

# eap

## newsletter



Managing Employee Health and Performance



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## Getting Back to Work

**I**t's okay, we can admit it—every once in a while we fantasize about winning the lottery and not having to work anymore.

But when it comes right down to it, most of us enjoy working for a living. We view it as a source of character and pride, and at times it even helps us define who we are in this world.

Occasionally we face circumstances that result in our being unable to work. Sometimes it's due to layoffs or cutbacks; in other cases it stems from a physical or mental disability that prevents us from performing on the job.

Whatever the reason, the impact is often the same. Our self-esteem suffers because we aren't contributing at the level to which we are accustomed. We want to work!

In the case of the latter, employers know that the costs associated with short- and long-term disability (STD and LTD) are enormous.

That's why companies invest in occupational health and safety resources to ensure workers don't get injured in the workplace. And that's why they provide employee assistance programs (EAPs) and other benefits that enable employees to address issues in their per-

sonal lives that if left unchecked could become debilitating.

The Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health estimated that annually \$30 billion is lost to the Canadian economy due to mental health and addiction problems. The private sector pays two-thirds of these costs in the form of lost productivity, STD and LTD, group insurance premiums and drug benefits. Depression is the fastest growing category of disability costs to Canadian employers at 4% to 12% of payroll costs.

So what can we deduce from these dramatic statistics?

First and foremost, these numbers cement the notion that companies operating without a quality EAP are effectively flying without a net.

These numbers also tell us that despite the best intentions and resources put forth by employers, employees are going to continue to face mental health issues that will result in both short- and long-term disability leave.

This being the case, the employers best able to mitigate the skyrocketing cost of mental illness are those that offer a holistic approach to employee well-being.

And this requires the provision of a prevention-focused EAP to help employees to maintain good mental health, and an effective return-to-work strategy to ensure their successful reintegration into the workplace following STD or LTD leave.

The longer an employee is off the job, the less likely it is that they will ever return to a productive working life.

Early intervention is key, and as noted by the Ontario Medical Association's Committee on Work and Health, "a return-to-work plan is essential to maintaining patient employability. Not doing so may have a negative impact on a person's physical health, as well as social and economic circumstances."

We enjoy working and it's important to us to be able to support our families and ourselves. But occasionally the challenges of life in the 21st century put up roadblocks that prevent us from contributing in the way we would like.

Companies that recognize this truth and provide resources to help employees navigate these roadblocks are best poised to control the devastating financial and personal costs of mental illness in the workplace. 🍁

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**ALSO: FROM DISABILITY TO ABILITY**  
by Heather Anderson

## From Disability to Ability: Tips for a Successful Return to Work

**R**eintegrating an employee after a lengthy absence is an important challenge facing employers today. Considering that an estimated 30%–40% of disability claims are related to psychological conditions, it is important to also consider the particular needs of these employees when establishing return-to-work guidelines. It is well known that the longer the work absence, the less likely the employee will resume normal work activity. Indeed, the chances of a return to work after a disability are only 50% after an absence of up to six months, dropping to 20% after one year.<sup>1</sup>

Recent research has shown that resolving psychological symptoms alone does not necessarily lead to a return to work.<sup>2</sup> We must identify ways to eliminate other obstacles to the return to work, developing a collaborative partnership between the employer, employee, insurer and health professionals.

Here are a few tips that can often make the return to work smoother and more successful:

### Meet with the employee before the return to work

When an employee has been off for several months or more, they are naturally apprehensive about returning to work, as they imagine how their employer and coworkers might perceive them and how they will perform after such a long absence. A meeting can provide an opportunity to “break the ice,” so the employee can reconnect with the employer and coworkers, learn about changes that may have occurred while they were away, and confirm the return-to-work plan. If there are any disciplinary or other difficult issues that need to be addressed before the return, your insurer’s rehabilitation consultant can

assist you with this process. They can meet with you and with the employee separately to help each party prepare, as well as offer mediation services during the meeting. An EAP can also assist the process, providing counselling to a supervisor who may not know how to handle the return of a certain employee, for example.



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### Allow for a progressive return to work

There is sometimes a misconception that an employee should remain on disability until they are prepared to resume full-time work. However, more and more studies show that a progressive return to work is an important part of the treatment. In fact, Blonk *et al* (2006) recently demonstrated that a combined approach of cognitive behavioural therapy and workplace-focused interventions that encouraged a progressive return to work brought people back to work faster than cognitive behavioural therapy alone. Gradual exposure to the workplace and workload enables the employee to regain functional abilities specific to his or her work, while also increasing confidence that may have been lost as a result of the extended absence.

### Consider temporary accommodations

A return to work may be possible at an earlier date if modified or flexible duties are available to facilitate the reintegration. For example, the employee may be “buddied” with a coworker for the initial week or two, providing assistance. Other examples include gradually increasing duties, an alternate position with less urgent deadlines, modifying productivity standards or providing a private space where the employee can contact someone from the EAP or insurer if they are having difficulty.

### Regular communication

Check in on the employee at regular intervals throughout the program, be available to them and provide them with information on the EAP. Also, communicate regularly with the insurer, providing feedback on the employee’s performance, which helps the insurer manage the claim more effectively.

It is to everyone’s advantage to find ways to improve the return to work process and reduce disability duration. With a bit of effort, creativity and teamwork, great results can be achieved. 🍃

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