



RETURNING TO WORK

**FOLLOWING AN
ACQUIRED BRAIN INJURY**

**A Self-Paced Guidebook and Resources
To Help Support You Along the Way**



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Introduction

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to return to work following an acquired brain injury? Can you imagine how you would manage your symptoms, while at the same time re-engage with your work life?

Alternatively, have you recently attempted to return to work, only to find that you may not have been well enough prepared to articulate your needs, or to work with your employer to reach a suitable workload and schedule?

At Brain Injury Canada, we've been thinking about these employment questions as well, and we've been looking at how we might support individuals who are considering returning to the workplace following a brain injury.

For some, at this stage, returning to work may not be possible. For others, we recognize that your job duties may have requirements that may preclude you from returning to your position. Because of this, we acknowledge the difficult decisions that have taken place with respect to income security, and the change in direction that many have had to make.

That having been said, there are some individuals who may be in a position to re-enter the workplace, and with that in mind, Brain Injury Canada has produced this self-paced guidebook to provide information, reflection exercises, and encouragement throughout this important time of decision-making.

Check www.braininjurycanada.ca for more employment related resources and information.



Key Themes of the Guidebook

- **What to be aware of and prepare for when considering a return to work**
- **Practical self-assessment and planning tools for return-to-work readiness**
- **Resources that are available to support your efforts**
- **Collaborative planning with your employer for a successful re-entry outcome**
- **Possible challenges and solutions when on the job**

Designed to assist you with your decision-making process around whether to attempt a return to work, this guidebook talks about some of the considerations that may relate to your individual circumstances.

Being a preliminary resource for your reference, we cannot guarantee that all of your specific needs will be addressed. However, this guidebook explores some of the steps you can take before you agree to return, and provides some strategies that you and your employer might benefit from.

As part of the back-drop, individuals will be encouraged to review existing workplace policies and benefits, along with current employment and/or human rights legislation on accessibility, disability as a protected ground, as well as the provision of “reasonable accommodation” in the workplace.

The majority of employers will respond reasonably and in good faith when welcoming back an employee following a job interruption. This practice can result in a rewarding and informative process where employees and employers alike can learn more about acquired brain injury, along with the modifications and steps that can be taken to integrate an individual back into the workplace.

A key message to keep in mind when reading this guidebook is that there may be information and knowledge gaps on both sides of the equation – yours and your employer’s. With each situation being unique, there is no blueprint to follow. When given factual data, combined with collaboration and information sharing and an understanding of employee and employer rights and obligations, plus a willingness to achieve a successful workplace re-entry, we are hopeful that more people will be in a position to return to work in the future.

This guidebook also provides tips and strategies from some individuals who have returned to work. Plus, it also contains a series of key companion resources that expand on the information that is provided herein.

We hope you find this informative, and we wish you well in this important endeavour.



Important Note

This guidebook is intended for individuals who are, or who have been, actively employed and have experienced a job interruption as a result of a brain injury. The information and resources contained herein are aimed at supporting individual assessment and decision-making when considering a return to work, along with building awareness and understanding between the employee and their employer when working through the job re-entry process.

In the event that you are currently not engaged in active employment, nor have an ongoing work relationship with an employer, additional support and employment services may be required as you consider your future employment options. **These may include, but are not limited to:**

- evaluating work readiness;
- vocational assessment and planning;
- how you fit into the current job market;
- initiating a job search and associated needs related to brain injury;
- options available for job interview and/or on the job accommodation;
- ongoing goals development and decision-making to support your efforts.

Should the above described scenario apply to you, in addition to reviewing the information contained in this guidebook, please also contact your local Employment Services Office, Brain Injury Association, Vocational Rehabilitation provider or any other groups who are working with individuals in your area to provide support around disability, inclusion and employment.

Disclaimer

The content in this guidebook is not intended to be a substitute for medical, legal, or other professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Specifically, with regards to medical issues always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider for any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

With respect to the workplace, wherever an employment relationship exists, both the employer and the employee have rights and obligations. These areas are governed by federal, provincial and territorial laws and legislation, including Provincial Human Rights Codes and the Canadian Human Rights Act, Occupational Health and Safety regulations, and/or other laws that encompass Employment Equity and Accessibility Standards.

Regardless of jurisdiction, in Canada disability is a “protected ground” against discrimination and harassment. With that in mind, and provided it is safe to do so, in most cases the employer has a duty to provide reasonable job accommodation for the employee – to the point of undue hardship.

It is important to note that while this guidebook provides some suggestions for on-the-job accommodation practices, each arrangement must be based on individual assessment, agreement to the provisions and customized on-the-job modifications. Additionally, ongoing review and assessment must take place to ensure needs are being met in a fluid work world.

1

Unexpected Job Interruption

When faced with an unexpected or unwanted change, it is common to experience a range of emotions and uncertainty as you begin to process what has happened.

While you are recovering, you may be feeling overwhelmed, and not sure of what to do next. With respect to acquired brain injury (ABI) and your work life, there may be a series of stages you will go through which are associated with the abrupt change that has taken place with your employment status.

