

SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES
RETURNING TO WORK AFTER A
MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS,
TRAUMATIC EVENT, OR SUICIDE
ATTEMPT:

A GUIDE FOR MANAGERS

2024



KONTERRA
RESILIENCE

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Returning to work after a mental health crisis, traumatic event, or suicide attempt can be a challenging process and requires a compassionate and thoughtful approach. It is essential to create an environment where the employee feels supported, valued, and able to reintegrate at their own pace. This resource offers practical strategies for managers seeking to support employees as they return to work after being away for some time due to a mental health crisis, traumatic event, or suicide attempt.

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1. TIPS FOR SUPPORTING RETURN TO WORK

While every situation is different and decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, here are some steps managers can take to support employees as they return to work after being away due to a mental health crisis, traumatic event, or suicide attempt.

A. Prepare in advance for the employee's return

- > **Consult with HR:** Partner with HR to understand the legal obligations and organizational policies related to employee privacy and accommodations. HR can also assist in developing a return-to-work plan that balances the employee's needs with the company's requirements.
- > **Consider consulting with mental health professionals:** It may be useful for you to speak to a mental health professional to discuss the issues explored in this document and consider respectful and supportive options.
- > **Create a return-to-work plan:** Collaborate with the employee to create a personalized plan that allows for a phased return if necessary. The employee may also wish to consult their mental health provider when developing this plan and/or involve someone from HR or a trusted colleague so that they are closely connected with someone who helps them feel comfortable throughout this process. Key considerations include part-time or flexible hours, modified responsibilities, or temporary accommodations to help the employee transition smoothly. Review Section 2 on supportive statements and questions you can ask the employee to help you collaboratively plan for their return to work.

B. Respect confidentiality and privacy

- > **Maintain privacy:** Make every effort to uphold privacy at every stage. The employee's mental health history, experiences of trauma, or details about a suicide attempt should remain confidential. At work, information should be shared on a need-to-know basis and contained as much as possible. The employee should have as much control as possible over what they wish to share with colleagues.
- > **Don't push for details:** While expressing empathy and concern, refrain from asking for details about the mental health crisis, traumatic event, or suicide attempt. Focus instead on the employee's readiness to return and how you can best support them.

C. Foster open and supportive communication

- > **Create a safe space for dialogue:** Let the employee know they can approach you with any concerns or needs related to their return. Be open and approachable and avoid pressuring them to share more than they are comfortable with.
- > **Check-in regularly after the employee returns:** Ask how their return is going and offer the employee an opportunity to discuss their needs and concerns, ensuring they know you are available for support without forcing conversation. These discussions should be low-pressure and focused on understanding whether additional accommodations are needed or if their workload requires adjustments.

D. Offer access to mental health and support resources

- > **Encourage use of support services:** Make sure the employee is aware of any Employee Assistance counseling or external support resources that are available to them. Encourage the use of these resources without any stigma or pressure.
- > **Consider peer support:** If appropriate, offer to connect the employee with a trusted colleague or mentor who can offer additional support during their reintegration.

E. Offer flexible work arrangements

- > **Offer adjustments to work schedule and hours:** Be flexible in terms of work hours, workload, and responsibilities, especially during the initial phase of their return. If the employee needs to gradually increase their work hours or take on modified tasks, be open to these adjustments to ease their transition.
- > **Monitor workload and stress:** Pay attention to how the employee is managing their responsibilities. Make adjustments as needed to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed, especially in the early stages of their return.

F. Identify and address potential triggers

- > **Address workplace stressors:** Discuss with the employee any aspects of their role that may trigger undue stress, anxiety, or trauma-related symptoms, and work together to minimize or mitigate these where possible. Adjustments might include modifying deadlines, altering communication patterns, or providing additional support.

G. Cultivate a supportive, inclusive workplace

- > **Promote mental health and trauma sensitivity:** Foster a workplace culture where mental health, trauma, and recovery are openly discussed and supported. Reducing stigma can create a more welcoming and understanding environment where employees feel safe setting boundaries and seeking help.

- > **Provide training for managers and teams:** Offer training on mental health awareness, trauma sensitivity, and how to support colleagues dealing with challenges. This can help prepare colleagues to be supportive and sensitive to the challenges faced by individuals returning after a crisis or traumatic event, and help to prevent further stress.

