

Return-to-work strategies to support workers who experience psychological injuries

A resource for employers

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Introduction

This resource lists examples of strategies employers can use to support a worker's successful return to work following a work-related psychological injury. It's designed to help you be comfortable and confident when you're helping a worker stay at or return to your workplace. If you're wondering how to interpret information from a worker's doctor or what changes to make to the worker's duties or work environment, this guide can help.

The key to successfully using the strategies in this guide is having open and ongoing conversations with your injured worker. In those conversations, the words you use matter. Focus on what the worker is able to do instead of what they cannot or must not do. This abilities-focused language is what we use throughout this guide. Rather than lingering on a worker's limitations, we highlight the worker's abilities and how these abilities may match the essential duties of their role.

The importance of a successful return to work

Injured workers and their employers have a legal duty to cooperate in the worker's safe and timely return to work. A successful return to work has many benefits for the worker and for you, the employer.

Just as with physical injuries, returning to work following a psychological injury leads to better health outcomes for workers. It promotes recovery and rehabilitation, reduces the potential for long-term mental health issues, and improves quality of life and well-being. Work also serves a protective role: It mitigates the symptoms of depression and anxiety and provides financial

security and stability, eliminating what can be a major life stressor for people. Work also provides people with essential social connections and opportunities for personal growth and development.

As an employer, facilitating a worker's safe and timely return to work allows you to maintain engagement with your worker and helps your business stay viable, operational, and productive. It also saves you the cost of hiring and training new workers and can reduce your WorkSafeBC premiums.

Things to consider during return-to-work (RTW) planning

As you consider potential strategies for an injured worker's RTW, keep the following in mind:

- **Role of supervisors:** Supervisors are in the unique position of being the main point of contact for the worker. Research shows that supervisor-worker interactions play a pivotal role in an injured worker's successful RTW. Supervisors have a direct impact on the worker's job expectations, work conditions, and work organization. They can facilitate the RTW process by meeting regularly with the worker to check in and to discuss any concerns. Supervisors can also offer constructive, non-judgmental feedback and highlight successes and accomplishments.
- **Role of co-workers:** Co-workers have an important impact on the outcome of the RTW process. When considering which strategies to implement, be mindful of those that may result in an unreasonable increase in workload or unpleasant work conditions for the injured worker's co-workers. RTW strategies that make things more challenging for others may result in co-workers resenting the injured worker, which could negatively impact the worker and their RTW process. On the other hand, having supportive co-workers increases the likelihood of a successful RTW for the injured worker.

How to use this resource

The purpose of this resource is to help you facilitate your worker's safe and smooth return to work following a psychological injury — or, if your worker has remained at work, to find ways to best support them.

It's important to remember that every worker is different and has unique needs. The best way to support your worker in returning to work or staying at work is through conversation and collaboration.

This resource can help guide those conversations by providing some strategies you can implement in your workplace. Be sure to customize the strategies according to the needs of your worker and your workplace.

You may see language like “restrictions,” “limitations,” “should avoid,” and “must not” in documents from the worker's health care providers, and the worker may use these words too. This guide will help you turn that information into actionable ways to support or accommodate the worker while highlighting their abilities. This leads to more productive RTW conversations and outcomes.

The resource is organized in tables according to these categories of psychological considerations:

- Time management and organization
- Pace, persistence, and stress tolerance
- Attention and concentration
- Memory and learning
- Interpersonal interactions and violence in the workplace

This is how to use this resource most effectively:

- First, refer to the category that is relevant for you and your worker. Then identify the RTW considerations that apply to your worker in column one.
- Column two will help you understand the implications of these considerations and how focusing on your worker's functional abilities can enable them to continue working. *Functional abilities* are what a worker is able to do, given their mental health condition.
- Column three provides examples of strategies that you and your worker could apply in the workplace to support them in performing their regular or modified job duties.

Questions?