Tracking Your Progress

Over time, as you process and come to terms with the situation, you can begin to track the progress you are making. How might you do this? By reviewing the transition stages table that can be found on the following page.

This table is a benchmark tool that identifies some of the factors that may be associated with a sudden change in your employment status. From finding it difficult to accept and adjust to a new reality, through to the time when you reach a new vision and hope, this table may help you to sort out what you are experiencing and what you might have in common with others going through a job interruption as a result of an acquired brain injury.

NOTE: *There will likely be additional factors or perhaps stages that are specific to you. If so, please add these to your table. It will become a customized and personal resource for you to keep on hand and refer to.*

From Home to Work

As you prepare to possibly transition from home to work, it is important to understand that returning to work is an action-oriented endeavour. With this in mind, it will inevitably affect your energy levels. As you begin to research and assess your options, you will discover the steps you can take to best support your efforts.

Key Points to Remember

- Return to work is a process – not an event.
- The process begins **before** you re-enter your workplace.
- This is the transition stage from being at home during your recovery, to being back on the job.

Possible Stages of Transition: Returning to Work Following ABI

WHAT IS A STAGE?

It's a period or step in a process, activity, or development. It's normal to move back and forth from stage to stage, and to see yourself in more than one of these stages at the same time. As you explore and assess where you are, you may experience some detours, or some stops and starts along the way. This is normal.

WHAT ELSE ARE YOU EXPERIENCING?

Add these to your list.

Possible Stages of Transition: Returning to Work Following ABI

DENIAL	RESISTANCE	EXPLORATION	COMMITMENT
Turmoil and challenges	Resisting the recovery process	Questioning	Individual reflection and awareness
Debilitating exhaustion	Impatience with the fluctuating pace of transition	Some clarity with the chaos may enter in	Setting realistic boundaries
Can't believe this has happened	Complaining	Unfocused	Re-connecting with abilities and integrating the previous learning
Denying your current reality	Doubting your abilities	Indecisiveness	Focus returning to the things that I can control
Refusing to hear new or helpful information	Attempts to control the outcome	Learning about and seeing some possibilities	"Where am I headed?"
Focusing on how good things were in the past	Feelings of loss, panic and fear	Seeking new ways to cope	Set practical SMART goals
Measuring success based on pre-injury level of work performance	Stubbornness	Explore potential	Reinventing through collaboration and cooperation
	"I can't do this!"	Asking for, and accepting support	Willing to try, assess and adjust
	Negative self-messaging	Adapt and achieve some successes	Focus on optimization versus perfection
	Defeated	Develop and test energy management strategies	Energy renewal
	Isolation	Cautious optimism	Vision and hope
	Exhaustion		

It's Uniquely Your Experience

Key Points for Reflection:

- It can be daunting and exhausting to think of everything that may be involved with a possible return to work. At this stage, there are so many unknown factors.
- The factors that you are thinking about before returning to work will be unique to your situation. Because of this, you should make this decision for you.
- That's not to say you shouldn't consult with others. It's simply a reminder that ultimately, the decision is yours to make, freely and without pressure.

You may wish to talk with a close family member, a friend or colleague or a trusted member of your care team and/or support network. Take the various viewpoints provided and consider the input and information carefully – without allowing yourself to be overly influenced by others.

As you begin to think about the various factors involved in your decision to return to work, we're hoping to help you to:

- Break things down into manageable compartments
- Take one step at a time
- Make a positive plan
- Develop some goals for open communication and to get the conversation started



2

Reasons for Wanting to Return to Work

So let's begin at the beginning. Why do you want to return to work?

Key Points for Reflection

- Take a comprehensive view of your reasons for wanting to return to work. It will help you to see your various options and set new goals.
- Spend some time thinking this through!
- If you can reach a solid understanding within yourself about why you want to re-engage with your workplace, it will help to align your vision of how you should proceed and who you would like to involve.

Let's take a moment to review some of the reasons an individual may have for wanting to return to work. By no means is this list complete. It's provided here to help you to identify and think about your own reasons.

Potential Personal Reasons for Returning to Work

- Financial and income security; contribute to household / other expenses
- Maintain identity
- Social interaction
- Need to be engaged and productive; enjoy job / colleagues
- Getting bored / need to get out

What Are Some of the Factors You Might be Thinking About?

One of the key things you might be thinking about is the area of financial and income security. Are you the sole earner? Are you a single parent? Do you have savings to draw from? Is there another source of household income available? Do you qualify for any income replacement programs? Overall, how is this impacting your budget or financial goals?

And although income security may be a key factor for you, there may also be other factors that you are thinking about. For example, you may be finding it difficult to let go of the parts of your identity that are closely related to the roles and responsibilities you have on the job. Many people experience this, as well as the associated loss and grief that can go along with job interruption or job loss.

