The information provided in this booklet is designed to give general guidance around good practice and is a simple guide to your employees' rights and your responsibilities as an employer. It is not a substitute for legal advice. If you need more details on employee rights, or legal advice, please contact a solicitor. While we endeavour to provide information of the highest quality, UK Sepsis Trust will not accept any liability for the use, or inability to use any information provided in this book.

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INTRODUCTION

Your employee’s experience of critical illness and CoViD-19 may continue to affect them physically and emotionally for some time after, even when they have been assessed as fit to return to work. It does not matter how old they are, how unwell they were or how healthy or active they were prior to 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 have 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. Alternatively, if you have an employee whose close relative has been affected, this booklet can help you support them.

Supporting employees so they can return to work when they are ready has benefits for all concerned

- reducing replacement, recruitment and induction costs, plus the associated management time
- retaining knowledge and experience
- helping managers support their teams more effectively
- building trust and loyalty with employees
- enhancing your reputation as a good employer

As their employer, you may have lots of questions, such as: What have they experienced? How will it affect my employee? What can I do to support them?
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. It is important 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.

Critical illness affects everyone differently, and although there are commonly experienced problems no two people are affected in the same way. This makes it impossible to predict the symptoms someone will have, or the extent to which these will affect them. Some problems are more common, such as fatigue, breathlessness, memory and concentration problems, muscle weakness and anxiety, most people will experience these to some extent.

Because the effects of critical illness are individual, it is difficult to know exactly how it will affect your employee. Some problems are invisible, so you may not be able to see how they are being affected.

It is important to try to establish an open dialogue with your employee, so 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 extra or different support is required.
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 this means they will have been in hospital and received treatment in a Critical Care Unit, a general term which includes areas known as Intensive Care Units and High Dependency Units (these units are sometimes combined). During times when these units may be at full capacity such as during the CoViD-19 pandemic, your employee may even have received Critical Care support elsewhere in the hospital, such as a temporary facility in an operating department.

This care would have involved very close monitoring and treatment to support one or more organs which were beginning to fail. This could have been the lungs (breathing), heart and circulation (blood pressure or heart rate) or kidneys (not passing urine).

WHY DID THEY NEED CRITICAL CARE?

Critical Care is where the most unwell patients in a hospital are treated. In Critical Care:

- 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 are all very important because 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
- nurses look after fewer patients. There may be one nurse looking after only one or two patients (though this ratio may have been stretched during the CoViD-19 pandemic)

The reason for admission to Critical Care may have been because of complications due to CoViD-19.
WHAT IS COVID-19?

A novel coronavirus, called the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) is the virus that causes the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (CoViD-19). Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that cause disease in animals. Seven, including the new virus, have made the jump to humans, but most just 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 will not require hospital admission, but for some reason things can get worse and they may require admission to hospital for treatment and close monitoring. Some of these patients will deteriorate further requiring admission to a Critical Care Unit. 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. Inflammation in the lungs is called pneumonitis.
WHAT IS COVID-19?

In the lungs, there are tiny air sacs called alveoli. These are where oxygen moves into the blood and carbon dioxide moves out, but in patients with pneumonitis the tiny sacs start to 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 need a ventilator to help them breathe.

Some patients may become more unwell because of the overwhelming response by the immune system and develop something called septic shock. This is when the blood pressure drops to dangerously low levels and organs stop working properly or fail completely. Septic shock means that further 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. These can worsen the ability to breathe and cause a deterioration in the function of other organs.
HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE YOUR EMPLOYEE TO RECOVER?

CoViD-19 is a new illness so we are still learning about it, and at his early stage it is difficult 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.

Recovery will commonly involve the whole body. Many people encounter new physical, cognitive, psychological and emotional problems during their recovery. It is normal to go through a period of recovery and most people will eventually make a full recovery.

• Recovery time varies for each person. Generally, it can take weeks to months, but for some people it can take longer. Some people have very few or no problems following critical illness
• There are contributing factors than can influence recovery such as age, medical history and length of hospital stay in critical care
• For those people who have suffered significant organ damage, recovery can take much 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

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

They may have:
- felt slightly aware but didn’t know where they were or what was happening
- had nightmares or thought things were happening which were not 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 having hallucinations is called delirium and is very common
- been unable to talk or let people know what they were feeling
- have found it very difficult to sleep or have had strange dreams when they did sleep
- not known 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. Memories can often be hazy or ‘jumbled’. It can be difficult to piece together what happened before being admitted, and what took place while they were there. Some people remember the end of their admission, whilst others remember almost nothing.

Some 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 physical and cognitive problems your employee may experience during recovery:

- Fatigue
- Problems sleeping
- Brittle hair and hair loss
- Joint pains and muscle weakness
- Nausea
- Breathlessness (it’s likely 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

Here are some of the most common psychological and emotional problems experienced during recovery:

- Low mood and/or mood swings
- Lack of interest in things they previously enjoyed, and possibly 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 have put their friends and family 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 who is experiencing fatigue, anxiety and trouble with concentration 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.

As a manager, you may be one of your employee’s most important sources of support. You do not 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 that 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. Whilst your employee may need some changes to their workspace or to their daily routine, many such changes cost little or nothing. They can be as simple as moving their workstation to a location with a more suitable ambient temperature, allowing an extended lunch break or enabling them to start and 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.

Talk to your employee.

There’s no ‘one size fits all’ approach when it comes to someone recovering from critical illness, 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.

Establishing an ongoing dialogue is the best way for both you and your employee to express concerns, determine what they need from you and how you can help.

Do not 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, try to avoid making any comparisons between your employee and the other person’s recovery as everyone is different and such comparisons can be unhelpful.

Whilst your instinct might be to show sympathy, an emotional response is not helpful. It’s better to focus instead on the support you can offer to your employee. Do not 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.

Talking to your employee needs to be more than a one-off conversation. Try to foster a relationship in which they feel they can trust you, and you can both talk about any concerns. 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.

Your company may already have policies in place that say how you should support your employee and advise how to record any discussions 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:

- 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 management concern about the health and safety or performance of affected employees
- consideration of alternative employment within your organisation
According to the Equality Act 2010, employers must consider making ‘reasonable adjustments’ to any policies or practices which cause a disadvantage to people with disabilities, including the employer’s premises. These adjustments can vary according to the needs of individuals, but examples of adjustments commonly required by people following critical illness may include:

- alteration to working hours
- phased return
- flexible working (e.g. altering 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/, or phone our Support Team on 0808 800 0029.

Here are some other useful links:

Access to work
gov.uk/access-to-work

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) Helpline
0845 747 4747
acas.org.uk

CIPD The professional body for human resource and people development
cipd.co.uk

Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) Web
citizensadvice.org.uk

The Pensions Advisory Service Helpline
0845 601 2923
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
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 or call 0800 389 6255. Thank you so much.