



### Is Depression affecting your work and productivity?

Four out of five adults with depression report that it causes them at least some difficulty with work, home, or social activities. So it would be no surprise if depression is interfering with your productivity at work.

#### The signs of depression

Depression, whether major depressive episodes or a longer-lasting type called Persistent Depressive Disorder (PDD), has many symptoms, and different people manifest depression differently. Here are the most common signs of depression:

- having less energy or getting tired easily
- sleep disturbances
- loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities
- isolating oneself from friends and family
- feeling worthless or very guilty
- significant changes in appetite or weight
- overeating or eating too little
- a decrease in productivity or performance
- memory difficulties and difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- feelings of anger or irritability
- chronic aches and pains that don't respond to treatment
- frequent crying episodes
- suicidal thoughts or talk of suicide (in which case, seek professional help immediately)

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## How depression affects work and productivity

Depression can have a major impact on your productivity and the quality of your work. You may feel too tired to manage your tasks or do a good job. It might be hard to focus or concentrate. You may feel uninterested in work that normally engages you. You might be less friendly or communicative. You may even miss work by taking sick days.

## Handling work responsibilities when you are experiencing depression

Here are some ways to cope at work while you're depressed:

- **Recognize the symptoms.** Pay attention to how you feel when a depressive episode is coming on. With fair warning, you can take steps to lessen the impact, such as employing coping mechanisms that you find effective and seeking support.
- **Find coping mechanisms that work for you — and use them.** Deep-breathing exercises, mindfulness meditation, taking a short walk, or doing a quick stretching workout may help you return to work with your mind more fully engaged in the tasks at hand and avoid falling into a worse mood. Try different methods to see what helps, and then schedule these into your day. Every person is different, and different strategies work for different people. Think about how you feel, and look back to see if you've experienced this same feeling in the past. If you have, what were small things that helped you through it? If you can identify the tools that worked best for you, you can apply them to your current situation in hopes of gaining some relief. If your symptoms persist, speak to your doctor about what you are experiencing.
- **Prioritize.** Organize your tasks and responsibilities by order of importance. Set a realistic schedule for getting specific tasks done. Having a list of ordered priorities and a schedule for completing them will help you stay focused and get work done. If you find it hard to set a schedule and stick to it, try out one of the many time management techniques you can find online and in books.
- **Talk with your supervisor.** If you feel comfortable sharing personal information, let your supervisor know you're unwell. You don't have to specify the problem. Ask if there might be flexibility with certain tasks, if co-workers can be assigned to step in and help temporarily, or if other allowances might be made.

## Keeping a lid on job stress

Job stress can exacerbate symptoms of depression, and depression can make work feel more stressful. Reducing stress will likely help you cope more effectively. Here are some effective ways to manage stress:

- **Get regular exercise.** A wealth of scientific evidence shows that regular exercise helps improve your overall health and sense of well-being. More specifically, exercise boosts endorphins, the brain's "feel-good" neurotransmitters.
- **Eat healthy.** Adjust your diet to focus on high-fiber, low-fat meals with plenty of carbohydrates. Include lots of fruits and vegetables, and cut back on meat and high-fat dairy foods like cheese and whole milk.

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- **Avoid alcohol.** Many people drink alcohol to cope with stress. For most people a glass of wine or beer now and then won't cause any harm. However, alcohol is a depressant, and any amount can increase feelings of depression. Also, heavy drinking, along with the aftereffects are likely to make you more, not less, anxious.
- **Avoid caffeine and sugar.** Caffeine gives you a quick boost of energy. But that effect comes from an artificial boost in stress hormones, and caffeine remains in your system for many hours. As for sugary snacks and drinks, there's some evidence that heavy consumption of sweet foods and beverages may contribute to depression, according to research published by the National Institutes of Health.
- **Try relaxation techniques.** Even just a couple of minutes of deep-breathing exercises can relieve stress. [Studies have also shown](#) that regularly practicing mindfulness meditation significantly reduces anxiety and depression.

### Finding support

Depression is highly treatable. Talking with a mental health professional can help you identify the causes and find ways to overcome both the underlying problems and the symptoms of depression. Medication is effective for many people as well.

Contact your health care provider if you have symptoms of depression that last for more than a few weeks, especially if they are interfering with your work or your relationships.

Remember, depression is an illness, not a weakness. Don't hesitate to seek help, including seeing a psychotherapist for treatment, if depression is hurting your productivity at work or impacting your relationships and well-being.

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## Return to work, friends and routine after mental illness

Those who have had time away from work due to mental or emotional health problems are not alone. Approximately 50 percent of long-term absences from work are attributable to mental health illnesses, and it is important to raise awareness about all aspects of these absences so that those returning to work and those who support them understand how to plan for and facilitate successful return to work and life. During a leave from work for a mental illness, most people experience:

- Low self-esteem and shame, and a fear of being judged as “weak”;
- Feelings of isolation and being misunderstood;
- Feelings of rejection and of being a “bother to others”;
- Uncertainty about what is “normal”;
- Despondency (“life will always be this way”);
- Fear of losing their job.

