

A photograph of two men in a modern, well-lit room with bookshelves. One man, older with glasses and a blue shirt, is sitting on a wooden surface. The other man, younger with a beard and a light blue shirt, is sitting on a red sofa. They are both looking at a document held by the younger man. The background features white bookshelves filled with books and a patterned curtain.

Your mental health toolkit

A manager's guide to help colleagues return to work following absence.



It's what we do

Helping you to...

Understand what mental health is →

Know who and what this toolkit is for →

Support absent colleagues and their return to work →

Find help and support →

What is mental health?

Mental health can affect our thinking, emotions and behaviour, which can disrupt our ability to work, carry out simple daily tasks and engage in relationships.

We recognise that just like physical health, there are different levels of mental health, which can vary from person to person.

There are also different types of mental health conditions, some of which are common such as depression, stress and anxiety disorders and some which are not such as bipolar or schizophrenia.

If colleagues are experiencing mental health conditions it's important to know **that support is available** for you and for them.

Click here to view and download more mental health toolkits



Who and what is the toolkit for?



This toolkit is a guide for you as a manager to help colleagues return back to work, following absence from any mental health conditions.

You play a key role in supporting colleagues through good times and bad. This will help ensure their health and wellbeing remains at the very heart of the Co-op.

This toolkit is designed to help you to understand and support colleagues, who are experiencing mental health conditions, return back to work following absence.

Keeping in touch with colleagues who are absent from work can help them feel supported, valued and more confident about returning to work.

Who and what is the toolkit for?

The toolkit will explain what the Co-op can offer to **support you** and where you can go to **get more information** to help you.

Use this toolkit to:

- Be more confident in having return to work conversations, keeping in touch and making **workplace adjustments**
- Know the **myths and facts** about colleagues with mental health conditions
- Learn from examples of 'real life' **case studies** and a **video**
- Understand how and when the Co-op can **support you and your colleagues** and know where to find help

Visit the support page if you need help and advice.



Supporting absent colleagues

It's important to support colleagues while they are absent by keeping in regular contact with them. As a manager it's up to you to agree how regularly you would like to have this contact

The conversations should be genuine, relaxed and focused on the future not the past. Having scheduled calls should make the conversations more productive.

You should discuss what improvements the colleague is feeling and what, if any, help they are receiving and if they are seeing the benefits of this.

It's also important to have encouraging conversations about their intention about returning to work and the timescales of this.

Try to keep conversations positive about when and how you can support colleagues in their return to work. This will set a goal for the colleague to work towards.

Click here to download the absence policy



Being open about the **workplace adjustments** we can put in place from the start, will put the colleague's mind at rest and make returning to work feel much more manageable.

It's always good to keep the conversation light for example try and talk about things that are happening at work, rather than just concentrating on the conversation about their mental health. This will keep them in the loop with any changes that are happening, but will go a long way to ensure they still feel part of the team so they don't feel isolated.

Need support?

ER Services are the Co-op team who provide phone based HR support to colleagues who are managers. If you need help or advice on how to keep in touch with colleagues who are absent with a mental health condition **then follow this link.**

- [Discussing workplace adjustments](#)
- [Returning to work](#)
- [Planning the conversation](#)
- [Types of questions to ask](#)
- [How to handle emotions](#)
- [Myth busting](#)
- [Top tips](#)

Workplace adjustments

When colleagues return to work, it is important that we do what we can to help them do their work and protect the improvements they have made to their mental health.



It's what we do

Workplace adjustments

When can we use workplace adjustments?

As a manager you are responsible for making adjustments. **ER Services** are there if you would like to discuss the situation at any stage and if you need any advice you can get in touch with **occupational health**.

You should consider adjustments when:

- You become aware of a colleague's disability
- The colleague asks for adjustments to be made
- The colleague is having difficulty with any part of their job and it is causing an impact on their mental health
- Making an adjustment will make return to work sooner
- The Fit note can recommend any changes

How do you decide if to adjust?

We have a duty to consider adjustments. We must adjust where it's reasonable.

