Supporting Employee Success When Mental Health Is a Factor
Creating a healthy workplace includes promoting employees’ psychological health and safety as well as their physical health. This article provides tips for creating successful return-to-work plans for employees who take leave for mental health issues.

by | Mary Ann Baynton
Before Joe Parker (not his real name) returned to work after a six-month leave related to his mental health, his doctor signed a letter for his manager indicating Joe could pick up where he left off at his job, without restrictions. Within weeks, Joe relapsed and was back off work.

Joe's experience is becoming increasingly common in Canadian workplaces. Employees returning to work after experiencing a mental health issue are seemingly caught in a revolving door that sees them off again after just a few days or weeks back at work. In Joe's case, the stress of returning to work without appropriate and meaningful accommodations to help him readjust triggered a relapse.

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, on any given week, more than 500,000 Canadians will not go to work because of mental illness. Many of these will end up part of the more than 30% of disability claims that are attributed to mental health issues and a factor in the approximately $51 billion the commission estimates is lost to the Canadian economy each year because of mental illness.

**Shifting Focus: From Physical to Mental**

As we mark Canada’s Healthy Workplace Month in October, it's clear that mental health issues affect all workplaces, regardless of industry. In the past, employers focused on protecting employees' physical health. Employees in all roles face increased demands to solve problems, interact with others and analyze and negotiate. Supporting their success is not just about providing safety equipment, but also about protecting and promoting their psychological health and safety.

Workplaces may have a human rights duty to make reasonable accommodations for staff with mental illnesses. Physical injuries heal in a very visible way, and any workplace or workload modification requirements are fairly clear; employees are generally supported with a physical accommodation. But an employee with a mental disability may be perceived as “faking” a mental health issue or as receiving an unfair “perk” if he or she receives an accommodation, such as flexible work hours to help manage stress.

In a psychologically healthy and safe workplace, a supportive work environment helps buffer against a variety of life stressors. But when an employee who has been off because of mental health issues returns to the workplace after a leave, employers may be uncertain how to proceed.

The truth is, effectively supporting employees who are returning to work after a long- or short-term disability leave actually starts the day the leave begins. Keeping in contact with the employee during the leave helps to maintain his or her connection with the workplace, in turn making it easier to return.

It is also important to address any work-related concerns co-workers may have before an employee returns to work. While employers need to respect the confidentiality of an employee's personal medical information, co-worker reactions and concerns about their colleague who is away or returning to work should still be addressed in an appropriate manner. If this is not done, the issues may make the return more challenging.

A returning employee can feel nervous, vulnerable or full of self-doubt about his or her role, the ability to do the job effectively and how co-workers will respond. One key to effectively supporting employees in returning to work is to engage the employee in developing a return-to-work plan that ad-
addresses workplace stressors and strengths, which can vary significantly from one person to another. For example, for some employees, stressors can include how they receive performance feedback or handle conflict; for others, it may be difficulty in maintaining work-life balance or lack of clarity about their role or work priorities. Stressors may even be as simple as fluorescent lights or lack of sunlight.

Often employees will have only one or two prominent workplace stressors that, if addressed effectively or removed altogether, will allow them to focus on their jobs. Once these stressors are identified, employers should ask employees how the stressors can be addressed while still allowing them to be successful. The solutions can be surprisingly simple.

Finally, it can help to find out what parts of the job the employee most enjoys and feels confident about, then try to balance his or her workload by focusing on strengths while reducing the challenges, where possible. Considerations include understanding which tasks are essential to the job and identifying tasks that can be swapped with another employee, or modifying those that cannot be swapped. It may also be helpful to provide flexibility around time and location of work.

Regardless of who creates the workplace plan, the supervisor is primarily responsible for its successful implementation. This means reconciling the demands of the business, co-workers, and the employee and his or her own responsibilities. For this reason, the supervisor’s participation is crucial to the successful workplace plan development process.

One of the challenges in the return-to-work planning process is that many health care professionals who evaluate an employee’s ability to return to work may simply not be aware of common workplace stressors or how to address them. They may provide a plan that doesn’t tackle key issues such as interacting with other people, being able to take direction and coping with stressful or contentious workplace situations.

Additionally, many supervisors and managers are still learning how to deal with the impact of mental health issues on the functionality of the workplace. This is improving; surveys have shown that the number of managers and supervisors who are receiving specialized training in dealing with issues like emotional distress is on the rise. A national 2012 Ipsos Reid study on depression in the workplace, commissioned by the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace, found that one in three leaders received this type of training, up from one in five in 2007. (See Depression in the Workplace sidebar.)

A Shared Effort

Many employers know that developing a return-to-work plan is helpful but simply don’t know where to start. In 2013, a group of Canada’s top occupational health and safety professionals recognized the disconnect in return-to-work planning between employees, their health care professionals and employers when mental health is a factor. The group developed a resource to facilitate greater collaboration. The result was Supporting Employee Success, a new accommodation resource aimed at helping bridge the gap between efforts to support an employee’s well-being while also promoting workplace success.

