

A capture of questions and answers from the How to Achieve a Successful Return to Work webinar

Hosted by Pamela Rose, 2nd July 2023

Question: I've been off work for a while, indeed I took redundancy from my previous employer. One thing I've been considering as I prepare to return to work, is whether to do some Voluntary Work. What are your thoughts on this?

This can be such a great way to dip your toe back into the 'work' world again! It gives you a way to start to use and flex your skills, but in a much less pressured way than if it was a brand new paid role. That said, even voluntary work does usually come with some obligations – certain days/hours each week etc. So do choose carefully, and follow my guidance around preparing and monitoring how much you can comfortably commit to before you sign up.

The other great thing about voluntary work is it gives you the chance to test out something different, in a less pressured way. If you decide you'd like to look for a different type of job before, having performed a similar role for a charity or similar will give you lots of lovely confidence that you do indeed like that line of work! And that it fits well with what you're able to do while still on your recovery journey.

In summary, great idea! But approach curiously and don't rush into committing to anything until you feel it's the right time.

Question: I know in myself I'm probably not ready to go back to work. I did return, but had to accept that it wasn't going as well as I'd hoped and now I'm back on sick leave. My employer is pushing me for a return date – they just don't get that I still have so much variety in how I feel from day to day. It feels like a mountain I have to climb. I'm not sure how a very small, phased return would be received by them – they want me back full time and so 2 hours a day will be difficult to get them to agree! I'm also keen to change career paths, but don't know how to approach that!!

Answer: I'd suggest that your absolute priority for now is to get back to work. Once you're back, and it's going well, you are then in a position where you have choices to make! You can decide at that stage whether you want to stay there, or follow your heart and pursue a change of career.

You've indicated that you have been back at work previously, but unfortunately it was too much and so you had to be signed off again. However, I get the impression elements of it were ok – it was just too much too soon. So, it's very possible that you're more ready to return than you think... it's just that you're not ready to return FULLtime.

My suggestion of a very small phased return is a great starting point – and for those who really haven't done any work for a long time, it can be a lovely way to gradually get back into

that world and start gradually building things up again. But for those who are in a slightly better part of their journey, starting at a higher level than that can go really well.

Have a think about whether, perhaps, returning for 50% of your hours feels achievable? If you'd been able to spread out your workload last time, and have some choice over when and how you worked your part-time hours, do you think you could have made it more achievable?

Remember, Pacing well isn't just about being careful about what you DO and when you do it. It's just as much about what you DON'T do...aka resting! So perhaps going back to 50% of your hours at first would give you lots of space to be able to do some smart proactive rest, meaning the work you have to do feels much more manageable. Rather than booming and busting and crashing frequently, you want your energy to flow across each day in a lovely gentle way. You might find it helpful to read this blog I wrote on resting, for Charlotte's website: <https://livingwithmecfs.co.uk/2023/06/20/resting-strategies-for-cfs/>

You mentioned during the Q&A that you're the first employee that your organisation has had with Long Covid, and so there's no policy or precedent as to how they deal with this. But use that in your favour!! You have a chance to educate and shape what they know is helpful for those returning with this health challenge.

My suggestion is to go to them with a proposal around the hours you think you **can** commit to. If it's 50% of your fulltime hours, go with that as your proposal. Tell them that you're determined that your return is going to go well – for them, as well for as you! And that you've been working with some helpful people (aka me!) who have advised that it's sensible to phase your hours and start part-time at first. Tell them you'd rather go back part-time for now, than not go back at all! (Hopefully they'll also agree that they'd rather have some of you, than none of you!)

When you're properly back, and all is going well, then you can think about a potential career change. At that stage, it might be helpful to reach out to a career coach so that they can help you navigate that process? Just a couple of sessions can end up being hugely helpful. (I do often provide career coaching to the people I've been helping and would be happy to help you – my time is full right now, but let me know if you'd like to go on my waiting list to give you the option!).

Question: I'm at the stage where I've been consistently pacing for a while. Work has been sporadic, but I'm now looking for something more long-term. It's perhaps a little too soon, but financial pressures mean I really need to think about earning money again. My issue is I'm good at predicting day to day what I can commit to, but with things like my period, changes in weather, or other illnesses, I can still be derailed and feel really fragile. That's when it's difficult to know what to do about when I'm back at work and these things happen. Also, it's great to know that there are employers out there who welcome new colleagues who require adjustments for health reasons, but what can I expect/ask for?

Taking your second question first. I'm not an employment law expert, or OH adjustment expert, but the sorts of things I've seen people getting agreed are:

- Part-time hours (even if advertised role is fulltime)
- Flexible working arrangements (working from home, compressed hours, later start times etc)
- Practical solutions – e.g. the journalist I mentioned whose colleagues understand and support her having to use a portable stool to sit on at times, or that she often needs to find a quiet place for a restorative rest
- A desk near the toilets
- A parking space near the entrance

The biggest thing I've seen getting in the way with these types of helpful adjustments, is the person themselves! They find an employer that is willing to give them some helpful adjustments, but come the time they feel reluctant to actually get these things put in place. So please recognise this and make sure you're prepared to grab all of the help you've negotiated!

