

How to manage a successful return to work - Q&A discussion content

Question: Is Occupational health the same as HR in the USA?

Answer: I don't believe so. In the UK, Occupational Health is an employee support service provided by some larger organisations. It's a service performed by qualified medical/health professionals to ensure the right care is available to members of staff who are experiencing health-related difficulties. It could be that this service is provided by employers in the USA under a different name.

Question: Can an employer tell you you've been off too long and that they have to let you go?

Answer: This is a contractual situation that you need to discuss with your employer (or, at least for now, dig out your contract of employment and see what it says). From my professional experience I've seen that many people reach the point where this type of discussion has to take place, but as to the timescales involved it can change from employer to employer. My personal experience is that this happened to me after 12 months of sick leave, at which time I started to discuss and negotiate a phased return.

Question: What time period would you suggest a phased return should be spread across?

Answer: This is a very difficult question to give a single answer to! This is because everyone's situation is different, and so needs to be considered in isolation. However I would suggest that a 12 week phased period is achievable for most who are ready to start tackling their return. This allows for a 'pause' in increases after the first 4-6 weeks, to allow you to stabilise at that level before then increasing your hours further. Please don't be concerned if you're not able to get agreement for such a time-frame, negotiate a period as long as you're able, and then focus on how to make this work.

Question: What do we do if we're only ready for a very phased return to work but have reached the point where we're not getting full pay anymore? I'm concerned about how I could manage financially on only being paid for a couple of hours a day. I wonder if it would be sensible to use my annual leave?

Answer: My advice is to discuss this with your manager/Human Resources department to see what their standard approach is for these situations. Although it varies from employer to employer, I have seen many examples where people returned to full pay as soon as they started their return, even though they were only working a few hours a week. It's worth finding out if that's the case for you.

But yes, if you have to commit to going back full time and have concerns about this being too much too soon, using your annual leave could be a great way to balance things out. For example, asking to use 2.5 days per week to reduce your full-time hours down to half-time

for your first couple of weeks. And then perhaps taking a Wednesday off to give you a midweek rest day for another couple of weeks after that. I appreciate that using your precious holiday days for this might seem frustrating, but if it means you've achieved a successful return then this could feel like worthwhile sacrifice.

Final discussion point

Thank you to the participant who mentioned that there is helpful information about this return to work topic on the ME Association's website. There are various guides, one being: <https://meassociation.org.uk/2020/06/me-association-guidance-key-points-on-employment-me-cfs-and-the-coronavirus-3-june-2020/>

The ME Association does great work to promote awareness and provide helpful information to those who need it, but can tend to veer towards presenting their information in a 'worst case scenario' light. Please do take care to balance their content against the constructive advice I've given you in this session, and focus on HOW to make your return a success rather than dwelling on concerns about whether it's achievable.