

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

Hosted by Pamela Rose, 28th June 2023

Question: In your suggested phased return blueprint you suggest a couple of hours a day two or three days a week. What if I'm not able to start at that level? Is it not worth going back if I can only do one hour twice a week for example? Is a smaller start ok?

Answer: If you can negotiate a smaller phased return, and that feels right for you, then absolutely go for it! But what I've seen with many other people/employers, is that it's often felt that until someone can return for 6 or so hours a week, there's not much value they can contribute, even with the best of intentions. And you wouldn't feel much satisfaction from feeling you'd delivered anything sizeable during only a couple of hours (which is an important helpful element to getting back to work).

If someone wasn't ready yet for, say, 3 x 2 hours a week then I'd suggest they continue to build up their tolerance to that level, adding in those similar work-related tasks that allow them to test relevant activities (e.g. driving a certain amount if that's a key part of their job, walking a certain distance, or being able to tolerate a certain amount of videoconference type activity).

Question: How do you know when you're ready to increase your phasing?

Answer: I talked about the importance of knowing you've found your baseline, and then using that as a guide as to when your current level has become comfortable enough for you to be ready to do more. As a reminder, the four ways I suggest you can gauge if you're at baseline are:

- Your symptoms are consistently low level – the level where you can forget they're there if you're engrossed in something particularly interesting or fun
- You have no instances of HAVING to stop and rest in a day... you're balancing your activity well and planning in (and doing) enough proactive rest that this isn't a factor
- You might feel a couple of little 'warning signs' that you're pushing things too much, but only once or twice a day. If this is happening too much (or you're experiencing regular PEM) you're not at Baseline
- You feel nicely tired at the end of the day, rather than utterly wiped in that horrible poorly fatigue type way. You know it's the end of the day, and you're glad you don't have to do anything much more! But you're not feeling symptomatic or horribly depleted.

Each time you increase a phase you'll have a period of a few days where it'll feel a little much. But as long as it's not making you hugely symptomatic, or triggering PEM, stay positive and calm and wait for your system to become comfortable with that amount. Stay at

that level for a few further days to really let it become your new normal, and then consider increasing. (this advice goes for increasing any sort of activity really, not just work!)

Question: I need to go back to work in 2 months' time or lose my job. My level of activity is still quite low but I'm going to give it a go as I feel I have nothing to lose. I'll negotiate as careful a return as possible, but I still worry it will be too much. How do I make a call if it's really too much??

Answer: Two months is still a good chunk of time to achieve further improvements, so I suggest you focus on what will help you achieve that, rather than overly worrying about how your return to work will go. Come September, if it still feels a bit of a push to go back, please remember that it's always worth 'making it go as well as it possibly can'!

Focus on how you can make it feel as manageable as possible, stick to your helpful pacing approach, do lots of short proactive rests, perform some calming/mindfulness techniques every little while if possible, etc etc. You could well find that being back is a bit of a boost, and takes your mind off 'being on a recovery journey'. This in itself can be a huge help and could mean it's more within your tolerances than you fear.

If, however, after a period of time it's clearly sending your level of wellness/recovery backwards, you might need to make the difficult decision that it's not right for you to continue in that role. But I agree it's definitely worth a try – it may well go really well!

Question: How can I help my employer understand that I'm still recovering, even though I'm back at work? My job is very high energy too and I've had 3 attempted returns so far. How can I ensure they get it a bit more?

Answer: We often have to ensure we make a regular effort to overtly bring our health journey into conversations. Otherwise people will forget – they really will! You don't want to be someone who's constantly talking about being ill/on a health journey. But every now and then, during 121's or even casual chats, perhaps drop it in in a positive way? For example: "It's so good to be back, gosh it's taking a lot of effort to make it work, but I'm determined that it will go well this time! Thanks for being so supportive as I make this work.". Also give them some helpful context, e.g. a casual mention that when you're not at work you're often sofa-bound, and that your social life is still absolutely non-existent (for example).

Your colleagues will only see you when you're at work – and you'll be giving it your best effort. Quite frankly they'll be seeing the best possible version of you right now. But unless you find a way to explain that outside of work life is very different, they could assume you're like that all of the time. We hope people will naturally join the dots, but with these sort of fatigue challenges I'm afraid they just don't. Please don't think this is anything particularly bad about your employer, I see it all of the time!

If, however, after trying to get them to understand, they really don't, you might want to decide to look for a job somewhere else. Working in toxic unhelpful environments is not conducive to staying in a healing state. It's always worth trying to make it work though first.

Question: I stopped working 6 years ago. Since then, I've moved from UK to Ireland. I have really lost confidence and am feeling daunted by navigating looking for a job in a different country. Any tips?

Answer: Have a careful think about what elements would help you start to feel a bit more confident. Is it helpful to look for a very similar role, so that at least that would feel familiar? Even if the country you're doing it in is different? Could you reach out to some organisations and ask about voluntary work or job shadowing? Just to have a non-pressured way to feel a little more familiar about working in your new country? If it's practical things such as employment law over there, or application processes, perhaps reach out to a local job centre or citizens advice bureau and ask if you can have a quick chat to get some helpful advice?

