



Mental Health Support
for First Responders

Stay at Work/Return to Work Package

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Introduction

When an employee experiences a mental health condition, it can be difficult to continue working as usual. However, being away from the workplace is not always the best remedy. Evidence shows that the longer an employee is off work, the less likely they are to return and this can be even more detrimental to their mental health.

In most situations, it is preferable for both the workplace and for the employee that they remain in productive work (stay at work – SAW). If employees do require time away from work, it is usually preferable that they return to productive work as soon as they are able (return to work – RTW).

The *Working to Well* program offers Return to Work tools to support injured workers through their return to work journey. These resources were developed by WCB Nova Scotia, in cooperation with partners in Atlantic Canada.

The pages that follow offer tools and resources that were developed by the BC First Responders Program, and reflect workplaces and conditions in that province. While not all of these resources are applicable to the Nova Scotia workplace, they may still be valuable in helping employers and workers understand their roles in return to work, and best-practice strategies that can be applied.

Resources

The following documents have been developed to assist organizations with the stay-at-work and return-to-work processes. They can be used by your HR department to develop tailored resources for your organization so that they fit your existing processes and language, to help shape your organization's RTW processes, or given to relevant workplace parties without modification:

- *Employee Role in Stay at Work/Return to Work*
- *Supervisor Role in Stay at Work/Return to Work*
- *Co-Worker Support in Stay at Work/Return to Work*
- *Risk Factors for Work Disability*
- *Accommodation Strategies for Job Expectations*
- Communication Log template
- Letter to Health Care Provider template
- Work Ability Assessment Form template
- *Supporting Employee Success – A Tool to Plan Accommodations*

With the exception of Supporting Employee Success, these resources are included as part of the toolkit and are available at BCFirstRespondersMentalHealth.com.

Employee Role in Stay at Work/Return to Work

Unsurprisingly, employees play the most important role in ensuring they can remain in the workplace if they have difficulties performing their duties due to mental health conditions. An employee facing these difficulties must play an active part in the process. This document helps to explain the role of the employee in the SAW/RTW processes.

Supervisor Role in Stay at Work/Return-to Work

Supervisors (including line managers) play an important role in facilitating safe and effective work accommodations. From beginning to end, the support supervisors provide their workers will contribute to the best possible outcomes. Their knowledge of internal processes, their ability to provide appropriate accommodated work, and their positive supervisory qualities will help prevent unnecessary work disability in your organization. This document helps to explain the role of the supervisor in the SAW/RTW processes, along with their functions and the competencies necessary to out those functions.

Co-Worker Support in Stay at Work / Return to Work

When an employee has been off work due to a mental health condition, co-worker support can mean the difference between a successful and unsuccessful return to work. Co-workers and their attitudes are a key component of an employee successfully reintegrating into the workplace. Supervisors (or line managers) play key roles in building this co-worker support as they manage the occupational relationship between the employee and the employee's coworkers. This document provides some tips that supervisors can follow to increase coworker support while maintaining the privacy of the employee.

Risk Factors for Work Disability

Work disability refers to the loss of some or all functional work ability and activity consequent to impairment. While a mental health condition alone can have a direct impact on the ability of an employee to remain in the workplace, there are usually other factors that will also affect that outcome. These are risk factors for work disability. There are a large number of these risk factors but only some can be influenced and mitigated by an organization, particularly an employee's supervisor. This document focuses on those risk factors that an organization can potentially help to mitigate and provides tips to supervisors on how to mitigate these.

Accommodation Strategies for Job Expectations

Helping employees who have a work disability remain productive is the objective of accommodation. An accommodation plan must address the specific workplace issues that impact the employee's ability to perform the job. This document contains a list of common job expectations with suggested accommodations that may help to ensure an employee can remain productive in the workplace. The “duty to accommodate” is a legal requirement arising out of human rights legislation and case law in Canada.

Communication Log template

It is important that supervisors involved in the SAW/RTW process keep a log to record information shared and decisions made when managing an employee who is off work or working at reduced capacity due to a mental health condition. This document is a template that organizations can provide to supervisors as a communication log. It can be incorporated into the organization's internal processes that ensure the handling of medical information is in compliance with privacy legislation.

Letter to Health Care Provider template

The employee's health care provider – whether that be a physician, a psychologist, or another qualified professional – has a profound impact on the likelihood of an employee returning to work. Most people have a lot of trust in the advice health care providers give, and if that provider doesn't believe an employee can remain in the workplace there is a significant risk that the employee will remain off work. Of course, sometimes this is the correct course of action. But sometimes it is because the health care provider doesn't understand the organization and its ability to support an employee's recovery. This document is a template letter that organizations can provide to employees to take to their health care provider.

Work Ability Assessment Form template

This document is a template form that organizations can provide to employees to take to their health care provider. It enables health care providers to record their decisions regarding any temporary work limitations and restrictions and will help organizations to work collaboratively with both the health care provider and the employee to develop an accommodation plan.

Supporting Employee Success – A Tool to Plan Accommodations

This document was developed by Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, an initiative of the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace. It can help clarify job expectations, identify employee abilities, and develop accommodations when mental health is a factor.

This document is available at workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/managingworkplace-issues/accommodation-strategies.