As for your question about external factors impacting your baseline. It's true that even when we're at a stage of our journey that going back to work is feasible, we're quite probably still vulnerable to many other factors. Hormonal cycles are often a factor, and can mean that our energy levels dip at certain times of the month. However, you can at least predict this to an extent, and start to plan your months accordingly – knowing that those are the days that you need to apply careful measures such as working from home, not planning anything outside of work, increasing your rests etc.

The weather, and picking up other bugs/viruses etc, are less predictable of course. But the theory is the same – it just means you need to recognise things 'in the moment' a little more, and make helpful adjustments quickly. This can be tough sometimes, for example cancelling a social plan because you know your system is struggling a little and you should give it as much space as possible. But as your journey keeps going in the right direction, you'll find that a lot of these external factors don't impact you as much. Having to be this level of careful is only 'for now'... you'll notice that things get more manageable as your journey continues. But doing the right things NOW is what will ultimately get you to that improved place.

One final piece of advice, one of the reasons I suggest a phased return is so that you hopefully have some 'wiggle room' and available baseline left for non-work things (once you've passed those first few careful weeks). It also means you hopefully have some capacity to deal with these additional external factors when they kick in. Going back to work at a level where you're maxing out your tolerances/energy levels doesn't give much leeway. So, if possible, try and find somewhere that will let you start on reduced hours at first?

You can also of course, take sick days – at least at first. Or I've seen people use some of their accrued annual leave at certain times of the month that they know will be helpful to be off work.

Question: I've developed POTS, which brings an additional set of challenges and unpredictability. How confident do I need to be about my abilities before I return?

Answer: You mention the word "confidence" and I agree that it will be extremely helpful for you to feel as confident as possible about how to control and predict your symptoms before you go back to your workplace. I've seen many people with POTS successfully return to work, but most of them made the sensible decision to wait until they were at a steadier place before they went back. The other reason that 'feeling confident' is so important is because the opposite of that would be feeling nervous or apprehensive, which are not helpful emotional states to be in. Worrying and feeling anxious about returning to the workplace can, in itself, kick in physical symptoms. So, you really do want to find ways to feel fully confident.

I mentioned the name of a wonderful Fatigue Coach called Jo Thomas, who herself has POTS and successfully managed to navigate a long and enjoyable nursing career with the NHS. She's not aligned to me or my business, but I DID mentor her as she was starting out and have heard wonderful things about her. Her website is: <https://iothomascoaching.com> Do mention me if you get in touch! (I don't get any sort of referral fee, it's just nice for her to know I mention her!)

Question: Before I got sick I was working as a trainee solicitor for a law firm. The nature of the job is that everyone else in the team is senior to you, and can give you work to do. I'm worried about communicating my boundaries to those who are senior to me, and also to those who have no idea of my health challenge or what I've been through. I'll be returning to a new team and so will be working with a full set of new colleagues, and I'm also unsure about how easy I'll find it to stick to my sensible personal boundaries when I'm back and keen to demonstrate value.

I definitely suggest that you 'start as you mean to go on'. The good thing about going back to a completely new team is that you can, to a certain extent, reinvent the work version of yourself! Decide that you're going to be THAT person who does a great job, adds super value, but also has a smart work/life balance.

You need to decide how much/if to tell your new colleagues about your health challenge. I respect anyone who'd rather keep it hidden. But I would say, from my experience of helping many people, there are probably more advantages when you DO share a certain amount with your workmates.

Perhaps contact your new colleagues when you first return, and book in a nice intro chat or coffee, and find a way to mention your journey in a positive and constructive way. You could start by saying how excited you are to be back and to be working with them. And that you don't want to go into too many details, but you've just had a tough health challenge to work through, but the great news is you're ready to get back. And that if you can get through that health journey, boy can you get through anything!! Perhaps mention that an important part of your continued recovery is that you need to be really careful about sticking to your hours/boundaries...make a point of making it clear that this won't be easy for you! That if they'd seen the previous version of you, they'd have seen a person who pushed themselves

way too much. But that, for now, you know this won't serve you well and so you'll have to stick to your agreed patterns. End by saying that you're so excited to be back and adding value again, and that you're determined to do all of the right things to make sure your return continues to go well. Perhaps even overtly mention that you appreciate their understanding and support as you get back to full health - very few people would decline helping someone's health journey!

I mentioned a suggestion that I'd seen on someone's email signature. Think about adding something like *"Please note, I try not to work on weekends unless urgent, thank you for your understanding."* At the bottom of your emails. You could tailor it to mention certain working hours rather than weekends??