Supporting Employee Success was launched in June at the Ontario Occupational Health Nurses Association’s annual conference. It is a free tool available at the centre’s website, Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, to help managers develop a plan to transition employees back to work while acknowledging the illness and any lingering issues that should be addressed. The tool includes a planning process that should be completed by the employer, the employee, and his

### Depression in the Workplace

- 22% of Canadian employees report depression, and 14% have been formally diagnosed.
- 84% of Canadian managers and supervisors say it is their job to intervene with workers exhibiting signs of depression.
- Only 31% of Canadian managers and supervisors have received training to help identify and support employees who exhibit signs of depression, and 63% would like more training to help them do so.
- 85% of survey respondents agree that workers with mental health conditions can be just as productive as others if they have access to the right supports.

*Source: Ipsos Reid.*
or her health care professional. Managers must come up with a very clear, specific, measurable agreement about return-to-work expectations and how success will be measured.

The goal of the Supporting Employee Success process is threefold: (1) to help identify the demands of the employee’s job and assess work-related triggers for emotional or cognitive issues, (2) to support a thoughtful approach to finding accommodations that best support success for the employee and (3) to facilitate the employee’s well-being while meeting the requirement for a safe and productive workplace. The tool is easily adaptable to a range of workplaces because it can be used on its own or as part of an existing approach to support an employee’s needs. The ideas shared are no-cost or low-cost to implement, other than a small investment of time and a potential change in communication approach.

Supporting Employee Success follows a sequence to gather information, with four sections to be completed by the employer, employee and health care professional and then passed back and forth between them. The tool helps to fully explore the job and task expectations of the individual employee and considers them in relation to specific workplace factors that can have an impact on the employee’s psychological well-being.

The process is fairly straightforward, but all parties need to be committed to following through in order for it to work, says program co-developer Dr. Ian Arnold, a senior occupational medical health and safety specialist, who was awarded the Canadian Workplace Wellness Pioneer Award in 2012.

“The workplace needs to be truly committed to accommodating the employee through an ongoing collaborative process, and the employee needs to want to return to work and be willing to do the job with accommodations that are reasonable and acceptable to both the employee and the workplace,” Arnold explains. “The job expectations and the needs of the employee, with respect to accomplishing the requirements of the job, also need to be clearly understood.”

Using the questionnaire, which is focused on job expectations, the employer, employee and health care professional outline how much of the employee’s job requires memory, attention to detail, time pressures, exposure to emotionally stressful or confrontational situations and other influences. The questions build on employee strengths and use a solution-focused approach to mental health to determine what the employee needs to be successful: Does he or she need to find a place to work in absolute silence, or will it help to listen to music? Will flexible work hours allow the employee to take advantage of the time of day he or she can be most productive? Or, perhaps reducing clutter on his or her desk will help keep his or her mind clear.

Employers can start the process when they sense an employee might require some form of accommodation to return to (or remain at) work. The results can support conversations about

## Tools for Employers and Employees

Additional free tools and resources available at www.workplacestrategiesformenthalhealth.com include:

- Working Through It™: A video-based resource to help individuals reclaim well-being at work, off work or when returning to work that focuses on video interviews of real people sharing their experiences of working through times of mental health pressures
- Guarding Minds @ Work™: A self-service resource that includes a framework for action planning and evaluation, to help small to large employers assess the psychological health and safety of their own workplace
- Managing Mental Health Matters: A scenario-based training program designed to help managers, supervisors and other leaders learn how to effectively recognize and manage mental health-related issues in the workplace through a series of online videos and activities
- On the Agenda: A series of slide presentations that can help trainers, managers or others facilitate discussions aimed at developing a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.

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### Learn More

**Education**

Canadian Health and Wellness Innovations Conference

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Visit [www.ifebp.org/canadahealth](http://www.ifebp.org/canadahealth) for more information.
what the employee needs and what success will look like. The workplace also may already have programs in place that can help, such as an employee and family assistance program, a peer support program or other provisions or training. These programs can help all staff, not just those at risk and already off work.

Each Employee Matters

Some managers may think they are being asked to identify and manage their employees’ mental health issues, when in reality it is not necessary to become a mental health expert to support staff living with a mental health issue. Rather, by supporting all employees to achieve success in the workplace, managers also will assist those with mental health issues. This demands a shift in thinking, from managing performance to managing agreements with the employee to reinforce his or her ability to get the work done, regardless of circumstances.

Today, there are more resources than ever before available to employers that want to make a difference—both before and after issues arise. Many free tools and resources, designed to help with the prevention, intervention and management of workplace mental health issues, are available on the Centre’s website. (See Tools for Employers and Employees sidebar.)

Ideally, all workplaces would be psychologically healthy and safe, with diminishing need for complex return-to-work plans. Canada is on its way toward this goal, with the launch of a three-year case study of organizations that have committed to working toward the National Standard of Canada on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. More information is available at www.csa.ca/z1003/.

BIO

Mary Ann Baynton is program director for the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace, which provides free, practical ideas, tools and resources to help with the prevention, intervention and management of workplace mental health issues. She is also executive director of Mindful Employer Canada, a nonprofit that supports positive workplace mental health, and is the principal of Mary Ann Baynton & Associates, a consulting firm that works with organizations to support productivity of employees with mental health issues.