What is reasonable will depend on the circumstances of each colleague's case. It will depend on an assessment of factors including:

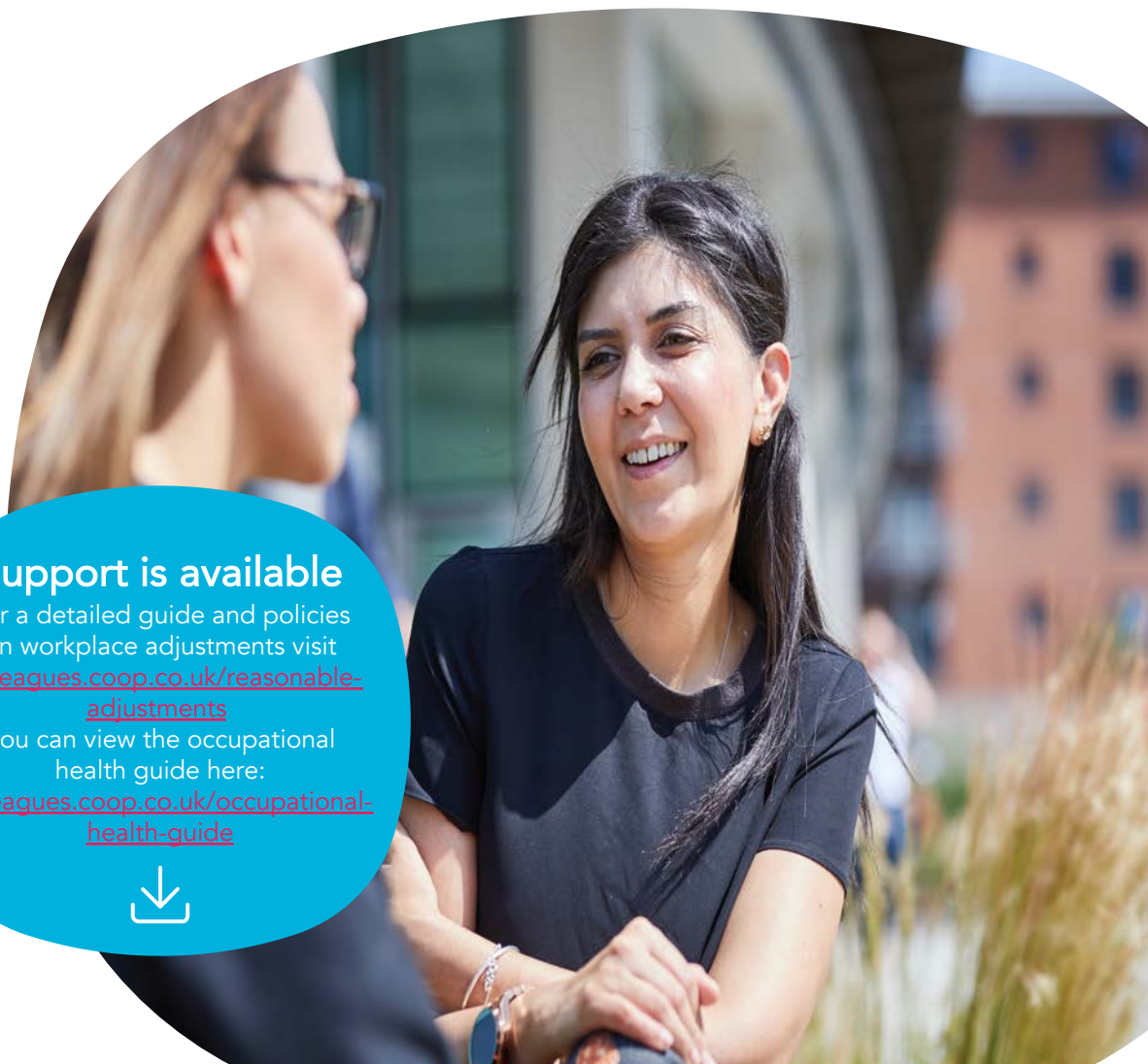
- Is the adjustment practical to make?
- Does the Co-op have the resources to pay for it?
- Will the adjustment be effective in overcoming or reducing the disadvantage in the workplace?
- Will the adjustment have an adverse impact on the health and safety of others?

Support is available

For a detailed guide and policies on workplace adjustments visit colleagues.coop.co.uk/reasonable-adjustments

You can view the occupational health guide here:

colleagues.coop.co.uk/occupational-health-guide



Returning to work

As a manager it's important to keep communication and have conversations with colleagues while they are absent.



It's what we do

Returning to work

It's important to have conversations throughout the absence regarding how their return to work will go and agree any adjustments.

ER Services

Provide phone based HR support to colleagues who are managers. If you need help or advice on how to make workplace adjustments then [get in touch with ER Services](#).

When the colleague returns to work, you should have a return to work meeting. If needed, you can use the [return to work discussion form](#) and the [stress risk assessment](#).

It's really important that you put your colleague at ease by explaining to them why you are having the meeting.

You should have been having conversations throughout the absence regarding how their return to work will go and agreed any adjustments, so the meeting is more of a way to formalise this and ensure that everything is in place for them to make the return as seamless as possible.