With the above in mind, the whole notion of personal identity can be a very significant reason for wanting to return to work. After all, your job has kept you connected with others and you may be missing your routine and your roles and responsibilities at work. This is a normal response when you have been faced with an unexpected interruption to your work life. Overall, this is something to be aware of and to what extent this might be driving your decision.

Potential Pressures Affecting Your Decision to Return to Work

- Receiving pressure from your employer / benefits / insurance or other entities you are involved with
- Receiving pressure from family members
- Feeling judged by others
- Putting pressure on yourself to return to full capacity in life, including work
- Sick leave or other financial support ending

If you are feeling pressured to return to work, it's important to take a step back and carefully consider how this may be affecting you, and impacting your decision-making process.

You may be feeling judged by others. This may not be through specific comments or actions – it may be more of a feeling or a sense that you are picking up on.

You may also be putting pressure on yourself to return to work as you possibly become impatient with the pace of your recovery. And because your identity may be closely linked with your employment, you may have the sense that if you could just get back to work, you will feel whole or normal again.

It is important to be aware of this. Rushing back to work before you are ready could result in detrimental consequences and could result in a setback to your overall recovery.

Regardless of the situation, always ask yourself:

- Do I have all of the facts in this scenario?
- Is what I am planning going to support my efforts to return to work?
- What is in my best interest? Always work from here as your starting point.

All of these factors listed above, and possibly others, may be influencing you. There's an opportunity here for you to reflect on this and to identify your reasons and motivation for wanting to return to work.





Exercise

Reasons for Wanting to Return to Work Personal Reflection

We invite you to participate in the first exercise.

The objective of this exercise is to help you identify your personal reasons for wanting to return to work. As you begin to think this through, some fears and concerns may surface for you. Try not to become overwhelmed at this stage. This is a normal response when beginning to think about how you might navigate this important transition. To the extent possible, do your best to focus on your reasons.

This is a two-part, self-paced exercise. If you cannot complete it in one sitting, feel free to begin and return to it when you are able to.

INSTRUCTIONS: Please reflect on the following questions and write down your responses. If you are not certain about your response, feel free to work through the questions and return to those that may require some further thought. There are no right or wrong answers. This self-assessment will help you to focus on the key reasons you have for wanting to return to work.

Part A: Your Current Feelings

In paragraph form, write down why you want to return to work. Be specific so that it is a concrete concept to you.

How much of your time do you spend wondering about what it would be like to return to work?

What excites you the most about the thought of returning to work?

What concerns you the most about the thought of returning to work?

Are you feeling pressured in any way to return to work?
YES NO If yes, who or what is pressuring you and under what circumstances?

Given your response to the question above, what impact does this have on your decision to return to work?

Do you believe that you are letting others (or yourself) down by not working?

YES NO If yes, how does this impact you?

Please circle the number that best represents how you are feeling at this time about the following statement:
“I feel like I am being judged by others for not working.”

Not feeling judged at all. **1 2 3 4 5** *I am definitely feeling judged.*

If you responded 3, 4 or 5, how does this make you feel?

Complete the following sentence:
When I think about returning to work, I am really looking forward to:

Are there any other thoughts that you have regarding why you want to return to work?

Part B: Identify and Prioritize Your List of Reasons

STEP 1: Review the list of possible reasons below for returning to work. Place a check mark beside any reasons that apply to you.

Financial and income security	Receiving pressure from employer / benefits provider / insurance company / other entities
Contribute to household / other expenses	Receiving pressure from family members
Maintain my identity	Feeling judged by others
Social interaction	Putting pressure on myself to return
Need to be engaged and productive	Sick leave / financial support ending
Enjoy my job / colleagues	
Getting bored / need to get out	

STEP 2: On the same list, write down any additional reasons that apply to you.

STEP 3: Using a number system, prioritize your list, with number 1 being the highest priority / importance / urgency to you. Work down through the list and assign a number to all the reasons you have noted.

STEP 4: Using the table below, re-write your reasons in order of priority to you, with the highest priority being at the top.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

You have now developed your list of reasons for wanting to return to work!

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

When you were developing your list, what were you thinking of when you were prioritizing your reasons?

What does this suggest to you?

Why is understanding your reasons for wanting to return to work important?

What conclusions can you draw from this?

How will the information from this exercise be useful to you?

How can you apply this awareness to your decision-making process?

Congratulations! You have completed the first self-reflection exercise.

Your Reasons in Focus

Congratulations on delving into your reasons for wanting to return to work. You may find there are certain areas that are not entirely clear to you at this stage. Don't worry if you are experiencing some doubt or confusion, this is normal and you are on the right track. Remember to keep your transition table handy.

The insight you have gained from this assessment will help you to articulate more clearly when others are asking you about why you want to return to work. At the same time, it should help to shift your reasons from vague concept to concrete reality going forward.

As you begin to fully understand your reasons, the goals you set and the steps you take towards returning to work will also become more concrete for you. These will form the foundation for your efforts.