Break this into small tasks and tick them off one by one. Don't try and solve it all at once... just do small things that will help you feel more comfortable (and even excited) at the prospect of working in your new home location?

Question: Can you recommend any career coaches?

Answer: I'd always suggest you find someone who's accredited by a recognised body – and make sure you read any Google Reviews etc, to further reassure yourself that they come recommended!

Good links are:

<https://coachingfederation.org/find-a-coach>

<https://coach-accreditation.services/directories/find-an-accredited-coach-or-mentor/entry/100/>

Question: What's Ikigai?

Answer: It's a wonderful Japanese Philosophy around the benefits of finding, and working in alignment with, your true purpose.

This site gives some helpful information: <https://positivepsychology.com/ikigai/>

Question: What are your top tips for getting through a work day more manageably?

Answer: These are mainly office-based examples, but take the concept and see how you could apply it in your role, whatever type of work you do:

- Keep meetings short – 25/50 minutes rather than 30/60! This will give you a moment to pause, rest, and prepare for your next meeting or activity. Many people dash from meeting to meeting and this is exhausting – physically and mentally (everyone else will love you for this too!)
- Every morning look at your busy diary and choose one thing you're going to politely decline. We often get invited to things we don't really have to be at! Get good at saying no if you've only been invited as a 'useful contributor' but don't NEED to be there
- Take mini rests throughout the day. Even just a couple of minutes of quiet mindfulness can keep you going surprisingly well. Recognise when you're feeling 'full up' with the day's stimulation and starting to feel a bit overwhelmed, and use this as a cue to have a mini-rest (even if you have to politely excuse yourself to nip to the loo and do it there)
- Pop your headphones on if you don't want to be disturbed
- If you have a big deliverable to work on all morning don't think of your morning as being '3 hours of work'. Break it down into '3 x 1 hour chunks of work' and have a mini rest in-between
- Always take a lunch break!
- Switch your screen off if you're feeling a bit depleted, just listening to a call rather than watching the screen is easier/less energy.

Those are the first that come to mind..I hope they're helpful!

Question: Are there private occupational health agencies??

Answer: Thanks to one of the attendees for mentioning that your local job centre is a great source of help and advice in the absence of a formal OH service. There are also some private companies though, if you google a phrase such as "employee welfare service".

Question: I'm back at work on very part time hours, and only getting paid for the hours I work – they're making me use my annual leave to top-up the rest. This will run out very soon and I'll have to negotiate something more beneficial to me. What should/could I ask for?

Answer: I'm afraid employee pay/law isn't my area of expertise. But as mentioned during the Q&A, I've seen many people getting paid 50% of their full-time salary once they return to work, even if they're not working anywhere close to half-time hours yet. I'd say it's worth trying to get that agreed in the first instance anyway! Citizens Advice might be a helpful source of guidance too?

Question: Can I have too LOW a phased return??!! I'm only doing 2.5 hours once a week – is that not enough?

Answer: It's certainly true that you don't rest your way to recovery from these health challenges! And that doing 'enough' every day (while not doing TOO much) becomes important. I call that staying in your sweet spot. But it doesn't have to be work related activity that you're doing more of – it's your call quite frankly. If working 2.5 hours a week seems plenty for you right now, but you're also gradually increasing your exercise endurance or socialising tolerances, that's your priority call. Do what feels right 😊

Question: Any more tips about communicating to my clients/wider network of colleagues who don't know what's going on?

Answer: Building further on some of the advice I gave during the presentation, have a think about whether you WANT to tell these people much about what's been going on. I'd say often you'll probably decide that you'd rather not. The only reason that could end up being the wrong move, is if they then expect/assume you can do something that you can't – e.g. go to a full day conference, or after work drinks. So be prepared as to how to manage that – tell them you have home commitments that mean you can't be away that long, and ask if you can dial in instead? Or tell them you have something already planned that evening so you have to politely decline.

Prepare what to say to those who have heard you've been off for a while and ask clumsy questions. E.g. "I won't lie, it's been the toughest thing I've ever dealt with, but I'm doing much better now and so pleased to be back. Anyway, how are YOU????".

There's no magic formula to these communication challenges, but preparing in advance and deciding what you will/won't say, and how, will help you feel more confident.

Question: How honest should you be when you've been pushed into a flare because of something NON WORK related you've done?

Answer: Although I usually say honesty is the best policy, sometimes just a small white lie is ok. You can always tell them you've caught a cold or similar? But as a longer time fix, what might help is for you to be quite overt with them about everything you're doing outside of work to manage/maintain your level of health. If they know you're giving it a great deal of effort and focus, they'll know that any inadvertent pushes into feeling symptomatic certainly weren't intentional.