[Ask your questions](#) but make sure that you fully listen to the colleague's answers and give them the opportunity to ask anything they feel they need to.

You may want to say something like:

"I'm going to use the return to work discussion form as a guide just to make sure I don't miss anything important. Please tell me anything else I need to know or ask me any questions."

It's highly recommended that you make notes, both for your benefit but also for the colleague. This way the colleague has peace of mind that any adjustments have been recorded and their ways of working won't be disrupted.

You should offer to share the notes with the colleague but remember you must not share any details of their health without their permission.



Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

Planning for the return to work conversation

If you plan correctly, you will both be more relaxed and have a much better return to work conversation.

Where?

Think about where you are going to chat. This needs to be a private conversation but that doesn't mean it has to be in an office or in a work environment.

You are trying to make your colleague as relaxed as possible, so the environment is important.

You might think about using somewhere quiet. The more relaxed you make it for the colleague, the better the conversation will go.

When?

The conversation needs to take place as soon as you can, ideally on their first day back. Make sure in advance that there is enough time set aside in your diary.

The conversation should be a priority and a positive experience that will help you both.

What?

It might be a good idea to read the [return to work discussion form](#) or make yourself familiar with the [relevant policies](#) beforehand. This will help you to understand what you are discussing and what questions might need answering.

Where possible, [try to use open questions](#) and genuinely listen to your colleagues answers.

Remember, the conversation is the most important thing, you can always fill in the form after you have finished talking.

ER Services can help

They can provide phone based HR support to colleagues who are managers. If you need help or advice on how to plan for a return to work conversation then follow this link.

Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

Types of questions to ask

There are two basic types of questions, closed and open.

The return to work discussion form includes questions that you do need colleagues to answer, but try not to use this as the template for your conversation.

If you ask the right questions and keep the conversation as relaxed as possible you should get the answers you need without making the conversation feel like an interview.

Closed questions focus on getting specific answers and details, whereas **Open** questions will encourage the colleague to answer with more detail and will hopefully keep the conversation flowing.

If you use a combination of both, then you will be able to confirm the facts you need to know, but also understand more about how the colleague is feeling.

Here are a few examples for you to try when you are having the return to work conversation.



Here are a few examples for you to try:

"It's great to see you back, how are you feeling?" – **Open**

"Are you on any medication that we need to know about?" – **Closed**

this could be followed by:

"How might this impact you at work?" – **Open**

"Are there any things that trigger your condition at work?" – **Closed**

this could be followed by:

"How can we help you with this?" – **Open**

"Is there anything we can change that would make a difference?" – **Open**

"Is there anything you are doing to help with your condition?" – **Closed**

this could be followed by:

"What can we do to help with this?" – **Open**

"Is there anything worrying you about being back at work?" – **Closed**

this could be followed by:

"How can we help support you with this?" – **Open**

What happens if a colleague feels upset or is emotional?

Returning to work following time off for mental health reasons can be quite an emotional experience. Talking about their condition can be uncomfortable for some colleagues and it is perfectly normal that they may become upset or emotional. If this happens:

- Give them time to regain their composure
- Consider having a short break
- Reassure them that it's normal to feel upset
- Ask if they need anything – a tissue, a drink, fresh air
- Check that they are okay before continuing

If they are unable to continue or if they keep getting upset then you may need to consider if they are okay to return to work at this time. You may wish to seek help from **ER Services** at this stage.

Get support

ER Services are the Co-op team who provide phone based HR support to colleagues who are managers. If you need help or advice on how to help a colleague who is upset or emotional [get in touch with ER Services](#).



Myth busting – know the facts

Can colleagues fully recover from a mental health conditions?

Yes. Just like a physical illness people can make a full recovery from mental health conditions and never have a repeat occurrence.

Are colleagues with mental health conditions able to work?

Yes. In lots of cases the cause of a mental health condition is nothing to do with work. Being at work can actually help colleagues to recover as it will give them structure, purpose and can make them feel positive about their life.

Am I putting colleagues and customers at risk when someone with a mental health condition is in work?

No. Lots of colleagues are able to work perfectly well, despite experiencing an ongoing mental health condition.

LifeWorks (EAP) is just for colleagues who are struggling?

No. Lifeworks can help managers who need advice on helping colleagues with mental health problems. The support line completely confidential.

Should I consult with ER Services when I have a colleague with a mental health condition?


Not necessarily. In most circumstances support for colleagues with a mental health condition can be provided by you as their manager.

Just because the condition relates to mental wellbeing it doesn't mean you can't deal with it. **ER Services** are there if you'd like to discuss the situation at any stage, ask for advice or just check you're on the right lines in how you're thinking you will approach the situation.

