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The Role of Work

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When we experience symptoms of anxiety and depression we can find that our overall functioning and specifically our ability to work can be affected. This may lead us to be signed off sick from work. In the short term this can provide us with an opportunity to reduce the demands on us, allowing us to gain some clarity into what we can do to assist our recovery. However, it is important to be aware of some of the negative aspects of being off from work too, as the absence of work can lead to maintenance of the symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Work plays an important function in our lives, not only providing for us a financial return (which allows us to achieve our basic needs of shelter, food and water), but it also gives us a sense of routine, structure, purpose, social contact, a sense of identity, confidence and esteem. Removing these positive elements at a time when we are unwell can serve to reinforce our symptoms of anxiety and depression. This section of the workbook will consider some of the effects of being off from work and look at things that you would benefit from doing if you are off work, as well as practical steps to assisting a return to work.

Maintenance Factors for Anxiety and Depression

As we already know (see the sections on understanding anxiety and depression) the way in which we respond to our symptoms of anxiety and/or depression has an impact on their course and severity. We will now summarise what specific behaviours are known to maintain them and then consider the impact that being off from work can have on our symptoms.

Anxiety

We know that for anxiety symptoms, behaviours that serve as an **avoidance** of anxiety are known to reinforce anxiety by preventing us from habituation. Habituation is the process that allows us to learn that we are safe by exposure to situations that may have been erroneously linked to our 'fight or flight' (survival) response. By avoiding situations that are erroneously linked to our fight or flight system we prevent a natural process occurring that would enable us to learn that these situations are safe. By avoiding our fears we have short-term relief, but in the long term this maintains our anxiety.

Anxiety can be easily transferred to situations. If we are experiencing anxiety about finances for example, it is possible that while this is on our mind while we are out shopping or at work then we could feel anxious in those situations and learn to associate those previously neutral situations with anxiety. When we go on to avoid such situations we reinforce this further. If we have associated work to anxiety in this way, by avoiding work (being off sick) we will be reinforcing our anxiety and unless we return to work and allow the body to learn that we are safe and to switch this system off (fight/flight), then we will remain anxious and no amount of time off from work can make this any better. In fact, the longer we remain off, the harder it will be to return and overcome it.

In some cases situations at work can lead directly to our anxiety. For example, when taking on a new role at work or having a new boss to work with we will naturally experience some level of anxiety. This is normal in new situations, as our brains do not have any evidence that what we are doing is safe. However, over time, we experience that we are safe and the system (fight/flight) can switch off. If we avoid this learning process we will not learn that it is safe and we will remain anxious. If we do not realise this and either avoid aspects of our jobs or go off sick because we feel overly anxious in these situations, we will not be able to recover from this while away from the work place because avoidance of exposure will stop us from learning we are safe.

For some people it may be specific issues at work that may be unlikely to change that can cause distress. For example, you may feel that you are being bullied, or that you are struggling with or just don't like your job. Going off sick may seem like the only solution at the time. However, in these cases not only will being off sick serve to increase your symptoms in the long term it also does nothing to resolve the real issues you have at work. You may be better to face these situations head on. For example, this may include: considering your options within your situation and weighing up the best of these to develop a realistic plan of how to manage the problem; seeking advice on further training; discussing problems with your manager; considering a job change or liaising with the human resource department about your companies policies on bullying.

Depression

We know that behaviours that serve to reinforce the symptoms of depression are those that lead to a reduction in our overall activity levels, social contact and structured purposeful activity. When we have little in our lives to get up for, little routine or purpose, then our bodies begin to shut down. We know that general activity is good for our mood and helps to keep us alert and that specifically, social and goal directed activity further enhances our stimulation and sense of who we are as well as our feeling of general well being. We also know that when we isolate ourselves or generally reduce our levels of social interaction, we are limiting the experiences that can engage us and make us feel good about ourselves. We can begin to experience negative thoughts about others, the world and ourselves generally and have limited opportunities to challenge this. When we go off work with depression, we are generally thrown into a situation that means we are exposed to many of these reinforcing factors. Our routines, structure, activity levels and social contact are likely to diminish and, as a consequence, our depression can worsen. Of course it is possible to attain all of these elements without working, but when you are already depressed, motivating yourself to maintain routine, activity and social contact can be overwhelming and it can be easier to give in to the symptoms. The table below summarises the types of behaviours than are known to reinforce anxiety and depression

Summary of Behavioural Maintenance Factors for Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety	Depression
Protective behaviours	Reduced levels of activity
Safety behaviours	Reduced goal achievement
Avoidance behaviours	Lethargic behaviour
	Avoidance behaviour
	Reduced levels of social interaction

