



Mental Health Issues

Return-To-Work from Long-Term Injury or Illness

by ROSS FLOOD

There are many definitions of what constitutes a Return-To-Work (RTW) plan. One definition centers on a rehabilitation (or return-to-work) program being based on the principle that the employer can, at a minimum, partner with the worker to enable a coordinated return to work. The program is delivered consistent with medical advice and, where necessary, the use of a rehabilitation provider (Return-to-Work Planning). The focus of this article is the role mental health issues play in teachers' long-term illness or injury and its influence on a return to work.

Two primary sources for this article are major studies, one from the United Kingdom titled *Returning to Work: The Role of Depression* (Loughborough University – Mental Health Foundation, 2006) and one from Canada titled *Business and Economic Roundtable On Mental Health. The Unheralded Business Crisis in Canada – Depression at Work, 2005*. Two secondary articles used were: *Principles of Return to Work* from the Workers Compensation Program in Nova Scotia and *Return to Work Planning* from the government of Australia.

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for Teachers focuses on the mental health and well-being of an individual. Among its counseling services, EAP for Teachers can provide support both during an extended sick leave or long-term-disability period and in supporting a return to work. Mental health problems may be the primary reason for a teacher's absence, or may be secondary symptoms a person displays stemming from the uncertainty of recovery and a return to work, their ability to perform in his/her previous position and how he/she will be accepted by the administration and other teachers upon their return to work.

Communication

In *Principles of Return to Work*, for the Return-To-Work Program to be successful, there must be ongoing communication and consultation amongst all team members. Only then can each person support and participate in both the planning and the implementation of the plan. If administrators/principals are not aware of the symptoms or effects of the illness and/or injury, then his/her ability to foster a positive environment is severely restricted, often leaving the returning teacher with conflicting and unresolved feelings.

In the UK study many of these emotional feelings arise because managers or administrators don't talk to returning employees about their health and well-being. "For some participants, in this study, the lack of communication made it difficult for them to access support most needed to have a successful outcome for their return-to-work." (*Returning to Work: The Role of Depression*)

Good return-to-work management is facilitated by good communication between administrators, occupational health, union representatives and the employee, through holding case conferences, planning individual return-to-work packages, and developing a positive employee attitude towards the workplace. The organization that provided health and well-being supports to their employees (i.e., physiotherapy and cognitive behavior therapy) noted an increase in early return to work.

Role of General Practitioner (GP) in Long-Term Sick Leave

As noted in the article *Returning to Work*, when illness is the reason for the absence from work, often it is the GP who plays an important role in the teacher's treatment and the return-to-work decision-making process. GPs are usually the initial contact for teachers in their illness and often the GP signs off on sick leave. Teachers often see the GP as the most sup-

portive during their sick leave and returned to work when their GP agreed they were fit enough to do so. The GP is often the medical case manager for the employee, providing primary treatment for physical or mental health problems, and referring to other medical and mental health providers as required. Administrators should be aware that teachers will follow the advice of their GP and it means the GP should be part of the collaborative effort of helping the employee return to work. If mental health concerns develop after a return to work, the GP is usually the first contact for the teacher.

Role of Principals and Colleagues

Colleagues have possibly the most important role in the employee returning to school, with their behavior determining the atmosphere for the teacher. Workplace support post return-to-work affects how employees feel about their work, their health and well-being. Where principals and teachers were supportive in phased returns and work adjustments, participants felt positive about their workplace. Employees who returned with no long-term plan or supports were left feeling isolated, stressed and anxious in dealing with their illness and their work (*Returning to Work*). Mental health issues often exist long after the teacher has returned to work. Identifying and providing appropriate supports for a teacher's well-being is critical in achieving a successful outcome.

The study *Roundtable on Mental Health in the Workplace*, contends that many administrators may not be aware that depression is the primary cause of long-term sick leave. As early as the year 2000, depressive disorders accounted for more than half of all medical plan dollars paid for mental health problems in the U.S. and represent 30-40% of all mental illness claims in Canada. By 2012, depression and anxiety disorders, at just over 40%, will be the main cause of long-term disability due to illness – surpassing cardiac disease.

