

How to support your employees  
return to work after critical illness

# RETURNING TO WORK FOLLOWING CRITICAL ILLNESS



Professional support for  
survivors and the bereaved

0808 800 0029

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# INTRODUCTION

Your employee's experience of critical illness and CoViD-19 may affect them physically and emotionally for some time after they've been assessed as fit to return to work. It doesn't matter how old they are or how healthy or active they were before their illness. They have been very ill and have been confronted with a life-threatening illness – it will take some time for them to recover.

We've created this booklet to help you understand critical illness and CoViD-19, some of the things your employee has experienced and how to help with their recovery. It can also help you to support an employee whose close relative has been affected.

By supporting employees so they can return to work when they are ready, you can:

- Help managers support their teams more effectively, building trust and loyalty with employees
- Retain knowledge and experience
- Enhance your reputation as a good employer
- Reduce replacement, recruitment and induction costs, plus the associated management time.

# ...INTRODUCTION

Not everyone recovering from critical illness will need extra support in the workplace, and many of those who do will only require small changes, termed 'reasonable adjustments', to continue working. Try to remember that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to managing recovery in the workplace. The support your employee will need, if any, will be individual to them.

It's impossible to predict the symptoms someone will have, or how they will affect them. Some of the more commonly experienced problems include fatigue, breathlessness, memory and concentration problems, muscle weakness and anxiety.

Some problems are invisible, so you may not be able to see how your employee is affected.

By establishing an open dialogue with your employee, you can find out what support they need, and ask them any questions you may have. As the effects of critical illness often change over time, it is good to have regular chats about how things are going and whether they need extra or different support.

# WHAT IS A CRITICAL ILLNESS?

The medical and insurance definitions of a critical illness differ. From a medical perspective, if your employee has had a critical illness, they will have been in hospital and received treatment in a Critical Care Unit, a general term which includes Intensive Care Units and High Dependency Units (these units are often combined).

## WHAT IS CRITICAL CARE?

Critical care involves very close monitoring and treatment to support one or more organs which are beginning to fail. This could be the lungs (breathing), heart and circulation (blood pressure or heart rate) or kidneys (not passing urine).

The most unwell patients are treated in Critical Care, where:

- they can be carefully watched and monitored, including checking their pulse, blood pressure, breathing rate, oxygen levels, how much liquid they take in and how much they urinate. These checks help staff can quickly identify any deterioration in their condition and change their treatment as needed
- staff can give them treatment including support for major organs, like the heart, kidneys and lungs
- there are highly trained doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, pharmacists and nutritionists who look after and support relatives by explaining what is happening
- there may be one nurse looking after only one or two patients (though this ration may have been stretched during the CoViD-19 pandemic).

The reason for your employee's admission to Critical Care may have been because of complications due to CoViD-19.

# WHAT IS COVID-19?

A novel coronavirus, called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is the virus that causes the Coronavirus Disease 2019. Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause disease in animals. Seven, including the new virus, have made the jump to humans, but most cause cold or flu-like symptoms.

CoViD-19 is closely related to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) which swept around the world in 2002/2003. Another coronavirus causes the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), cases of which have been occurring sporadically since it first emerged in 2012.

## **WHY CAN COVID-19 MAKE SOME PEOPLE SO UNWELL?**

For most people CoViD-19 is a minor illness and they won't need hospital care but, for some, things can get worse and they may require admission to hospital for treatment and monitoring. Some of these patients will deteriorate further and need critical care. This deterioration is likely to be due to the immune system overreacting to the virus. This causes inflammation around the body but particularly in the lungs, a condition called pneumonitis.

# ...WHAT IS COVID-19?

In the lungs, there are tiny air sacs call alveoli, where oxygen moves into the blood and carbon dioxide moves out. In patients with pneumonitis, the tiny sacs become inflamed and fill with fluid. This eventually causes shortness of breath, low oxygen levels in the blood and difficulty breathing. If things get worse, some people will need a ventilator to help them breathe.

Some patients may worsen, due to an overwhelming response by the immune system, and develop septic shock. This is when their blood pressure drops to dangerously low levels and organs stop working or fail completely. Septic shock means that other organs, in particular the heart and circulation system, and often the kidneys, require support.

In patients with CoViD-19, the situation is further complicated by small blood clots forming. This makes it harder to breathe, causing other organs to deteriorate.



# HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE YOUR EMPLOYEE TO RECOVER?

CoViD-19 is a new illness we're still learning about it, and it's too early to know if there will be any lasting effects peculiar to this illness. The information we provide here is based on recovery from other similar conditions requiring admission to a Critical Care Unit, such as sepsis and viral pneumonia.

## PEOPLE RECOVER AT DIFFERENT PACES

Many people encounter new physical, cognitive, psychological and emotional problems during their recovery. It's normal to go through a period of recovery and most people will eventually fully recover.

- Recovery time varies for each person. Generally it can take weeks to months, but sometimes longer. Some people have few or no problems following critical illness
- Age, medical history and length of hospital stay in critical care can influence recovery
- For people who have suffered significant organ damage, recovery can take more time and be complex, often involving ongoing treatment. If they have suffered organ damage and/or had an amputation, further specific information will have been provided to your employee by their healthcare providers.

# WHAT YOUR EMPLOYEE MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED IN CRITICAL CARE

Patient may have no memory of their time in Critical Care or have very confused memories of what happened to them there. The strong drugs and treatments will have affected their body and mind.

The may have:

- Felt slightly aware but didn't know where they were or what was happening
- Had nightmares or thought things were happening which weren't real – and these can be very frightening. They may not have realised they were in hospital, and their mind may have tried to make sense of what was happening, for example by making them think things such as they had been kidnapped or were being held captive. Experiencing this confusion and hallucinating is called delirium and is very common
- Been unable to talk or let people know how they were feeling
- Have found it very difficult to sleep or have had strange dreams when they did sleep
- Not know what time of day it was, or how long they had been in hospital.

Not remembering what happened is extremely common and can make moving forward difficult. Sometimes people are happy not to remember very much, but for others, this can be upsetting. It may be that they are only ready to find out more in the weeks, months and sometimes years after getting home. It may be that they just want to put it behind them.

# HOW YOUR EMPLOYEE MAY BE FEELING

Here are some common problems your employee may experience during recovery:

## PHYSICAL AND COGNITIVE

- Fatigue
- Problems sleeping
- Brittle hair and hair loss
- Joint pains and muscle weakness
- Nausea
- Breathlessness (it's likely that this will be particularly marked following CoViD-19)
- Poor appetite
- Change in vision and hearing
- Reduced kidney function
- Short term memory loss
- Judgement and decision-making
- Speech, for example finding the right words
- Loss of concentration
- Difficulty performing tasks that were previously simple

## PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL

- Low mood and/or mood swings
- Lack of interest in things they previously enjoyed and possible their personal appearance
- Anxiety about becoming unwell again
- Loss of confidence
- Wondering 'what if I hadn't survived?', as well as feeling guilty that they did
- Feeling guilty about what they had put their family and friends through
- Flashbacks and nightmares
- Frustrated that nobody understands
- Strain on personal relationships

# ...HOW YOUR EMPLOYEE MAY BE FEELING

During recovery, your employee may experience some or all the symptoms listed, and they may also look relatively well. It may have been some time since their illness and many people will expect that they should be better now. This can make recovery a very lonely place for someone who is experiencing these symptoms, and some can even start to doubt themselves and wonder if they are imagining all their problems.

It is often a combination of issues that conspire to make returning to work difficult. For example someone experiencing fatigue, anxiety and trouble concentrating would find most work challenging.

In some cases, a person who has been affected by critical illness can feel obliged to give up their job because their symptoms are so severe or make it impossible to work. The effects of treatment might leave them feeling unable to work. Others may resign because their self-esteem or confidence has been damaged and no support is in place.

## **YOU DON'T NEED TO BE A MEDICAL EXPERT TO PROVIDE SUPPORT**

As a manager, you may be one of your employee's most important sources of support. You don't need to be a medical expert, but a basic understanding of their illness, the treatment received and what they have been through can help you fulfil that role. This knowledge will allow you to plan and recognise issues that may emerge at work.

# WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY EMPLOYEE RECOVER?

There are a number of things you can do to help your employee during their recovery period.

Once an opportunity to return to work has been identified, supporting your employee who is recovering is not expensive. Your employee may need some changes to their workspace or to their daily routine, but many such changes cost little or nothing. They can be as simple as moving their work station to a location with a more suitable ambient temperature, allowing an extended lunch break or enabling them to start or finish half an hour later to avoid commuting during the rush hour. These changes are known as 'reasonable adjustments'.

