

The Return-to-Work Conversation

A GUIDE FOR THE EMPLOYEE AND THE MANAGER

The conversation should create clarity, not another test to pass

A return-to-work conversation can shape how safe and manageable the next few weeks feel. Done well, it gives the employee and manager a chance to understand what is needed, agree priorities and identify anything that may make the return more sustainable. Done poorly, it can feel like an interrogation about why somebody was absent or a test of whether they are now 'better enough' to be back.

The purpose should not be to extract private details. It should be to understand what is relevant to work: current capacity, practical needs, priorities, possible adjustments, communication and what both people should do if difficulties begin to reappear.

The employee may arrive feeling exposed. The manager may feel uncertain about what they are allowed to ask or worried about saying the wrong thing. A clear, respectful structure can reduce anxiety on both sides.

The most useful question is often not 'What was wrong with you?' but 'What will help this return work well?'

For the employee: you can prepare without preparing a defence

Before the conversation, think about what you want your manager to understand. You may want to discuss energy, concentration, workload, hours, communication, appointments, sensory needs or warning signs. You do not necessarily need to explain every part of your mental-health history in order to talk about what affects your work now.

It can help to write down two or three priorities. When anxiety is high, it is easy to leave a meeting and realise you forgot the most important point.

For the manager: begin with welcome, not investigation

A simple acknowledgement that you are pleased to see the employee back can reduce tension. Explain what the conversation is for. Avoid immediately asking for a detailed account of their illness. Focus on the return, while allowing the employee to share more if they choose.

Ask open practical questions: 'How are you feeling about being back?' 'Is there anything about the return that you are particularly worried about?' 'What would make the first week more manageable?'

What the Conversation Needs to Cover

There is no single script that fits every return. The conversation should reflect the job, the length and reason for absence, current needs and any relevant professional guidance. But several areas are often useful to explore.

Workload and priorities

Clarify what needs attention first. Do not hand the employee every task that accumulated during their absence and expect them to decide alone what matters. Identify what has already been dealt with, what can wait and what genuinely needs their input.

Hours, duties and adjustments

Where relevant, discuss any agreed or proposed changes to hours, duties, location, workload, breaks or other working arrangements. Be clear about what is temporary, what will be reviewed and who is responsible for putting changes in place. Individual circumstances may require occupational-health, HR or other appropriate input.

Communication and privacy

Agree what colleagues need to know and who will communicate it. The employee may want a simple message such as, 'Maggie is back and working a gradual return,' without any explanation of the underlying health issue. Respecting privacy can remove a significant source of anxiety.

What happens if the employee struggles?

Do not wait for another crisis before deciding what to do. Agree how the employee can signal that the plan is too much, who they should speak to and what an early response might look like. This turns support into something practical rather than a vague instruction to 'let us know if you need anything.'

Set a review point

A plan that seems right on the first morning may need changing after several working days. Agree when you will check in again. A review is not a performance test; it is an opportunity to ask what is working, what is not and what needs adjusting.

A return-to-work plan should be a working agreement, not a promise that somebody must remain exactly as well as they felt on the day it was written.

A Conversation Built on Trust, Clarity and Realistic Expectations

The strongest return-to-work conversations recognise two realities at once: the organisation has work that needs to be done, and the employee is a human being returning after a period when their health affected their ability to work. These do not have to be opposing interests.

Questions managers can use

'What are you most concerned about as you return?' 'Which parts of the role feel manageable at the moment?' 'Is anything in the working environment likely to make the return harder?' 'How would you prefer us to handle questions from colleagues?' 'What early signs should we both pay attention to?' 'When shall we review how the plan is working?'

What employees can say

'I am ready to return, but I need to rebuild gradually.' 'I would prefer not to discuss the details of my health with colleagues.' 'The part I am most worried about is the backlog.' 'I need clearer priorities for the first week.' 'If I become overloaded, it helps if I can take a short break and return to the conversation.'

Neither person needs perfect words. They need enough honesty and clarity to make the next step workable.

When the original workplace contributed to the absence

If workload, relationships, bullying, discrimination, sensory demands, unclear expectations or another workplace factor contributed to the absence, the return conversation should not ignore it. Appropriate organisational processes or specialist advice may be required. Asking the employee simply to become more resilient does not address an unchanged problem.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

I would like return-to-work conversations to feel less like somebody sitting on one side of a desk proving they are ready, while somebody on the other decides whether they believe them.

A better conversation is collaborative. One person understands their own experience; the other understands the role and workplace. Between them, they can identify what is realistic, what support is possible and what needs to be reviewed.

Managers do not have to become therapists. Employees do not have to disclose everything. The goal is not to diagnose, rescue or investigate. It is to create enough understanding for somebody to return with dignity and a realistic chance of staying well.

Open conversations do not solve everything. But they can stop silence, assumptions and fear from becoming additional problems.

Before the conversation: Employee — what are the three things I most need my manager to understand? Manager — what information do I genuinely need to support the return? Together — what will we try, when will we review it, and what will we do if it is not working?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and is not a substitute for individual medical, psychological, occupational-health, HR, legal or employment advice. Workplace procedures and individual circumstances vary.