Information on a teacher's mental health is often shared informally and passed to colleagues either from the teacher's friends or from the administrator when the teaching load has to be readjusted. Often colleagues are not clear on the reason for the illness/injury and how they can prepare to welcome a teacher back to the workplace. Clarifying the reason for the teacher's leave and informing other teachers about symptoms can go a long way in facilitating a positive outcome for the returning teacher.

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Role of Workplace Attitude

Sharing information about the returning worker could be handled better in many cases, as often there is no explanation of what depression or anxiety disorders are, how debilitating they can be, and how they can continue to affect the employee after a return to work. This lack of information means that many co-workers held misconceptions about depression and this was often sensed by employees when they returned to work. The attitude about a colleague returning to work is often based on limited factual information, especially when mental health is the reason for the absence. It is beneficial for the symptoms of depression and anxiety and the impact on an individual to be shared with co-workers. This requires the consent of the returning employee and how to do this becomes part of the RTW plan.

Administrators and teachers both need to be aware that employees with a serious physical illness may also experience anxiety or depression during sick leave, which hinders their timely return to work. For those who are on sick leave or LTD primarily for depression, it contributes strongly to the belief/feeling that they feel unable to cope. As well, teachers on extended sick leave or long-term-disability may bring with them symptoms of depression and/or anxiety and continue to need support throughout their return to work.

Role of Improving Post Return-to-Work Management

The UK study states that one of the most important concerns raised by participants related to a manager's lack of knowledge and understanding of their illness and, in particular, of depression and anxiety and their symptoms. From the *Returning to Work* article, "most workers indicated the need for better training for leaders, not only understanding of certain illnesses and depression better for the returning employee, but also in supporting employees returning to work following sick leave so that both illness and sick leave relapses are minimized".

This is a critical role for the administrator to understand and undertake. Teachers returning from an episode of depression may find it more difficult to adjust back to work than those recovering from other illnesses. This can be overcome by strong support from administrators and colleagues. Results from *Returning to Work* also suggest that "upon returning to work, three quarters of participants recovering from cancer developed symptoms of depression they believe was related to both their cancer and adjusting back to work. Surprisingly, individuals recovering from cancer were more worried telling the employer about their depression than they were in sharing information about their cancer". Teachers returning to work may be more comfortable discussing their physical injury or illness and more reluctant to discuss secondary symptoms of depression that may have developed because of the injury or illness and especially if a mental health issue was the reason for the leave.

There is a great deal of pressure on teachers returning to work after a lengthy injury or illness. Attempting to re-integrate a teacher into the workplace without a structured plan and supports from both administrators and colleagues reduces the chances for a successful outcome and provides a setting where depression and anxiety symptoms can hinder the employee. The longer the employee has been absent from the workplace, the longer the re-integration may take. The RTW plan should be based on the needs of the individual.

For teachers returning to work after a lengthy period of leave, the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers can provide assistance during your illness/injury and return to work with respect to your emotional and psychosocial needs. For questions and answers pertaining to your income support, sick leave benefits and a Return-to-Work Plan, a Benefits and Economic Services administrative officer of the NLTA can provide you with the advice and information to make informed decisions.

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Information for this article was taken from:

- *Business and Economic Roundtable on Mental Health. The Unheralded Business Crisis in Canada - Depression at Work*, 2005. Toronto: GPC Canada.
- *Principles of Return to Work* (www.wcb.ns.ca/return-to-work/principles.html)
- *Returning to Work: The Role of Depression: Loughborough University – Mental Health Foundation* (www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/?entryid5=67533)
- *Return to Work Planning* (www.comcare.gov.au/injury_management)

Other sites:

- www.worksafebc.com/claims/rehab_and_rtw/default.asp
- www.mentalhealth.org.uk/return-to-work
- www.whscc.nf.ca