



Returning to work after illness or injury is easier with supervisor support

Returning to work following an illness or injury is a complex challenge for people and workplaces across Australia. Supervisors play a critical role in supporting workers to return to work, but may have limited time, knowledge or confidence.

We drew on expert advice and behavioural science to design materials to help supervisors provide timely, tailored and ongoing support for workers. We tested the materials with the assistance of case managers from two APS agencies.



If you are unable to have regular conversations with your employee, this role should be carried out by your manager.

As soon as you know the employee is off for an injury/illness

- Start simple. Ask how they are and actively listen.
 - Open-ended questions are better (e.g. How are you feeling generally? What can I do to help?)
 - Actively listen by asking questions that show you care. This can make a big difference to the employee's motivation.
 - If the employee is comfortable talking, let them guide the direction of the conversation as much as possible.
- Employees can sometimes feel that their injury or illness is being questioned. Don't focus on aspects of the injury or illness at first contact.

Return to work facts

Early contact is important: research shows injured/ill employees contacted by their employer within the first few days were twice as likely to achieve stable HRW compared to those contacted after two weeks.

- Don't say when you expect them back at work, but reassure them that there is no rush and you are looking forward to having them back when they are ready.
- Make a plan for how to keep in touch, taking into account the employee's preferences (e.g. via phone once every two weeks to begin with and over time you may want to change the frequency or mode of contact).

Conversation starters provide tips for making contact with workers (the example for step 1 is shown above).

The materials were delivered to supervisors in a five-step return to work process matching key points in the return to work journey:

Return to work pathway



Supervisors and case managers reported the materials were useful

“Overall, I think the content is really good. [The Checklist] is great! The mental health content and language is great [in the suitable duties guide]” (HR, ATO)

Tailored support materials provided at key points in the return to work journey can help supervisors to provide timely and appropriate support to injured or ill workers.