Do I need to make an exception for inappropriate behaviour because someone has a mental health condition?


No. It is important that you act fairly and consistently with all colleagues. It is important that you try to look after the health and wellbeing of all colleagues you are responsible for.

If someone behaves inappropriately at work or in a way that endangers other colleagues, you should deal with the situation according to Co-op policies **You can download and view them here.**



If a colleague is acting inappropriately and you have done all you can to help them, you can get support and discuss this further with ER Services.

You can find out more by getting in touch here.



Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

Top tips



Here are a few top tips to help you understand what to do and what to avoid, when having a conversation.

What to do

- Plan ahead and decide what you are going to discuss
- Make time to have the conversation
- Find the right place to talk – private but relaxed
- Take the lead – encourage colleagues to talk by asking ‘open’ questions
- Make a decision on the best time to talk about their role/reasonable adjustments
- Listen to their answers and respond, show empathy
- Focus on their wellbeing first

What to avoid

- Rushing the conversation
- Asking only ‘closed’ questions
- Focusing only on their role
- Making judgements
- Treating the conversation the same every time

Find support

Our Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) support helpline is run by a separate organisation to the Co-op and is completely free and confidential. Don't ever feel alone, you can call from a UK landline or a mobile with **FREE** contract minutes on

For online support, visit the lifeworks website:



Case study - Alison

Alison has worked for the Co-op for 4 years. She is part of a team of 20, working shifts in a busy customer facing operational team.

You are her line manager but you do not always work the same shifts. She has been away from work for month having been diagnosed by her GP with 'Panic Disorder' after she had been experiencing panic attacks at home and at work. You spoke to Alison when she was originally absent.

During the past month Mark, a close colleague has been in regular contact with Alison - this was at her request and they have been updating you weekly.

Alison recently emailed you to let you know that she was ready to return to work.

Yesterday Mark informed you that although she is worried about coming back she is also very keen for things to 'get back to normal'.

You contact her directly to discuss a plan for her to return to work and book in a meeting for her first day back.



Case study - Alison

Preparation is the key

When you became aware of Alison's date of return, you spent a little time preparing which included:

- Researching 'Panic Disorder' through the NHS website to help you understand the subject a little more
- Reading the **return to work discussion form** and **absence policy**, to know the types of questions you may need to ask
- Booking the time in your diary to ensure you were not disturbed
- Making sure you had a suitable place to have the conversation

Having the discussion

You meet Alison in a small meeting room away from the operational area and the rest of the team. You make sure she feels comfortable sitting her near the door in case she wants to leave at any point and you begin with general conversation such as:

- "How are you feeling?"
- "It's great to see you back, we've missed you while you have been away"

Once Alison feels comfortable, you make a start by explaining to her that there is a compulsory return to work discussion form to complete, so you will have to ask some questions to help fill this in.

You go on to tell her however that the most important outcome from this meeting is that you are able to develop a 'wellbeing' action plan together to ensure she gets the right support now she is back at work.

To help fill in the forms you ask questions such as:

- How are you feeling about coming back to work?
- What can we do to make your first day as easy as possible?
- What areas of your job are potential triggers for you?
- What could we do to help with this?

During the conversation Alison explains that she has been advised to recognise when she is feeling under too much pressure (stress) and use relaxation techniques to help with this.

She has been trying 'mindfulness' and this is really helping.

She asks if she can be given set times in the day to carry out her mindfulness sessions as she attends a group class to help with relaxation.

You tell her that today she should take time to do her mindfulness and you arrange to check in with her at the end of the day to see how things have gone.

You also explain that you will see how any **workplace adjustments** could be made to ensure she is given suitable opportunities to carry out her relaxation exercises. You agree that you will meet again in about a week to discuss how things are progressing.

Keeping in touch

You are next on shift with Alison 6 days later and you arrange the day before to meet before shift again to discuss how things are progressing.

Visit the support page if you need further help and advice.

Case study - David

David has been with the Co-op for 18 months. He is a field-based colleague who also works about 2 days a week from home. You are his line manager but you are based in a different region.

He has been away from work for 3 weeks following the bereavement of his partner.

He initially returned to work soon after his death but very quickly realised he wasn't able to cope with the situation and subsequently his GP declared him temporarily unfit to work.

At David's request you have not spoken to him during his absence but as a temporary arrangement to help him, it was agreed he could maintain contact by text message until ready to talk/meet up.

David text you last week to let you know that he was ready to return to work and planned to start his first day back working from home.

