



**Robert N. Anfield, MD,
JD, FAAFP**
Chief Medical Officer
CIGNA's Disability
Business

Returning to Work: Overcoming Fear and Anxiety

Remember how you felt in grade school when you were absent for a few days? You may have been anxious about reconnecting with your friends and had butterflies in your stomach about how long it would take to catch up on what you missed.

What about now, when you're on vacation or traveling for business? Even though you can stay connected using today's high-tech communications, you probably still feel some of those same old butterflies when you think about what's waiting at the office.

Multiply these perfectly natural anxieties tenfold and you might understand what it's like for a person who's been out of work on an extended disability leave. His head will be swirling with questions: Will my social network still be there? Will I be able to catch up? Have things changed so much that I'm no longer able to do my job? Will my boss still have confidence in me? Physically and emotionally, am I up to it?

With all these worries, it's not surprising that returning to work after an extended time can be difficult. Employers can help ease the transition by implementing a return to work program and connecting the employee to a vocational rehabilitation counselor who can help her address a wide range of issues, including stress and anxiety.

Research shows that the longer an employee stays out on disability leave the less likely he will return to work, so the topic of returning should be discussed early, while the employee is still absent and recovering. The sooner it's established that returning to work is the employee's goal,

the more quickly a treatment plan can be designed to make that happen. Barriers to achieving the goal—both perceived and real—can be identified and planned for.

People on disability leave need reassurance that somebody's there to help them navigate the return to work process. The counselor can assess the individual's situation and discuss a variety of options, such as a partial return to work, special accommodations, alternative work arrangements that might be appropriate to the individual's specific circumstances, or even a transition to a new job.

Returning employees may feel anxious about what others know about their condition, especially if the disability absence is related to depression or another behavioral issue. The employee needs to know that confidentially laws are being obeyed and that it's up to her to decide when, what and how much information is revealed to co-workers.

Returning employees may not realize it, but their co-workers and manager will likely feel a bit anxious, too. They may be nervous about how to approach the returning employee and worry about inadvertently saying something upsetting or insulting. It's important for returning employees to understand that fear and anxiety are two-way streets!

A company's employee assistance program (EAP) can play an important role. EAP counselors can listen to people's concerns and provide strategies to help the returning employee, co-workers and manager cope with their anxiety. That's what the EAP is for and nobody should hesitate to use it.

Returning to work after a disability isn't just about the physical. There's also a very large social-emotional component. If employers keep this in mind as they create a return to work program, they'll be well on their way toward implementing a successful one. ●

Tips for successful return to work:

- Keep in contact with the employee, maintain the work connection.
- Focus on abilities, not just restrictions and limitations.
- Follow confidentiality laws.
- Integrate EAP into your return to work program.
- Educate employees about return to work policies, even before an absence.