H. Support positive team dynamics

- > **Prepare the team as appropriate:** Without breaching confidentiality, consider informing the team about their colleague's return and how they can best support them. This can be done generally, emphasizing empathy, respect, and understanding in the workplace.
- > **Address stigma:** Be proactive in addressing any signs of stigma or exclusion from colleagues. Ensure that the returning employee is treated with respect and is reintegrated smoothly into the team.

I. Encourage self-care and wellbeing

- > **Promote self-care:** Encourage the employee to focus on their wellbeing and self-care as they return, whether that means taking breaks, setting boundaries that contribute to work-life balance, or continuing therapy and treatment as needed.

By adopting an empathetic, flexible, and structured approach, managers can help employees successfully return to work after a mental health crisis, traumatic event, or suicide attempt. It's important to focus not only on accommodations but also on ensuring that employees feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute meaningfully to the workplace once again.

2. SUPPORTIVE STATEMENTS AND QUESTIONS TO ASK THE EMPLOYEE

Here are some supportive statements and thoughtful questions you can ask the employee to help you plan together for their return to work after a mental health crisis, traumatic event, or suicide attempt. These sorts of statements and questions allow you to show empathy and care while involving the employee in creating a return-to-work plan that is manageable and supportive for them.

Sample supportive statements

1. "I'm really glad you're feeling ready to return. Please know that we're here to support you as you transition back."
2. "Your wellbeing is our priority. Let's work together to create a plan for your return to work that feels manageable and comfortable for you."
3. "We understand that this has been a difficult time for you. You can take things at your own pace as you return, and if you ever need additional support please feel free to let me know."
4. "It's important to us that you feel safe and supported at work. If there are any adjustments we can make to help with that, please let me know."

Sample questions you can ask

1. **"How are you feeling about returning to work? Are there any concerns or worries you'd like to discuss?"** This helps you gauge how the employee is feeling emotionally about the return and allows them to express any concerns.
2. **"What would your ideal first day back at work look like?"** This empowers the employee to take control over their return by imagining a scenario that feels comfortable and manageable. It also helps the manager understand the employee's expectations and any accommodations they might need.

3. **"Is there anything specific we can do to make you feel more comfortable during this transition?"** This question allows the employee to share their needs, whether it's related to their workspace, hours, team dynamics, or something else.
4. **"Would it be helpful to have someone from the HR team or a trusted colleague involved in planning your return-to-work process?"** This shows that you're willing to bring in additional support if they feel more comfortable with multiple points of contact.
5. **"Would you prefer a phased or gradual return, such as starting with fewer hours or a lighter workload?"** Offering a phased return can help ease them back into work without overwhelming them.
6. **"Would it be helpful to have some flexibility with your schedule as you return, in case you need time off or more breaks during the day?"** Offering flexibility in their schedule can alleviate the pressure of returning full-time too quickly.
7. **"Are there any work tasks or environments that you find particularly stressful, and is there anything we can do to minimize those challenges?"** This shows you're willing to adjust their responsibilities to reduce potential triggers or stressors.
8. **"Would you like regular check-ins as you transition back? If so, how often would feel right for you? How would you like those check-ins to happen?"** Regular check-ins ensure you're providing consistent support, but it's important to let the employee decide the frequency and modality. They may prefer to check-in via electronic communication or in person.
9. **"Are you aware of the resources available to you, such as our Employee Assistance/Resilience Program or other support services? Would you like more information on these?"** This is a gentle reminder of the mental health resources available, without pressuring them to use them.

10. **"What, if any, additional information would you like shared with colleagues before your return?"** This question ensures the employee's privacy is respected while allowing them to have input on how their situation is communicated to colleagues. Some employees may want to share more about their experience to avoid speculation, while others may prefer to keep details private.
11. **"How would you like us to communicate your return to the rest of the team?"** As above. Respecting their privacy and allowing them to decide how (or if) they want to communicate their return to colleagues is critical.
12. **"How would you like colleagues to interact with you when you return to work?"** This question allows the employee to express their preferences for social interactions with colleagues. Some may want to ease back into regular interactions, while others might prefer limited interactions initially. For example, some employees may ask that colleagues don't gather around them when they return—they may wish to receive as little attention as possible. Help set the tone for the employee's return to work by relaying any such preferences to staff, ideally during an in-person meeting.
13. **"Is there anything you would like me to be mindful of when we work together? For example, certain communication styles or approaches that would help you feel more supported?"** This shows your willingness to adapt your management style to better suit their needs.