The important thing to remember at this stage is that this is not an assessment about your physical or emotional ability to return to work. It's simply an exercise to get you thinking – in a meaningful way – about your motivations for re-engaging with your place of employment. Use this insight to support your decision-making process, and determine overall what is in your best interest.

SUGGESTED BREAK TIME

3

Establishing Balance

The next part in this guidebook deals with the push and pull of balancing your plans with the practical and hands-on reality of returning to work.

The area of planning is a key factor in terms of the progress that can be made and, in order to help you to prepare, we'll be providing some strategies for you to consider.

It's important to acknowledge that this information is not meant to dissuade or discourage you – but rather, to prepare and equip you as you make your choices moving forward.

Returning to Work Does Not Always Mean That You Are Fully Recovered

When you are deciding about returning to work, you may find yourself concurrently dealing with a range of symptoms related to the unique and potentially alternating pace of your recovery.

Energy levels may fluctuate. You may be experiencing pain or other physical symptoms. You may have difficulty concentrating and maintaining your focus. You may wonder, "How can I possibly think about returning to work when I am not yet 100%?" And this is where we can begin to see some anxiety building about how you might cope when back on the job.

Because ABI is largely an invisible disability – with episodic symptoms – the need to find a manageable balance is extremely important. This balance, and the boundaries that you develop, will sustain you during your transition from home to work.

The goal is to eventually achieve a sustainable balance between comfortably returning to work and potentially over-extending yourself.

Here's an example: as you add in additional activities to your routine, it will be equally important to think about and identify what activities you might need to take out of your daily routine.

Learning what activities to engage in, at certain times of the day, will also help with managing your energy levels. Engaging in higher cognitive functions, such as tasks that require multiple steps, driving, attending meetings or participating in conference calls, may be best done in the morning. More routine and/or lower level cognitive tasks may be best suited to the afternoon.

On the home side, going into a noisy store, cooking with multiple ingredients, organizing a birthday party, going to doctor appointments, and developing lists may be best done in the morning, while doing laundry or other routine housework like watering the plants, may be good activities for the afternoon.

As you determine the schedule that works best for you, you will find there will be a series of judgement calls that you will need to make throughout the day. What to say yes to; what to say no to; when to do certain tasks; when to rest and exercise will become more intentional for you. Over time this will become routine. However, in the beginning, as you return to work you may need to devote extra attention to determining what works best for you as you bring together your energy requirements for your home and work life.

Assessing how you are doing – and adjusting throughout the day – will help you to achieve the goal of finding a sustainable balance. This strategy will serve you well into the future and it will ensure that you are not taking on too much. It should also result in a gradual draw on your energy, versus over-extending yourself and experiencing an energy crash or a deficit that may be challenging to recover or rebound from.

Leaving the Controlled Home Environment

While many individuals feel that they can return to work, it is important to recognize that leaving the controlled home environment can bring on or possibly aggravate ABI symptoms.

To illustrate this, we're going to look at preparing to leave home.

Key Points for Reflection

- One of the biggest challenges when attempting to return to work can be the impact of the steps involved in preparing to leave home – literally! How much of this do we take for granted?
- Things may be pretty much under control at home, and perhaps you can function relatively well, taking breaks, sleeping, or spending quiet time when required.
- Within this environment you may observe positive changes with respect to your ability to maintain energy throughout certain times of the day.
- However, leaving this controlled environment in order to return to the workplace can place additional strain on your energy and your ability to concentrate.
- For some, in the absence of a plan to work from, the steps involved in preparing to get out the door can be overwhelming. If this happens, you may be caught off guard and unsure about what to do. Your energy may be diverted to worry and uncertainty, which in turn can take your thoughts in a different direction: "Should I get behind the wheel and attempt to drive in? Do I have the energy to take public transit? I have made a commitment to be at work at a certain time – now what? What's this going to look like? What will people be thinking? Will I be letting people down?"

4

Strategies for Preparing to Leave Home – Time Estimates and Planning Template

This next exercise is aimed at thinking about your current routine, and what it might look like once you add in the activities associated with returning to work.

At the same time, it's a planning template that will help you to develop realistic time estimates so that you can schedule accordingly. To participate in this exercise, please review the steps listed.

NOTE: *It will not be possible to carry out the full planning and scheduling exercise here today. However, this document will provide you with a guide that you can use in the future.*

Be sure to return to this exercise and schedule some time to work through and carry out the various steps involved.



Exercise

Leaving the Controlled Home Environment Time Estimates, Impacts and Scheduling Personal Reflection

We invite you to review the next exercise.
Before starting, please take some time to reflect on your routine.

Point A = Home

All Points/Steps Between

Point B = Arriving at Work

When thinking about returning to work, it will be important to take a realistic view of the various steps involved and the associated energy requirements you will have. Equally important will be for you to prepare in advance, and to carry out a test run.

CONSIDERATIONS: We may take things for granted in our morning routine, and not really give much thought to the time it will take to accomplish the various tasks and activities. This assessment will help to shine a light on your current routine and provide some strategies that you might incorporate into your new return-to-work schedule.