We're here to help. Please call our [Claims Call Centre](#) at 1.888.967.5377 if:

- You have any questions or concerns about a worker's RTW
- A RTW plan lasts longer than anticipated
- The worker isn't making progress toward their pre-injury level of duties

For general questions related to RTW planning, consultation, and support, please call the [Return to Work Consultation and Education Services Support Line](#) at 1.877.633.6233 or email RTW-CES@worksafebc.com.

For more information on supporting return to work, please visit worksafebc.com/returntowork.

RTW considerations and strategies

Time management and organization

Examples of RTW considerations	Examples of abilities in practice	Examples of RTW support strategies
Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty with deadlines, time pressures, and productivity expectations</p>	<p>Worker is able to perform adequately in work situations with reasonable or moderate deadlines, time pressures, and productivity expectations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider if more time can be provided to complete priority tasks at higher quality. • If speed is crucial, consider if support or resources can be provided to assist. • Separate tasks in order of priority. • Provide checklists of tasks that need to be completed in order of priority.
<p>Difficulty with organization and prioritization</p>	<p>Worker is able to perform adequately in situations with reasonable expectations for organizing and prioritizing work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop colour-coded system for files, projects, or activities and to prioritize tasks. • Use weekly charts to identify daily work activities. • Use electronic organizers, mobile devices, and email reminders. • Provide “cheat sheets” of high-priority activities, projects, people, etc. • Organize workspace to reduce clutter. • Take time at end of each day to organize and set up for next day.

Pace, persistence, and stress tolerance

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Decreased stamina and increased fatigue</p>	<p>Worker is able to work on a regular basis provided sufficient supports are in place to address fluctuating energy levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer flexible schedules so worker can work optimally during hours of increased attentiveness and take a mental rest when needed to refocus or reorient to their work. • Examples of flexible schedules include adjusting workday start and end times, combining regularly scheduled breaks to create one extended break or dividing large breaks into smaller segments, and allowing work to be completed during hours when worker is most alert. • Help worker determine best time of day for work (e.g., early morning, afternoon) and schedule the most cognitively demanding tasks during those times. • Start with shorter shifts and increase hours as endurance builds over time. • Present information in small segments and watch for signs of overload. • Schedule periodic breaks to allow worker to move about, stretch, adjust their seating position, or modify how a task is completed.

Pace, persistence, and stress tolerance (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty with pace and persistence</p>	<p>Worker is able to perform adequately in work environments with moderate expectations for pace and persistence. Examples of such work environments include those where worker can engage in self-pacing activities or has some control over the pace of work to be completed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redesign worksite to minimize activities that increase fatigue (e.g., move workstation closer to break room, provide a printer for use at workstation, communicate in alternative ways such as telephone or email, have others report to worker physically). • Consider offering telework, work from home, or reduced work hours. • Gradually increase work hours.

Pace, persistence, and stress tolerance (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty with mental flexibility (including abstract thought, generalizing, or considering others’ perspectives)</p> <p>What this might look like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty taking feedback • Resisting • Appearing stubborn or argumentative • Appearing to lack empathy 	<p>Worker is able to perform adequately in work environments with consistent routine/structure and clear expectations for job duties.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and practise routines and plan ahead for changes in routines. • Prepare for transitions. • Develop alternative ways to complete tasks. • Assist in prioritizing goals, breaking them down into small, tangible tasks. • Ask worker how they prefer to receive feedback. • Provide respectful feedback on obvious problem areas. • Practise strategies in multiple environments with different staff/support persons. • Anticipate obstacles by creating a backup plan. • Provide direction in clear, direct, and concise manner. • Tell worker the impact of their actions on others.

Pace, persistence, and stress tolerance (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Reduced stress tolerance</p>	<p>Worker is able to perform adequately in work environments with reasonable levels of stress. Examples include environments where worker has ability to self-pace activities and has some control over pace, frequency, or quantity of work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer flexible schedules so worker can work optimally during hours of increased attentiveness and take a mental rest when needed to refocus or reorient to their work. • Examples of flexible schedules include adjusting workday start and end times, combining regularly scheduled breaks to create one extended break or dividing large breaks into smaller segments, and allowing work to be completed during hours when worker is most alert. • Provide supportive employment services such as a work coach or peer support. • Consider how to provide or increase support in stressful situations. • Regularly bring the team together for team-building activities that focus on building resilience, emotional intelligence, civility, and respect. • Allow for some or all of the work to be done from home, if practical.