### Contact with the work team during a leave

When an employee is on leave and experiencing these fears and negative emotions, positive contact with members of a work team and/or manager is usually greatly appreciated and can be quite motivating. Even the smallest gestures can have a big impact:

- Acknowledging that the employee is still continuing valued member of the team;
- Extending best wishes;
- Sharing some personal news about team members’ families, vacations, etc.;
- Encouraging the employee to take good care and not to worry about work.

Employees are often afraid to return to work because they fear harassment or that colleagues will think less of them. They may have been present when colleagues made jokes or negative comments about people with a mental illness. Leaders have an obligation to ensure that the employee is returning to a safe environment that is free from harassment and that the employee is treated no differently than they were before they went on leave.

### Returning to work

Having a clear understanding of what the return to work will entail before arriving for the first day back from a leave goes a long way towards reducing back-to-work stress. A short phone call with Human Resources or a meeting with the manager to discuss important details about the return and potential impacts on work performance or team can be extremely helpful:

- Expectations and job duties;
- Accommodations needed to get back on the job;
- The optimal pace at which to reintegrate into the workplace;
- Available support;
- Conditions that might affect work quality or quantity.

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If such a meeting is not offered, employees can request that one be arranged.

Many times, a person returning from a mental health leave will be advised to return in a progressive manner, that is, to start with a few shorter shifts and gradually, over time, work back to full-time accountabilities. This has proven to be a very effective way to ensure a successful return-to-work and to significantly reduce the chance of relapse.

On the first day back to work, it is ideal for the employee to meet with their direct manager right away in order to go over any specific expectations again and to get oriented to any changes that may have occurred in the work environment. This will aid in the employee's reintegration into the workplace and will help to ensure a smooth transition.

### **Returning to family and friends**

People may lose touch with some of their friends and extended family when off on a disability leave. They may lack the energy or confidence to interact socially while they are recovering. As with returning to work, taking a 'progressive' approach to reintegrating into the larger social circle is often best. The individual should feel free to:

- Start slowly, one step at a time – restrict frequency and duration of contacts;
- Give themselves time to recover from social encounters – recharge the batteries;
- Lean toward more compassionate friends who are able to express empathy.

### **Returning to a normal routine**

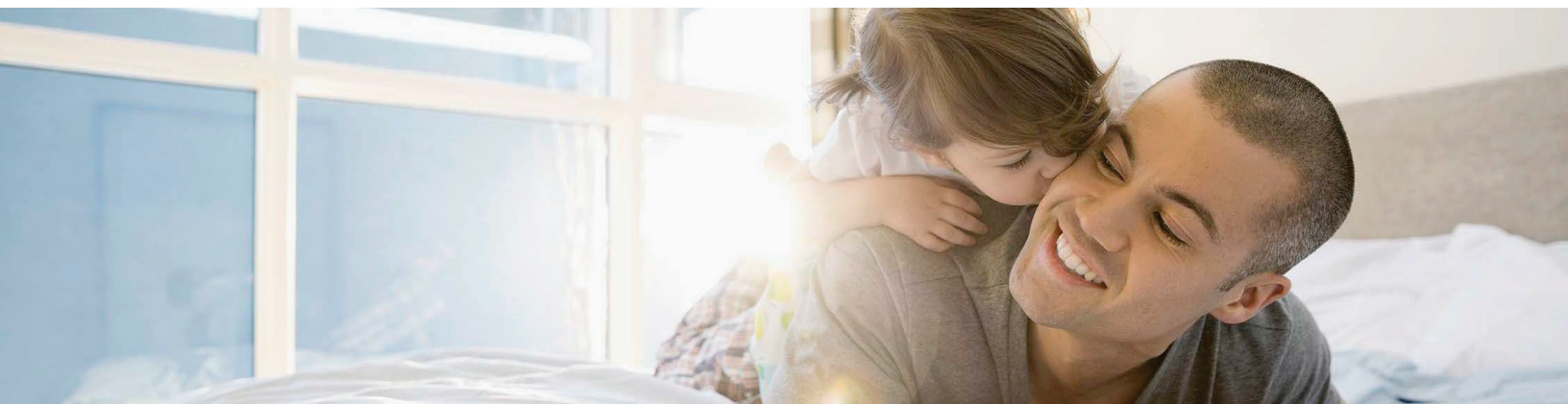
When people who are recovering from mental health challenges are able to return to "normal life", they are often encouraged to regulate their routines. Each person's needs for recovery after a leave are different and there is no correct path that will suit everyone; however, some of the ideas here may be useful:

- Observing the same time to bed and same time to arise every day (even on the weekend!);
- Observing regular meal times, including the most important meal of the day - breakfast;
- Getting regular exercise – tension can accumulate if we are inactive. Get the blood moving with aerobics, walking, jogging, dancing, swimming, yoga, or an outdoor activity such as gardening;
- Slowly easing back into regular pursuits such as membership at the gym, golf or book club;

Additionally, research shows that those who stick with counseling through their return are better able to maintain their balance and relapse 85 percent less frequently than those who discontinue counseling.

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## Online featured reads

### Mental health myths and facts

Many of those grappling with mental illness still face discrimination and isolation because “mental health myths” are still very much in circulation. The information in this article helps to demystify mental illnesses and can help you get the straight facts on mental health. [Keep reading.](#)

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