The activities associated with preparing to go to work will likely differ from your current at-home morning routine activities. For example, will it take more time for you to prepare and dress in work clothes than it does to wake up, throw on a pair of jeans and begin your day now?

How Much Time Will it Take You to Get Ready for Work?

TIME TRIAL / TEST RUN

STEP 1: Think about your current morning routine. Some things to consider may include (but not be limited to) the following:

- Are you on a schedule in the morning?
- What time do you wake up? Does this vary during the week?
- Do you wake up to an alarm or to your internal clock?
- Do you wake up slowly?
- Are you a morning person? Do you prefer to sleep in?
- What is the time involved to tend to your personal readiness? Be sure to include shower / hair / other, as well as selecting and putting on clothing.
- Do you eat breakfast or grab a mug of coffee or tea and sit quietly or do you read the paper and / or check your online communications?
- Do you have children? What associated tasks must you attend to?
- Do you have an animal that requires your attention?
- Are you up and out on various days or at various times to attend to commitments you may have?
- What other activities are you involved in or responsible for before leaving for work?

STEP 2: Write out / list your anticipated morning activities. Be as thorough and specific as possible.

STEP 3: Assign a time to each one. Note: This includes from the time that you wake up to the time you will leave home.

STEP 4: Plan a morning to carry out a test run. Prepare as if you will be leaving for work.

STEP 5: Carry out your morning activities and track the actual time it takes to accomplish each one.

STEP 6: Compare your original list to the actual time it takes. Add in any activities that you may have left off your original list. Make adjustments where may be required.

Answer the following questions:

1. From the time I wake up, over what period of time will my morning routine comfortably extend?
2. Do I need to take a break or rest at any point of my morning routine? If so, when is the best time to do this?
3. Given the time it will take for me to wake up and carry out my morning routine, what is a realistic time for me to plan to leave home for work?

GETTING TO WORK

ASK YOURSELF: How will I get to work?

For example:

- > Drive myself
- > Receive a drive from someone else
- > Car pool
- > Take public transit
- > Take Uber or other ride-share service
- > Walk
- > Bike
- > Other

Answer the following question:

- > From the time I leave home, how long does it take to arrive at work?

BUILDING IN A TIME CUSHION

Building in a cushion to your time estimates will eliminate some of the stress involved in scheduling. Start with a 10% to 15% cushion, and build on this as may be required.

Identifying Actual Time Requirements

Once your routine becomes more familiar, you will be in a position to establish a realistic time schedule.

The following list provides some time allotments for you to consider.

- > Wake-up time: _____
- > Time for morning routine: _____
- > Time to leave home: _____
- > Time in transit: _____
- > Time to arrive at work: _____
- > Time at work: _____
- > Time to leave work: _____
- > Time in transit: _____
- > Time to arrive home: _____

SUGGESTED BREAK TIME

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Making Contact with Your Employer and Pre-Return Research

Once you have a good understanding of why you want to return to work, and what your pre-departure home schedule might be, it's time to contact your employer.

There are many different employment situations. Some people may have a supervisor that can be contacted, and/or support from an HR department, benefits advisor or union representative, while others may have little or next to no support available. We're going to review this and provide some tips and strategies for you to draw from.

Key Points to Consider

- Part of the decision-making process to return to work will include having a discussion with your employer.
- When contacting your employer, it is important to communicate that you are in the process of considering a possible return to work and you would like to discuss / review this.
- You will want to convey that you would like to develop a realistic re-entry plan.
- To the extent possible, this re-entry plan should be developed and agreed to before you actually return to work.
- The notion here is to begin the conversation at this stage, so that you can obtain the information you will require for your decision-making. (Please refer to the next section on Workplace Policies and Employment Legislation for further details.)
- At the same time, it will provide your employer with valuable information about your unique situation and provide an opportunity for collaborative planning to take place before you return to your place of employment.

Conversations to Have with Your Employer

- You may find that you and your employer will require more than one meeting before you return to work. Be sure to agree on the date and time for any pre-return meetings before you agree on a date to return. Be sure to pace these meetings and schedule them for a time when you are typically at peak cognitive functioning.
- You can have a face-to-face / SKYPE / phone / GoToMeeting, or use other apps that you may have available. Face-to-face meetings are preferred if you can manage this. However, it would be valuable to become comfortable using other forms of communication in the event the need should arise in the future.

- It is not always possible to know beforehand what your needs will be. With that in mind, be sure to refer to the resources that accompany this guidebook for some suggestions and proven solutions. The information provided will support you in developing a working understanding of your requirements, and at the same time will help you to develop confidence in expressing your needs. This step will ensure open and honest lines of communication are established between yourself and your employer when you are engaging in return-to-work planning.
- Request a pilot or trial return period so that you have time to settle into your new routine, modify your working environment, assess how things are going, and make adjustments as required. Determine the appropriate time-frame with your supervisor. As a suggestion, perhaps begin gradually, over shortened hours, with a two-week period, and be prepared to experiment with your schedule during this time.
- Be open, positive, honest and as concrete as possible when conveying any information and your needs to your employer.

