

***This is a draft version of the workbook
and is subject to further change.
Please do not circulate beyond your
team.***



Compassionate Employers

CHAPTER 2- Worksheet: individual reflection

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Worksheet: individual reflection

Compassionate return to work conversations

Coming back to work can be daunting for the person who has been through what can be life-changing experiences. You can play a critical role in supporting a team member in returning to work after any difficult life event.

Barjork argues 'You don't need to be occupational health or clinical psychologists ... managers can play a large part in helping employees return to work'¹.

This conversation guide draws on The Flourish model¹ which identifies managerial actions which can support employees in the workplace. While Edwards' work² applies to the support of mental health in the workplace, arguably this structure can be applied to supporting employees returning to work.

This conversation guide draws on the model's² steps and includes conversation starters specific to returning to work after absence:

Important note!

Individual reflection guidance

- You do not need to answer any questions that feel too personal, unsafe or difficult.
- Pause at any point.
- If this content brings up distress, speak to someone you trust and access your organisation's support routes, such as your manager, supervision, occupational health, Employee Assistance Programme, HR, GP or urgent support if needed.

Conversation (formal and informal)

It is important to arrange a time and place that feels comfortable for colleagues. Particularly in the initial return to work discussion, you may need to follow your organisation's formal HR processes. Once your colleague has returned to work it can be helpful to take them aside for a quick informal chat/check in.

- "Lets find some time to discuss what would be helpful for you upon your return to work."
- "It can feel overwhelming to think about the next steps. Is there a time/day/space that feels comfortable for you?"



Individual reflection: further notes

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Identification

We want to create space for colleagues to share how they are truly feeling. This helps you identify any additional support they may need in the coming weeks and months.

- "How are you feeling about returning to work?"
- "Is there anything that would make this transition easier for you?"

Individual reflection: further notes

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Workplace adjustment

Some people worry about returning to work because they fear they won't be able to keep up with their workload or perform as they would usually. Asking about possible adjustments can help them recognise what support might be helpful. We also recommend explaining any workload that has been reallocated during their absence and opening a conversation about how they would like this to be managed on their return.

- "I recognise that work can feel overwhelming. Do you feel ready to resume your usual responsibilities, or would a phased return or reduced workload be more manageable?"
- "Would temporary adjustments to your duties or hours be helpful?"

Individual reflection: further notes

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For many people, flexibility is essential, especially if they are experiencing changing needs, medical appointments or administrative tasks. This may include adapting working hours, location, or responsibilities, or simply offering trust and space to take personal calls or attend appointments during the working day. Understanding what flexible arrangements are available can help employees feel more comfortable about returning to work.

- "Are there any upcoming appointments or personal tasks you'll need time for?"
- "Would flexible working arrangements support you during this time? For example, home working, fewer meetings, or a phased return?"

Individual reflection: further notes

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Collaboration

It's important that employees have ownership and autonomy over their experience. Transparency over what can or cannot be done is vital in giving an individual as much agency over their support as possible. For example, it may be necessary that the team is informed about the colleague's return to work. Clear communication about what the team knows and agreeing a plan for how colleagues can offer support can help prevent awkward or uncomfortable interactions for everyone involved.

- "Would you like me to share any information with the team about your return to work?"
- "How would you prefer colleagues to approach and support you?"

Individual reflection: further notes

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Review

Challenges do not end when someone returns to work. One of the most meaningful forms of support is ongoing recognition and regular check-ins. It's important to follow the employee's lead, some may prefer to seek support outside of work, while others may value the care and understanding offered by their manager and colleagues.

- "How would you like me to check in with you, for example, regular meetings, emails, or something else?"
- "Are there any important dates you'd like to share so we can be mindful of them throughout the year? For example, anniversaries or birthdays."
- "If you feel comfortable, we could complete a '[get to know me](#)'³ form together to help me better understand how to support you."

Individual reflection: further notes

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References

1. Bajorek Z, Bevan S, Cooper CL. How to be the line manager you never had: managing people, performance, & wellbeing in a hybrid world. Springer Nature Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; 2024.
2. Edwards M, Parel R. How to support positive mental health at work: a guide for line managers. [Brighton]: Institute for Employment Studies; 2020.
3. Compassionate Employers. Download your "Get To Know Me" document [online]. Hospice UK. 2026 Available from: <https://www.hospiceuk.org/download-your-get-know-me-document>