The Function of Sickness Absence

There is little research to examine the effectiveness of sickness absence in the management of anxiety and depression. On the basis of our understanding of how emotional problems such as anxiety and depression are maintained, it is clear that sickness absence at some level could serve to worsen the severity and duration of symptoms. It is important that if we are able to maintain functioning on some level at work, it can be one of the best places for us to be when we experience these conditions. If we do need to go off from work then it is helpful to consider ways in which we can attempt to maintain our levels of activity, structure and social contact as much as possible to prevent being off work making us worse. A speedy return to work is often in our best interests.

For some people the symptoms can be more severe and it is likely that if you are really unable to maintain these activities that you may need to consult your GP as medication may be necessary in the first instance to lessen your symptoms enough to assist you in this.

The previous sections of this booklet on graded exposure and graded activity will give you further information as to ways to help you overcome anxiety and depression. The next section will go on to look at how these principles can be used to help you return to work.

Returning to Work

In this section we have considered some of the common difficulties people face when returning to work and look at ways that you might overcome them.

Tiredness

This is a common problem for people generally when they return to work after a prolonged period of absence. It is actually a very normal experience whenever we have a period of reduced activity and then need to increase activity back to normal levels. It is especially linked to returning to work after anxiety and depression as both conditions can lead us to feel tired and lacking energy too.

Our bodies are designed not to waste our energy resources and when we do less over a period of time we are supplied with less readily

available energy. When we are able to, and need to return to our previous levels of energy, our bodies will need to learn this over time to give us the necessary available energy resources. Until this learning has happened (through the experience of running out of energy a few times and feeling fatigued), we will naturally struggle with tiredness and lethargy. If we are not aware of this we may stop when we are tired and this can keep us at a plateau of energy and prevent the body learning that we need more.

If you have been off for a while it may be helpful to start to prepare to return to work while you are still off by considering your current level of activity and what level of activity is needed for work. You can then establish a plan of increased activity in the days leading up to your return.

At some places of work you may be able to have a graded return to work, which can also help with overcoming lethargy. This will involve returning to work on reduced hours or workload, with a plan of gradually increasing both work hours and or workload over a period of time. At every level of increase it is normal to expect a return of tiredness and lethargy as your body learns your new energy needs. So as you can see your graded plan needs always to be increasing in spite of any lethargy as you risk plateauing.

Worrying Thoughts

It is normal to have worries about many things when we are doing something that we haven't done for a long time. Some common worries people have are considered below.

'What will people think of me?'

It's natural to worry about what people might have been thinking while you have been away. When we have been anxious or low, returning to work can trigger worries that others may see you in a negative way or that they might have a negative opinion as to why you haven't been at work etc. In most cases people report that work colleagues are pleased to have them back and happy that they are well. Although there may be some people who do have a negative view, it is important to remember that how we perceive things is related to our beliefs about life in general and will tell you more about the individual themselves than about you and is something that we can't change in life.

'I won't cope!'

It's natural to worry about how you will cope when you're coming up to returning to work after a time of sick leave. You don't have recent evidence that you can cope as you have been away from the environment and often the most recent evidence of your coping was just prior to going off sick and that is likely to have been a time when you felt you weren't coping well. Either way, avoiding going back will prevent you learning that you can cope or even identifying areas that you might need some initial support with.

'I'll get ill again!'

As we mentioned earlier it might be that you have learnt to erroneously associate work with anxiety and this may lead to you thinking that work was the reason you became ill. In most cases by returning to work this learning will extinguish and any initial anxiety will diminish. If there are real problems at work then avoiding them won't change them, so by returning you can address these issues directly. You may even find that some problems can start to be addressed whilst you are still off from work.

Also it may be helpful to look through the section in the booklet entitled 'relapse prevention'. This is a process that can assist with your understanding of the triggers and early symptoms of when you were starting to become unwell and help you to have a plan of how you will manage any early signs and prevent a relapse.

In general, worrying thoughts can lead to you feeling anxious but hopefully by now you will have a good understanding of how avoiding facing our fears actually hinders our ultimate recovery. You may want to re-read the section on graded exposure to refresh your mind on this point and even develop a graded exposure plan of how you might want to tackle any specific worries you have about returning to work.

Summary

Anxiety is a normal experience when returning to work but ultimately, unless we experience going back to work, we are worrying about things that may not happen and whilst we avoid them we gather no evidence to the contrary.