Vocational Rehabilitation

In order to support your employment goals, part of this process may involve vocational rehabilitation. Vocational rehabilitation can explore a range of cognitive and work skills, resulting in recommendations that are focused on strengths and areas for support, as well as potential barriers and solutions for successful employment.

With a range of customized services available, vocational rehabilitation can provide comprehensive evaluation, as well as situation assessments which can be carried out either by on-the-job assessments or in a simulated environment under expert direction.

Examples of assessment areas include, but are not limited to:

- **Neurocognitive** and/or **Psychological** assessments, which consider: attention span; visual perception; language and communication; memory; executive functioning; psycho-social factors; and, motor skills.
- **Physical / Functional** assessments, which consider residual strength, balance and endurance.
- Additionally, **Situational** assessments can evaluate the ability of the individual to perform specific job tasks, along with overall return to work readiness.

Vocational evaluation / assessment and transferable skills analysis can be achieved in a one-to-one setting with a provider who is experienced in working with those who have a brain injury. This process is often valuable as it will include a comprehensive review of key factors including, but not limited to, an individual's education, training and work experience, along with aptitudes for work and objectively gauging current vocational interests. Where possible the evaluation can also be expanded to include the employee's supervisor. The benefit of this approach provides first hand, real-world feedback, which in turn will assist in discussions around accommodation in the workplace, including possible modification of the working environment and job duties.

Some ABI support groups, networks, Employee Assistance Programs, and other workplace Health and Safety committees may offer vocational rehabilitation. If this is of interest to you, discuss it with your care team and your employer, carry out some research, and contact your vocational rehabilitation provider.

If you do not have this service available through your workplace, there are vocational rehabilitation services across the country which support the public.

6

Workplace Policies and Employment Legislation

Are They There for You When You Need Them?

As you are considering a return to work, if you have workplace policies it will be valuable to review and understand your options with respect to each policy that could potentially support you in your efforts.

You'll see listed further below some of the policies that may be available at your workplace to support your return to work. It is normal not to pay close attention to the provisions of your policies until they are needed. Now that you are in this position, it is critical that you inform yourself.

As mentioned previously, some individuals will be supported by policies and dedicated staff members who will review options and solutions with you. However, it has been our experience that there are a broad range of individuals who are not certain about their policies, their rights and obligations under current employment or Human Rights legislation, or in some cases, who to contact at work to begin these discussions.

If you are not clear about this, begin with your supervisor. If your supervisor is not sure of how to proceed, request a meeting between yourself and your supervisor and that person's supervisor. Be sure to agree on a specific date by when you will hear back with the details about when the meeting will occur. Follow-up if necessary.

Remember – it is your right to inform yourself and to govern yourself accordingly. The best case scenario is to achieve this collaboratively with your employer. If this may not be possible, you should take the necessary steps to gather as much information as you can prior to making a decision to return to work.

For example, this may include:

- talking to a trusted colleague at your workplace;
- carrying out research on human rights and employment regulations;
- contacting an HR Advisor;
- contacting an employment lawyer;
- contacting a union representative; or,
- referring to your Employee Assistance Program and/or your insurance benefits provider.

Whether you are having collaborative discussions with your employer, or you are carrying out independent research, of particular interest to you will be:

- Whether your workplace is regulated federally, provincially or territorially – and associated with this – the Human Rights and/or Employment Standards that govern disability as a protected ground. To determine this, you can do a little internet research using these keywords: federally regulated businesses and industries in Canada.
- The employer's duty to provide "Reasonable Job Accommodation" in the workplace to the point of undue hardship, and you and your employer's respective rights and obligations under this provision. Typically, federally regulated businesses are governed by the Canadian Human Rights Act, and provincially and territorially regulated businesses are governed by Provincial Human Rights Codes or Acts. Internet research keyword search: human rights codes by province and territory in Canada and/or what is the duty to accommodate in Canada.

- Any other provisions that may apply to accessibility and inclusion, Health and Safety legislation, Employment Equity and/or income replacement.
- It will also be important for you to fully understand your employment contract, your collective agreement, and any other documents that you have agreed to by signing as part of your employment agreement with your employer, including access to insurance benefits / obligations.

Building Your Knowledge Base

Let's take a moment here to re-group. The area of policies and procedures, employment legislation and contractual agreements can be confusing, and this may begin to feel somewhat overwhelming. That having been said, the more information and understanding that you can bring to discussions with your employer will demonstrate not only your commitment about returning to work – it will also signal your seriousness about taking an informed and proactive approach to this process.

In order to avoid information overload, take this one step at a time. Begin by making a list of the areas or topics that you may need to inform yourself about, then prioritize your list. Next, identify one subject that you will research or review before moving to the next. You can proceed methodically through your list, making notes about the key points and questions you may have.

As you build your information and knowledge base, you will gain additional insight into those areas that are available to support you. The benefit of this approach is that you will be taking the time necessary – at your own pace – to inform yourself. This proactive step will provide valuable information required prior to agreeing to a return to work.