Attention and concentration

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty with multi-tasking</p>	<p>Worker is able to perform more than one task but may need support if required to tend to multiple tasks at the same time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support worker to perform fewer tasks at a time until capacity is reached. • Modify workplace processes to allow worker to focus on one task at a time, where practical. • Outline clear, specific, and measurable expectations with all tasks. • Work with worker to determine and understand priorities. • Provide opportunities for retraining on tasks to support proficiency. • Provide opportunities for training on time-management skills. • Create flowchart of tasks that need to be performed at the same time, carefully labelling or colour-coding each task in sequential or preferred order. • Identify tasks that need to be performed simultaneously and tasks that can be performed individually. • Provide specific feedback to help worker target areas of improvement. • Remove or reduce distractions in work area.

Attention and concentration (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty with maintaining sustained attention and concentration</p>	<p>Worker is able to work in environments with minimal distractions and where a moderate level of concentration and attention is required.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer flexible schedules so worker can work optimally during hours of increased attentiveness and take a mental rest when needed to refocus or reorient to their work. • Examples of flexible schedules include adjusting workday start and end times, combining regularly scheduled breaks to create one extended break or dividing large breaks into smaller segments, and allowing work to be completed during hours when the worker is most alert. • Provide quieter work environment to mitigate distraction. • Give worker the option to listen to music using headphones. • Provide or suggest earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones to minimize noise distraction. • Reduce clutter in the work area as this may cause distraction. • Redesign workspace to minimize visual distractions (e.g., add higher cubicle walls or doors). • Offer optional short breaks when concentration declines (even standing up for 10 seconds can improve concentration).

Attention and concentration (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Limited tolerance for working in noisy or confusing situations</p>	<p>Worker is able to work effectively in quieter and more organized work environments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide quieter work environment to mitigate distraction. • Give worker the option to listen to music using headphones. • Provide or suggest earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones to minimize noise distraction. • Reduce clutter in the work area as this may cause distraction. • Redesign workspace to minimize visual distractions (e.g., add higher cubicle walls or doors). • Use white noise machines. • Offer the option to work from home if work building or surrounding area is undergoing prolonged periods of construction (if practical/feasible).

Attention and concentration (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty with tasks requiring accuracy; prone to make more errors than normal</p>	<p>Worker is able to complete tasks where accuracy is not a crucial job requirement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide written instructions and checklists. • Provide “cheat sheet” of steps to follow to complete and review accuracy of work. • Give extra time for learning new materials or routines. • Provide peer support or a buddy system to review work, especially during training periods or when worker is learning new job skills. • Provide quieter work environment with minimal interruptions to mitigate distractions. • Provide uninterrupted work time. • Allocate more time to complete work where accuracy is important. • If the stakes of making a mistake/error are too high (e.g., for safety-sensitive duties), remove task until the ability to ensure accuracy is present.

Attention and concentration (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty engaging in tasks that require significant attention to detail</p>	<p>Worker is able to complete tasks that require moderate attention to detail.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove any non-essential functions of the job so worker can focus energy on essential tasks. • Break large tasks into a series of smaller tasks. • Allocate more time to attend to work requiring attention to detail. • Offer optional short breaks when concentration declines. • Provide instructions and assignments in writing. • Give extra time for learning new materials or routines. • Encourage worker to do detailed work when they are less tired.