3. COMMUNICATING WITH AND SUPPORTING IMPACTED COLLEAGUES

When a traumatic event, mental health crisis, or suicide attempt involves an employee, it is crucial for managers to carefully consider how to communicate with colleagues who may be affected. Maintaining the confidentiality of the employee who is directly impacted is essential, however colleagues who are aware of the situation or impacted by the event may require support.

Especially when a traumatic event, mental health crisis, or suicide attempt has occurred at the workplace or is public knowledge, it may be suitable and helpful to discuss events more openly. Here is some guidance for managers and leaders on what and how to communicate.

General guidance for managers

- > **Respect privacy:** Before any communication, ensure that the employee involved is consulted about what information, if any, can be shared with others. Their wishes regarding disclosure should be respected as much as possible.
- > **Verify facts:** It's essential to ensure all information is accurate before sharing it with colleagues. Miscommunication or speculation can lead to further distress or misunderstandings.
- > **Limit details:** Avoid sharing unnecessary or specific details about the event. When discussing sensitive incidents, keep the focus on ensuring the wellbeing of the team without delving into personal information unless the employee has given explicit permission.
- > **Consult HR:** Work with HR to ensure that communication aligns with organizational policies and guidelines. HR can also provide guidance on the appropriate level of disclosure, taking into account both the employee's privacy and the team's needs.
- > **Check in privately as necessary:** For colleagues who are aware of the incident or are close to the individual involved, offer private one-on-one check-ins. These conversations should focus on their emotional wellbeing, providing them with an opportunity to share how they are feeling and how the situation has affected them. It will be helpful to ask impacted colleagues how they are doing, to offer time off from work, and to ask them how you can best support them during this time.

- > **Consider small group support:** If the affected colleagues work closely together and share a high level of trust, consider holding small group discussions (ideally facilitated by a mental health professional) to offer collective support. This can help create a shared space for colleagues to process the event together.
- > **Encourage counseling:** Suggest that impacted employees take advantage of available mental health services, such as Employee Assistance counseling services. Let them know that seeking help and support processing their own thoughts and emotions is encouraged.
- > **Provide resources:** Share information about local mental health resources, such as suicide prevention hotlines or crisis intervention services, in case colleagues need additional support outside of the workplace.

Sample script for managers

Here is a sample script managers could use to communicate with colleagues of an employee who has experienced a mental health crisis or suicide attempt.

I wanted to take a moment to speak with all of you about a sensitive situation regarding [Employee's Name]. Recently, [Employee's Name] experienced a significant personal challenge, and as a result, they will be taking a leave of absence to focus on their recovery and wellbeing.

I want to emphasize that, in line with privacy policies and out of respect for [Employee's Name], I'm not able to share specific details about their situation. It's important for us to respect their privacy and allow them the time and space they need during this period. If you have questions, please understand that I may only be able to share limited information, but my focus is on ensuring that we support both [Employee's Name] and the team in the best way possible.

For those of you who have been closely impacted by this situation, I want to check in with you individually or in small groups to see how you're doing and to offer any support you may need. If this has been difficult for you, please don't hesitate to reach out to me or [HR/another trusted team member]. We are here to help, and I want to make sure you feel supported during this time.

Additionally, I encourage everyone to take advantage of the resources we have in place, such as our [Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or Employee Resilience Program

(ERP)], which offers confidential counseling and support. I will share more information about how you can access those resources, and we can also connect you with external mental health services if needed.

As we move forward, let's be mindful of how we can create a supportive, understanding work environment. If you have any concerns or need to talk, my door is open. Your wellbeing is important to me, and we'll navigate this together as a team.

Thank you for your understanding and for respecting [Employee's Name]'s privacy. Please feel free to come to me with any thoughts or questions you may have.

ABOUT KONTERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.



Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: info@konterragroup.net.