With the above in mind, some of the information you require may come from your workplace, while other details may come from research that you will need to engage in. Be sure to allow sufficient time to be confident you have the information required to make your decision.

Examples of Workplace Policies

- Vacation time
- Sick leave (through the employer, the insurance carrier or Employment Insurance if it applies)
- Personal leave
- Leave sharing
- Chronic or episodic illness
- Reasonable accommodation in the workplace
- Income replacement programs
- Group benefits
- Para-medical practitioners
- Gradual back-to-work program
- Job-sharing options
- Part-time work / reduced hours
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Other

This policy listing is provided as a reference. You may be familiar with some of these, or perhaps you do not have these policies available at your workplace.

Regardless of the policies that you do have, remember that in most cases, employment legislation and/or human rights provisions will apply to you, and will cover disability as a protected ground, along with the obligation of the employer to provide reasonable job accommodation.

All applicable policies, income replacement programs, along with other legislated provisions will fit into the equation when you are deciding whether to return to work. Explore and understand what applies to you, and how these might be coordinated to support both you and your workplace. Are there innovative and creative solutions to be found?

No matter what the situation is, it will take trust, understanding and good faith, along with a willingness and commitment from you and your employer to work together to create the conditions for a successful return to work.

Be sure to refer to the resource section for additional tips and strategies.



Re-Cap: What Have We Covered?

- Transition stage
- Reasons why you want to return to work
- Impacts of leaving the controlled home environment; planning and scheduling
- Pre-return research, employer contact and starting the conversation
- Vocational rehabilitation
- Workplace policies and employment legislation

Moving Forward: Learning from Others

- If you experience difficulties at any time, it is important to pay attention to this. Your long-term health and well-being are of paramount concern. It may be something that can be easily managed with some alterations to your schedule or the re-entry plan, or it may be something more serious that requires further attention. Be sure to take the time necessary to assess and discuss any difficulties with your employer, your care team and/or support network, and proceed from there.
- Returning to work is an ongoing process with the emphasis being on progress versus perfection. At times, it may feel like you are moving one step forward and two steps back.
- You may find that you will need to persevere through tough times. The more informed you are and the more knowledge you have, the better the outcome will be.
- It may take more than one attempt to return to work. If the first time does not work out, you have not failed – you have tried. Assess and adjust where you believe it is required – and then try again. Making adjustments is key.
- To help you to maintain momentum, pay attention to your energy requirements. Develop boundaries, along with pacing and energy management strategies. Rest and sleep equals sustainability.
- It is important to regain self-confidence in your abilities, and at the same time, be open to newly emerging opportunities that might better reflect your new situation. Some ABI survivors have found new talents that they can now explore and add to their interests and competencies.
- Remember to acknowledge and celebrate your successes.

Wrap-Up

Returning to work can be both a complex and rewarding undertaking. Along with a high degree of patience and commitment, it requires thought, planning, collaboration, decision-making and problem-solving. Interestingly, when we think about it, these skills are likely similar to those required at your job.

Throughout the transition process, you can apply your learning and the insights you have gained. Our hope is that this guidebook, along with the companion resources appended, will help to prepare and equip you for the discussions you have ahead about returning to work.

We would like to thank you for accessing this guidebook, and wish you well in your future endeavours.



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Appendices: Supporting Resources

- 1 Developing a SMART Goal
- 2 Preparing to Leave Home and Arriving at Work
- 3 Tip Sheet: Conversations to Have with Your Employer
- 4 Building Awareness and Understanding in the Workplace
- 5 Shared Experiences: Possible Symptoms and Strategies
- 6 Tip Sheet: Creating the Conditions for a Successful Workplace Re-Entry
- 7 Learning from Others
- 8 Brain Injury Associations

1 Developing a SMART goal

What is a SMART Goal?

S = SPECIFIC

Make your goal as specific as possible. Say exactly what you want to achieve in clear, concise words.

M = MEASUREABLE

Include a unit of measure in your goal. How will you know it has been achieved?

A = ACHIEVABLE

Ensure that your goal is feasible in terms of the resources available to you.

R = REALISTIC

Be reasonable or you will set yourself up for disappointment.

T = TIME BOUND

Give yourself a deadline; include a specific date if possible.

Using this framework you can practice developing goals that will support you in your future endeavours. Whether in your personal life or on the job, setting goals can help you gain some control and direction, and can create focus, accountability, and develop positive momentum for the things that you would like to accomplish.

You may wish to keep your goals to yourself. After all, they are personal and unique to you. However, there may be times when you may want to share your goal with someone who can either assist you with achieving it, help you to assess your results, or who can help encourage you along the way.

No matter what you decide, writing down your goal by committing it to paper or to an electronic device is a good first step to begin to clarify what it is you want to achieve.

EXERCISE: Applying the SMART Goal Framework, is there something that you would like to achieve that you can develop a concrete goal toward today?