You arrange to have a call with David to discuss the plan, then you book in a return to work meeting to have a face to face conversation with him when you both can meet up.



Case study - David

Preparation is the key

To get ready for the return to work phone call, you spent a little time preparing which included:

- Reading the **return to work discussion form** and **absence policy**, to know the types of questions you may need to ask
- Deciding where you will be to make the call – private and free from distraction
- You sent David a copy of the return to work discussion form and wellbeing action plan to allow you both to understand the information required on the call
- Thinking about how you will phrase your questions, given that you are not 'face to face' and will not be able to pick up on any of David's body language

Having the discussion

You arrange to be in a private room to make the call. You begin with some general conversation such as, **"How are things?"** You check that the line is good and that David can hear you clearly.

Once you feel ready, you make a start by confirming that he has seen the return to work and wellbeing action plan forms and that he understands the purpose of these. You explain that whilst completing the return to work discussion form is mandatory, the most important outcome from this call is that

you are able to develop a 'wellbeing' action plan together to ensure he gets the right support back at work.

To help fill in the forms you ask questions such as:

- How are you feeling about coming back to work?
- What can we do to make returning as easy as possible?
- What aspects of your role do you think will be more challenging?
- What could we do to help with this?
- What support have you been receiving whilst you have been off?

As you are not face to face with David you concentrate on listening to his tone of voice and consider if what you are hearing is in keeping with the responses he is giving.

During the conversation David explains that he has been talking with a bereavement counsellor, which is really helping him to come to terms with things. He recognises that he tried to come back to work too soon last time but he now feels ready to return. He advises you that occasionally he finds it hard and becomes emotional, but he has coping strategies to help with this.

You discuss his routine and he confirms that working remotely isn't going to be a problem.

You tell him that you are going to complete the return to work discussion form and will email him a copy to check he agrees with everything. You agree that you will call him later in the day to see how things are going and to confirm he is happy with the return to work discussion form content. You also agree to meet up face to face within the next 2 weeks for another discussion and to develop a wellbeing action plan.

You confirm that David knows you are 'at the end of the phone' if he needs anything and, after completing the return to work discussion form you email it to him as promised.

Keeping in touch

You meet with David with 2 weeks later, making the effort to travel to see him and you discuss how things are progressing. You complete the wellbeing action plan and agree a timescale for regular contact moving forward.

You again re-iterate that you may be in a different region but you are there to offer support if he needs it.

It's good to talk

It's really important for mental health to talk to others about the great times and tough times.



Who are ER Services and how can they help?

As a manager, you're often the best person to offer help and support to the colleagues in your team, although there may be times when this isn't possible. It maybe you don't know what to do or you feel that the situation is too much for you to cope with.

ER Services are there if you'd like to discuss the situation at any stage, ask for advice or just check you're on the right lines in how you're thinking you will approach the situation.

They can support on most colleague related matters including wellbeing, absence and performance.

You should look at our [People Policies on the Colleague Website](#), or How Do I if you're in Store, in the first instance and call ER Services if you need more information or can't find what you're looking for.

You can call: 0330 606 1001 (option 2). They're open Monday to Friday 8am - 6pm and Saturday 8:30am - 4pm.

To help as best they can, they need to understand as much about the situation as possible. Ideally you should use the toolkit as a guide to get as much detail as possible before calling them. They'll also need to know what you've done to try and help so far, along with what the colleague's already doing for themselves.



Help and support

The following links can be used to read, learn and contact others in order to support you in managing colleagues with mental health conditions get back into the workplace.

Many of the sites have downloadable fact sheets and take-away information which will support the use of this toolkit.

Lifeworks is our Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

The support line is run by a separate organisation to the Co-op and is completely confidential. You can contact the EAP from a UK landline or a mobile with **FREE** contract minutes on **0800 069 8854**.

For online support, visit the lifeworks website www.coop.lifeworks.com

Watch the video on YouTube

Click this link to watch a colleagues personal journey with mental health.



Here are links to online support:

- Mind.org - A starting point for anybody suffering from mental health conditions
- Samaritans - If you need somebody to talk to, the Samaritans are available 24 hours a day. Visit samaritans.org or Call 116 123
- Mentalhealth.org.uk - This UK's leading mental health research, policy and service improvement charity
- Co-op absence policy - Find out how to report an absence and how absence affects your pay and benefits
- Co-op work related stress policy - Support colleague's physical and mental wellbeing at work. Find out how you can get support
- Wellbeing action plans - These are a great way of helping everyone manage their mental health - whether you've got a mental health issue or not
- Mental health policy - Find out what support Co-op offer to colleagues with any mental health problems.