

KEEPING IN TOUCH

For some, a short period of time off may be valuable & it's important to stay in touch

We've already considered the importance of communication but managers often fear that contacting someone who is off sick will be seen as harassment. However, lack of contact can actually make an employee feel less valued and less able to return. The overwhelming view from people who have experienced distress is that appropriate contact is essential.

Early, regular and sensitive contact with employees during sickness absence can be a key factor in enabling an early return and this view is endorsed by companies that have pioneered active absence management.

If your company does have occupational health support, it is important to co-ordinate approaches to the individual. This helps to ensure clarity about professional roles and about what personal support is offered. While the employee might not wish to be 'out of sight, out of mind', too much uncoordinated contact from different people can be overwhelming and cause confusion.

IF THE PERSON REQUESTS NO CONTACT

Sometimes employees do not want to be contacted. Do not accept this at face value – all the evidence shows clearly that this hinders the person's recovery and greatly reduces the chances of a successful return to work. People may request no contact because they feel anxious, embarrassed or ashamed about the way that they feel and are behaving – a sympathetic manner, being sensitive and treating the person normally can help to overcome that.

Sometimes the request for no contact arises because you, the manager, are perceived to have been a factor in the employee becoming unwell. In such circumstances, options include offering the services of another manager and/or making use of an intermediary such as a colleague, trade union official or a local vocational service. If there are work issues (real or perceived) it is essential that these are addressed or it will be unlikely the person will return to work.

Employees have a responsibility to keep in touch and if you have made all reasonable efforts to communicate with an employee and they refuse to remain in contact with you then you cannot be expected to anticipate what reasonable adjustments might help them return to work.

It is worth considering a policy of 'light touch' regular contact for all people off sick – a text, an e-mail, a card. This is a neutral, non-stigmatising way to engage with all employees. A person with a mental health condition is then much more likely to react positively and as they begin to recover, contact may seem less daunting.

The person's requests may change very quickly or over time. If they initially request little contact, this may change as their mental health improves. As far as possible, someone with a mental health condition should be treated in exactly the same way as with any other sickness absentee.

COMMUNICATING WITH COLLEAGUES

You should agree with the employee whether, and precisely what, they wish colleagues to be told. In general, it is best to talk to someone experiencing a mental health condition in an honest, matter-of-fact way – in the same way you would deal with someone's physical health problems. If the person takes sick leave you could all send them a card as you would if they were off work with a physical problem. You should ask whether they want to be visited by colleagues and respect their wishes.

Be aware of the impact an employee's mental health condition could potentially have on the rest of the team. This could be in responses to the person's particular symptoms or behaviour while unwell, any reasonable adjustments that are made, and an increased workload for other staff if the person is not well enough to work.

In these instances it would be advisable to:

- Be honest and open with the team as long as it does not breach any agreed confidentiality with the employee concerned.
- Identify working conditions that may negatively influence the wellbeing of the team, and change them where necessary.
- Create an environment where staff can air their concerns openly to avoid gossiping and any resentment towards the member of staff who is off work.
- Treat all staff fairly otherwise some colleagues may show lower commitment to their job.

GETTING PAST THE ILLNESS



**HM Courts
& Tribunals
Service**

*When Gisela Wrest was off sick for 8 months from her job at the
HM Courts & Tribunals Service due to depression,
line manager Kerry Clorley maintained contact throughout.*

“I wanted to offer Gisela personal support, workplace support and occupational health referrals,” Kerry recalls. “Prior to being signed off she was an extremely competent member of staff who was and still is valued by her fellow colleagues. I felt that it was important to keep relaying that message back to her as I wanted to show her that we could get past the illness through working together. We eventually agreed a phased return in order to get her used to being back in the workplace.”

“My employers were very understanding throughout,” said Gisela. “A month before my return to work date, we planned how best to help me build up the stamina and energy to return to work. For the first couple of weeks I worked half days. I was surprised at how tired I felt. Before my illness I could work 9-10 hours per day but after 4 hours I was more than ready to go home. When I got there all I was able to do was have a cup of tea and go to bed! But if it were not for the opportunity to build up my hours, I am not sure I could have coped with a full working day and may have suffered a relapse.”

“Over the coming weeks I sat with Gisela daily to discuss tasks and how she felt she was coping,” said Kerry. “This in turn led to her being able to return to working her normal hours. So, all in all, a great success all round.”

“Kerry didn’t give up on me. The fact that she kept on saying that she wanted me back did get into my consciousness and helped me to hold onto how I used to be. I am so glad it is all over as I am sure Kerry is too. Work is keeping me on the straight and narrow and I have a very supportive manager, mother, family, friends and therapist!”

Gisela Wrest
Regional Estates Support Services Manager
www.hmcourts-service.gov.uk

Kerry Clorley
Regional Estates Performance & Compliance Manager