SANE

FACTSHEET

GETTING BACK TO WORK

QUICK FACTS

Getting back to work when you have a mental illness can be a challenge. Whether you have never worked, or have not been in work for months or even years, it's important to be as prepared as possible, to be realistic, and to know where to get information and support.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Returning to a job

If your employer is holding a job open while you recover, discuss with your supervisor or human resources manager about your approach to returning to work; consider what supports you might need, such as working part-time while you build back up to more hours.

Finding new work

Centrelink can refer you to a jobactive or Disability Employment Service (DES) agency. Visit jobaccess for useful information. A private career counsellor may also be able to help. Remember to be patient – looking for a job can take time.

Other types of work

Volunteering can be a good way to build up skills and help you get back into a routine. If you feel ready, consider registering with a recruitment agency for temporary work to ease back into employment with short-term contracts.

Should I disclose my illness to an employer?

Deciding whether to tell an employer that you have a mental illness can be difficult. Talk with your doctor, a close friend or worker at an employment agency about the reasons for and against disclosure in your circumstances, especially if your symptoms may affect health and safety issues (such as operating machinery).

Discuss, too, whether you need (or want) to tell co-workers, and how this could be done.

Possible concerns include:

- being treated unsympathetically.
- not offered promotion, or even being fired.

Benefits can include:

- the employer being understanding and prepared to help if you need time off.
- feeling supported if you become unwell at work.

WHAT CAN I DO TO STAY AT WORK?

An essential part of being a productive and valued employee is making sure your symptoms are well managed, and that you feel understood and supported by managers and co-workers.

Handling stress at work

Handling stress at work is very important as this can be a factor in the onset or worsening of symptoms. Some strategies include:

- taking slow deep breaths
- talking about how you feel to someone you trust
- making sure you take holidays
- planning occasional ‘mental health days’ using annual leave, rather than calling in sick at the last minute
- talk to a health professional about other stress management techniques.
- Try to keep a good work-life balance

Do things that help you stay well, such as:

- taking any prescribed medications
- psychotherapy
- exercise
- getting enough sleep
- doing things you enjoy to relax
- socialising with friends and family.

Decide soon after you start a job what action is best for a manager or co-worker to take if you start to become unwell. This may include providing a quiet space and making a call to a family member or friend, treating doctor or crisis team.

What can I do about being a smoker at work?

Discuss giving up smoking with your doctor before taking steps to stop. The doctor can provide helpful advice, especially where there may be an interaction between quitting aids and medications.

If you do need to smoke at work, minimise its impact by using breath mints, making sure you don’t take more breaks than your co-workers, smoke discreetly in designated areas and dispose of butts appropriately.