Attention and concentration (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty with tasks that require attending to multiple speakers simultaneously</p>	<p>Worker is able to work in environments that require attending to only one speaker at a time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up individual meetings with worker when practical/feasible. • In large meetings, use a moderator to facilitate discussion to avoid multiple people speaking at once. • Provide minutes of meetings and trainings that involve a panel or multiple speakers. • To reduce video-conferencing fatigue, ensure adequate breaks are given, offer off-camera time, use screen-share time during meetings, and use breakout rooms to allow for smaller group conversations.
<p>Difficulty engaging in tasks where fast-paced decision making is required (Decision making means the ability to work effectively when analyzing problems, organizing information, resolving issues, or generating solutions, and demonstrating good judgment)</p>	<p>Worker is able to make decisions that demonstrate good judgment when provided with adequate time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify areas where an error in judgment could create difficulty. • Create checklists to guide judgment in routine tasks. • Identify areas where judgment must be discussed. • Give more time to attend to work requiring attention to detail. • Break large tasks into a series of smaller tasks. • Offer optional short breaks when concentration declines.

Memory and learning

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty with memory</p>	<p>Worker may need supports for tasks requiring significant memorization, but should be able to manage tasks with moderate expectations for memory.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide written instructions and checklists. • Use recording device to allow for playback of information discussed at training/meetings. • Offer training refreshers. • Provide minutes of meetings and trainings. • Use flowchart to indicate steps in a task. • Use a colour-coding scheme to prioritize tasks. • Provide uninterrupted work time. • Separate tasks by prioritizing them, and assign a new task only once current task is completed. • Provide “cheat sheets” of tasks in order of priority. • Set regular reminders.

Memory and learning (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty learning new material</p>	<p>Worker is able to learn new material but requires sufficient supports, such as written instructions or “cheat sheets.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify best modes of learning for worker and use those (e.g., written instructions, verbal instructions, video instructions). • Provide written instructions and checklists. • Use recording device to allow for playback of information discussed at training/meetings. • Offer training refreshers and opportunities to regularly practise skills. • Provide minutes of meetings and trainings. • Use flowchart to indicate steps in a task. • Use a colour-coding scheme to prioritize tasks. • Provide uninterrupted work time. • Separate tasks by prioritizing them, and assign a new task only after current task is completed. • Provide “cheat sheets” of tasks in order of priority. • Set regular reminders. • Arrange for job shadowing, if feasible.

Interpersonal interactions and violence in the workplace

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty dealing with distressed people on a regular basis</p>	<p>Worker should be able to work in environments where exposure to distressed individuals is minimized or where supports are in place to allow worker to defer or debrief with others when needed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide training in emotional intelligence and/or other best practices. • Consider how to increase support in emotionally stressful situations (e.g., offer a peer support program, access to counselling services). • Provide a supportive job coach or mentor. • Offer a flexible break schedule to access necessary emotional support during the workday. • Provide genuine praise and positive reinforcement during the work week. • Give reasonable time off to attend counselling sessions or medical appointments.

Interpersonal interactions and violence in the workplace (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty dealing with angry and hostile individuals on a regular basis</p>	<p>With adequate supports in place, worker may be able to work in an environment where they are dealing with interpersonally demanding situations, such as conflict, differences of opinions, or supervising/managing others.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">or</p> <p>Worker will work most effectively independently or in an environment with little interpersonal interaction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review policy, procedures, and practices related to confrontational situations with worker. • Provide training on managing potentially confrontational situations and recommended responses. • Consider how to provide or increase support for worker in situations that are potentially confrontational. • Exchange tasks with other workers (e.g., if this worker is good with administrative tasks and another worker is comfortable with taking on tasks that may involve potential confrontation, consider an arrangement where they can switch tasks to limit exposure to potential confrontational situations). • Encourage worker to take a break after a difficult/challenging interaction. • Encourage worker to walk away from frustrating situations and confrontations, if appropriate. • Encourage worker to use stress management techniques, such as mindful breathing, to deal with conflict and frustration.

