all go. Here are some tips for how you can work with your manager to make your return as smooth as possible. You can use these tips as a checklist for what should be in place before your return to work.

What is a return-to-work plan?

A return-to-work plan is a plan for a slow return to work. The return-to-work plan aims to get your nervous system used to being back at work. Your job is to stick to the plan and listen to your signals. The plan typically covers the first three months of being back at work. The return-to-work plan specifies both the number of hours per week and your work duties during those months.

A good return-to-work plan is characterised by describing accurately and clearly the agreements made. The process must be notable for predictability and avoid too many variable situations as far as possible. That will make you feel at ease and help avoid increasing your stress.

Phased return to work

A timetable that shows the exact days attended, week by week, may be a useful tool for employees who have been absent from work due to stress. The timetable can provide you with a helpful overview and confidence in knowing that recovery and time go hand in hand. So make sure you have fixed hours of attendance – and make sure you arrive and leave as agreed. Typically, it is good to have fewer hours and slower ‘phasing’ at the beginning – for example, just a few hours to start with. However, it is important to stress that the plan can be adjusted as and when needed.

Below is an example of what a phased return to work might look like. Here we start with six weekly working hours and slowly increase to full-time over a 3-month period. The plan can be adjusted at any time as needed. You and your manager prepare the timetable together.

Week:	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Total:
1-2	2 hours	rest day	2 hours	rest day	2 hours	6 hours
3-4	2 hours	rest day	3 hours	rest day	3 hours	8 hours
5-6	3 hours	4 hours	rest day	4 hours	3 hours	14 hours
7-8	4 hours	5 hours	3 hours	5 hours	4 hours	21 hours
9	5 hours	6 hours	5 hours	6 hours	5 hours	27 hours
10	6 hours	6 hours	6 hours	6 hours	6 hours	30 hours
11	6 hours	7 hours	6 hours	7 hours	7 hours	33 hours
12	7 hours	7 hours	7 hours	7 hours	7 hours	35 hours
13	7,5 hours	7,5 hours	7,5 hours	7,5 hours	7 hours	37 hours

The right tasks at the right time

Slowly and gently, you need to get used to more hours and greater complexity of tasks, without increasing your stress. The number of hours you work should not exceed the hours available and the tasks should be easy and comfortable for you. To avoid increased stress or relapse, it may be helpful if your manager divides your tasks into green, yellow and red categories and plans them so that you can manage the complexity together:

-  **The green tasks** are easy tasks that you are comfortable with and used to performing. The green tasks will often be tasks that are more routine and allow for frequent breaks.
-  **The yellow tasks** are tasks that you can accomplish in the short term, typically within 1-2 months. These will be tasks that partly require you to have an overview of the tasks. It will usually be at this point that you can be in contact again with customers or clients, for example, but at the lighter end of the scale.
-  **The red tasks** are tasks that you are only expected to be able to fulfil in the long term, for example towards the end of your phased return to work. The red tasks will often be tasks that require an ability to keep many balls in the air at once, deadlines, a greater degree of responsibility and, for example, the ability to deal with complex material.

Tell your colleagues what is going to happen

When an employee on sick leave is returning for work it also affects their colleagues in the department. Colleagues may be worried about you while at the same time looking forward to your return. It will therefore be useful to all parties if there is transparency about the process, so that both you and the department know what to expect. It is therefore important that your manager tells other colleagues about the overall plan, so that they have some idea of what tasks you are doing and when you will be there. This should provide transparency and ensure a clear alignment of expectations.

Talk to your manager and follow up the plan

To ensure a smooth process, it is important to keep in regular contact with your manager. This could be in the form of a brief status report once a week or every 14 days. Have a chat about how the plan is going and talk about the balance between working hours and tasks. The plan can be adjusted as needed – for example, if you experience a return of symptoms. In that case it may be necessary to maintain the status quo on the plan or scale it back a little again. Also consider whether it might be because you have started on a task you were not ready for. Conversely, if you find that the time is right to speed up the plan, decide, for example, whether it is the working time or the complexity of the task that you will increase, but avoid scaling up both parameters at the same time.

Get help from Velliv's experienced stress coaches

If you or your manager need more targeted advice and follow-up on your phased return to work, contact the Velliv Health Team on 70 33 37 07. We can provide you with support, knowledge and tools to help you get back to a sustainable working life.