If your employee needs specialist equipment or adaptations to existing equipment, you may be able to get help to cover the costs from the Access to Work scheme. There are details of this in the resources section at the end of this booklet.

Find out what your employee needs. The process and pace of recovery from critical illness differs from person to person, so the support your employee will need depends on how their illness has affected them, the job they do, and their own abilities and coping strategies.

## TALKING CAN HELP

Talking to your employee needs to be more than a one-off chat. Keeping a conversation going is the best way for both you and your employee to express concerns, determine what they need from you and how you can help.

Try to foster a relationship in which they feel they can trust you. For example, you could arrange a monthly meeting – separate from their performance review – to talk about how their recovery is progressing and whether any reasonable adjustments you have agreed on are working for them.

# ...WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY EMPLOYEE RECOVER?

## **AVOID MAKING ASSUMPTIONS OR COMPARISONS**

Try not to make assumptions about what your employee can and cannot do. They might be able to continue doing their job as usual, without any additional support.

If you know someone else who has had a similar illness, resist making comparisons between your employee and the other person's recovery. Everyone is different and such comparisons can be unhelpful.

## **RECOVERING EMPLOYEES NEED TIME**

Whilst your instinct might be to show sympathy, an emotional response isn't helpful. It's better to focus instead on the support you can offer your employee. Don't pressure your employee into making decisions about changes to any aspect of their job, particularly if their critical illness was recent. Give them time to process their situation and think through their options.

Your company may already have policies in place that say how you should support your employee and advise how to record any discussion you have with your employee about their recovery.

# THE ROLE OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

If your organisation has access to an occupational health service, then they will be invaluable in supporting the process of returning to work.

Most occupational health professionals serve in an advisory role for managers and employees. Occupational health advice can help you understand your responsibilities and advise on:

- Reasonable workplace adjustments
- Recruitment
- Return-to-work
- Ongoing employment
- Release of company benefits such as pension
- Fitness for return-to-work after sickness absence
- Where there is a management concerns about the health and safety or performance of affected employees
- Consideration of alternative employment within your organisation.

# YOUR LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES

According to the Equality Act 2010, employers must consider making 'reasonable adjustments' to any policies or practices which cause disadvantage to people with disabilities, including the employer's premises. Examples of adjustments commonly required by people following critical illness may include:

- Alteration to working hours
- Phased return
- Flexible working (e.g. start/finish times, particularly during acute episodes; working from home where appropriate, part time working, job sharing)
- Changing tasks or the pace of work to avoid exacerbating the condition
- Allowing for reasonable time off for appointments and treatment
- Changing layout of workspace (e.g. desk)
- More frequent and/or longer breaks
- Providing a quiet place for an employee to rest without being disturbed.

You will find further information and links to support on your legal obligations in the resources section of this booklet (please see overleaf).



# FURTHER RESOURCES

## UK Sepsis Trust

For more information and support relating to severe infection, sepsis and critical illness (including CoViD-19) visit [sepsistrust.org/get-support/](https://sepsistrust.org/get-support/), or phone our Support Team on **0808 800 0029**.

Here are some other useful links:

## Access to work

[gov.uk/access-to-work](https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

## Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) Helpline

**0845 747 4747**

[acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk)

## CIPD The professional body for human resource and people development

[cipd.co.uk](https://www.cipd.co.uk)

## Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) Web

[citizensadvice.org.uk](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

## Critical Care Recovery

[www.criticalcarerecovery.com](https://www.criticalcarerecovery.com)

## ICU Steps

[www.icusteps.com](https://www.icusteps.com)

## The Pensions Advisory Service Helpline

**0845 601 2923**

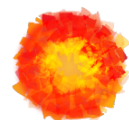
[pensionsadvisoryservice.org.uk](https://www.pensionsadvisoryservice.org.uk)

Fit to Work, workers and employers free advice on managing health conditions at work and returning to work after sick leave

[fitforwork.org](https://www.fitforwork.org)

If you feel able to donate to UK Sepsis Trust, a registered charity, so that we can support more people who are, or have been critically ill, please visit [sepsistrust.org/donate](https://sepsistrust.org/donate) or call **0800 389 6255**. Thank you so much.

visit us at [sepsistrust.org](https://sepsistrust.org)



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