Interpersonal interactions and violence in the workplace (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “limitations” (what the worker can’t do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing limitations into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Difficulty managing interpersonal conflict on a regular basis</p>	<p>With adequate supports in place, worker may be able to work in interpersonally demanding situations, such as conflict, differences of opinions, or supervising/managing others.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">or</p> <p>Worker will work most effectively independently or in an environment with little interpersonal interaction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure clear policy and expectations for respectful workplace practices are in place, communicated to all workers, and reviewed on an annual basis. • Communicate clear expectations for acceptable behaviour when there are differences of opinions (e.g., no critical comments in team meetings, no outbursts, have facilitated discussions with manager or supervisor support). • Communicate expectations for acceptable working relationships and how workers will be held accountable for disrespectful workplace behaviour. • Provide all staff with training on building a socially supportive workplace. • Ensure processes and procedures are in place for dealing effectively with conflict in the workplace. • Provide opportunities for workplace mediation.

Focusing on abilities when restrictions are in place

Much of this guide has explained how to shift focus from what a worker cannot do (limitations) to what they can do. Sometimes there are duties a worker must not do (restrictions). In these cases, you can apply the same shift in focus, highlighting their abilities each step of the way.

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “restrictions” (what the worker must not do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing restrictions into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
Restricted from safety-sensitive work	Worker is able to concentrate on, or attend to, detail at a significant level for most tasks, but should not work in an environment where a momentary lapse in attention could result in harm to self or others.	Consider reason(s) why worker should not perform safety-sensitive duties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If related to concentration difficulties, review RTW strategies under the Attention and concentration category. • If related to fatigue, review RTW strategies under the Pace, persistence, and stress tolerance category. • If related to lapses in memory, review RTW strategies under the Memory and learning category.
Restricted from work that may expose worker to violent and aggressive clients	Worker is able to work with clients with no known history of violence or aggression but should not work in environments with a high risk of exposure to violent or aggressive clients.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore availability of work that is not client facing. • Create a plan to allow worker to remove themselves from a situation where a client escalates.

Focusing on abilities when restrictions are in place (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “restrictions” (what the worker must not do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing restrictions into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
Restricted from responding to emergency situations	Worker is able to attend to emergency situations in person but should not act in roles where they will take unscreened, public-facing phone calls that could involve emergency situations (e.g., 911 call-taker or dispatcher).	Consider reasons why worker can't respond to emergency situations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If related to concentration difficulties, review RTW strategies under the Attention and concentration category. • If related to fatigue, review RTW strategies under the Pace, persistence, and stress tolerance category. • If related to lapses in memory, review RTW strategies under the Memory and learning category.
Restricted from direct contact with perpetrators of violent crimes	Worker is able to work with inmates and offenders but should not have direct contact with perpetrators of violent crimes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider whether worker can be assigned to a unit where inmates do not have a history of committing violent crimes.
Restricted from psychiatric nursing	Worker is able to work as a nurse but should not work in a position where they are supporting people through acute psychological distress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider whether worker can work as a nurse in other areas of health care where supporting people in acute psychological distress is not required.
Restricted from working with individuals involved in the claim incident	Worker is able to meet critical demands of their job but should not work with individuals involved in the claim incident.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider placing worker in same position in a different area. • Consider whether individual(s) involved in claim incident can be moved to a different area.

Focusing on abilities when restrictions are in place (cont.)

Examples of RTW considerations Commonly described as “restrictions” (what the worker must not do)	Examples of abilities in practice Reframing restrictions into functional abilities (what the worker can do)	Examples of RTW support strategies Strategies you can apply in the workplace
<p>Restricted from dealing with interpersonally demanding situations, such as working with high-risk populations</p>	<p>Worker may have difficulty working with individuals with a history of, or current issues that place them at higher risk of, injury or loss of life (e.g., substance use, suicidality, violence). Worker should be able to work in environments without regular exposure to high-risk populations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider how to increase support in emotionally stressful situations (e.g., offer a peer support program, access to counselling services, training in emotional intelligence, and/or other best practices). • Provide a supportive job coach or peer-support person. • Offer a flexible break schedule to access necessary emotional support during the workday. • Provide genuine praise and positive reinforcement during the work week. • Give reasonable time off to attend counselling sessions or medical appointments.