Don't feel guilty about enjoying life outside of work. You are aiming to get BACK to full health/life – and that includes doing fun things. Gently pushing your tolerances of these things is just as important a part of your recovery plan as building up your work hours.

Question: Is it wise for me to get back to work while I'm still recovering? I'm an NHS junior doc and there are no boundaries at all, tricky to stick to hours etc. So it's a struggle to phase. I've already had one phased return that didn't go well, should I wait until I'm really healed?

Answer: In my experience of helping other medics, it is often more helpful to stay off work until you are much closer to being fully 'back'. You don't necessarily have to be completely healed, but at a stage where you can tolerate things changing and having to be more spontaneous. Others decide to look for a temporary different role that is in a ward/department which is a little more predictable and quieter. You can always go back to doing what you did before once you're back...for now, it's about doing what's right for you and your health. Which can mean having to make difficult decisions, but ultimately if it helps you get back to where you want to be asap, it's worth it.

As a side point, are you in the 'Doctors with Long Covid' group on FB? I've helped a few people who are in there, and they probably have some helpful wisdom to share about things they've negotiated to help them?

Question: I work for NHS. Different trusts have different PRTW. Some allow 12 weeks before using annual leave. Mine are allowing 4 weeks - can I encourage more time?

Answer: I'd certainly encourage you to push for longer. The 4 weeks sounds like an off the shelf approach to me. Try to explain to them how different it is returning with a fatigue challenge – the key thing to spell out is the point that *you are still recovering*. So this isn't a phased approach to 'just get you used to being back again' (which 4 weeks would probably be ok for). This is a phased approach to gradually allow your body to get used to working again, while it's also still having to give a great deal of it's resources to healing you. I'm afraid you might have to spell that out to them, but it will be worth it hopefully!

Question: If a phased return takes much longer than this suggestion would that mean that you weren't quite ready for a return / you need to scale back?

Answer: Everyone is different, and the blueprint I've shared is a great starting point for most. But if you discover that you need longer, and your employer is happy to support that, go for it. OR wait a bit longer before going back, in the hope that this then becomes achievable.

Question: Can you reclarify the go/no go meetings?

Answer: These are a formal opportunity at the end of each phase to loop back with your manager and let them know how things are going. If all's gone well, it's when you agree to up your hours to the next two weeks' phasing (a 'GO' decision). If, however, you feel you need a bit more time at the current level, you talk that through. Perhaps another two weeks at that level, (this would be a 'NO GO' decision as far as moving to the next phase). You'd then review it again at the end of those two weeks and decide if you're ready to GO up to the next level now.

Question: I Wonder if you have a templated piece of copy we could use to explain this / share with colleagues?

Answer: I'm afraid I don't – but I do often suggest that people send a link to the 'Spoon theory' essay to people who don't get it at all. It's a great article – it's not helpful enough for those of us WITH the condition. But it gets the point across to others! See:

<https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>

Someone messaged me as a follow-up to the event to share how she tries to get others to understand, so I'll include that here in the hope it helps some of you:

"I say that I have a very small energy battery that I can appear normal for which takes a lot of effort, but before and after that short period my battery needs major recharging and I don't look healthy."

A helpful letter that someone left in the chat in case it helps others:

Sharing in case its helpful for anyone. This is from a letter to my employer that I wrote together with my Long Covid OT for suggestions on my return to work:

- Switch from salary to hourly basis, keep a time sheet of hours worked.
- Redeployed to different team with less pressure and workload
- reduced hours
- reduced responsibilities, no team to manage, and no stressful deadlines
- work from home only
- working in short instalments such as 10/20/30mins with rest before and after, using a timer can be helpful
- starting with non-concurrent days to enable sufficient rest
- starting with a small amount such as 2hours per week, split over a more than one day
- increasing hours very slowly to avoid a relapse, for example increase by 30mins every fortnight
- regular review and communication with supportive manager
- should a relapse occur, further time off work of appropriate length for rest and recovery before trying another return to work

Some links left in the chat in case they help others

(Note from Pamela: I haven't checked this out and am not agreeing with or promoting what they say, just wanted to have a capture for you all here in case they are indeed helpful!)

For long covid peeps - this may not help if your employer is not supportive, but these are some documents links I included in letter to employer.

Further advice for returning to work with Long Covid can be found here:

- https://www.som.org.uk/COVID-19_return_to_work_guide_for_managers.pdf

- on pages 28-30 of this document:

https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/Long_COVID_and_Return_to_Work_What_Works.pdf

- https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/long-covid-report-feb-22_tcm18-106089.pdf

Company doing placement of people with chronic illness: <https://www.astrid.org>

Working with long COVID: Research evidence to inform support.

Look at the IGLOO model & recommendations.

https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/long-covid-report-feb-22_tcm18-106089.pdf

Something that really helped me with building up activity is the concept of adjustment periods. There are videos about it on this YouTube by CFS recovery.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCh610cYKG5yfXITT8Se97Vg> .

They also do this cheap masterclass that I love - <https://www.cfsrecovery.co/recovery-foundations>

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