2

Preparing to Leave Home and Arriving at Work

There is no timing for when a brain injury may occur. You may be single or part of a couple, you may be living alone, or with others, you may have children of varying ages, or elderly parents that you are caring for. No matter what your situation, part of the process of returning to work will include careful consideration of your home environment, along with developing a realistic plan. Remember that your planning will have a direct relationship on the progress you will make in terms of your morning routine and the time it takes you to you prepare to leave home.

To help you to prepare, we have gathered some tips and strategies from individuals who have experienced the challenges and successes associated with getting up and out the door. We hope you find these helpful.

- The action of returning to work can potentially take up as much energy as you have. Prepare for this beforehand so you do not take on too much during this time. Let family and friends know that you may not be in touch as much as usual over the next couple of weeks as you ease into your new routine.
- Be realistic about your time estimates. You may find you will need to pace yourself from the time you wake up until the time you leave for work. This pacing will help you to develop a calm and realistic schedule that you can operate from.
- Clear the decks and give yourself permission to focus solely on the objective of getting ready, leaving home and arriving at work. As you become more comfortable with this routine, gradually build back in any additional activities.
- Recognize that this will require a different level of effort when compared to a regular day at home. Be aware that there will be a series of judgement calls that you will need to intentionally make. For example, you may need to say, "If I do this, I may need to remove X from my schedule."
- Recognize that high emotions can be involved with this endeavour. High emotion can drain your energy. Do your best to remain calm. To help with this, take a few deep breaths. Affirm that you are doing this because you want to; remember that this is a trial run and you are doing the best that you can. Apply any other relaxation techniques that you can draw from and carry on from there.
- Give yourself permission to pivot or change your plan on short notice versus trying to just push on through. For example, if you find your energy unexpectedly crashing before you arrive on the job, take a rest period prior to commencing your work. Sit somewhere quiet, alone, and reduce any stimulation around you. Sometimes it might take time in a quiet environment to regain your energy. You will be able to gauge this over time.

At Home

- Because brain injury is largely an invisible disability, many people may forget that you are dealing with symptoms and fluctuating energy levels throughout the course of the day, including the morning. Activity levels, noise, chaos, and the overall stimulation associated with getting up and out the door can take its toll.
- Different factors will apply to different people. For example, if you find that listening to the radio or music first thing in the morning brings you calm and gives you energy, this would be a helpful activity for you to engage in. Alternately, if you find that listening to the radio or music is difficult, distracting or a drain on your energy, be sure to begin your morning routine without it. Over time, you will determine and develop the best balance for you.
- If you live with others, you will know best what the level of demand is on your time and energy in the morning. To the extent possible, communicate beforehand with your family members and together establish and agree to a plan that you can work with. The goal in this is to reduce or eliminate demands on your time and energy so that you can focus on your own morning routine. Be aware that this may initially feel like a selfish approach to take. However, in the long run, removing as many demands as possible up front will support your efforts to return to work. Remember, when the time is right, your responsibilities will be added back into your morning routine.
- Receiving support from others may include both encouragement as well as hands-on help during this time. For example, if you have children, plan ahead of time what the morning routine should look like. Be practical. If applicable, ask your spouse for help and together discuss what can be done. If your children are old enough, communicate beforehand that you are attempting to return to work and that you will require their help with this. If you are a single parent, is there a family member, friend, or caregiver that you can contact for support? Be specific in what your needs might be and the expectations you will have of your family and others.
- To keep your mind calm, try to minimize the amount of “thinking” required in the morning, to the extent possible.
- Prepare as much as possible the night before. Get others involved in lunch-making, selecting clothing, gathering items for the next day, packing book-bags, and ensuring winter gear is ready for the morning. Doing as much as possible the night before will reduce stress and energy requirements in the morning.
- Find creative ways to get your kids to school or day care. Ask for help with this and let others know it will be for a short period of time while you are establishing your new morning routine.
- If you have a dog, ask a family member or friend, or consider hiring a dog walker for the morning walk. This temporary step will go a long way to freeing up your time and energy.
- As you go forward, it will be important to think about communicating your needs. For example, ask yourself the following question: “How will I communicate my return to work goals to my family, and in practical terms, what will I need from them?” Be clear. Be specific. What will this look like?
- It’s possible that others may not understand the level of effort required to return to work. Do your best to articulate your needs. It may take some practice and time to become comfortable relating this way with others. If you’d like to, write or record some notes or key points and work from these. Let others know that this is very important to you and that returning to work will take a group effort in the short term. Eventually you will find a good balance with your morning routine and arriving on the job.

Commute Planning: How Will You Get to Work?

- Drive yourself
- Family member or friend pick you up / drive you
- Public transit
- Uber or ride service
- Ride your bike
- Walk
- Other

If you are in a vehicle

- If you are driving yourself, it is important to acknowledge that the action of driving a vehicle involves a number of steps, a high degree of focus and concentration, and potential draws on your energy.
- Arrange for a calm and quiet drive, reduce noise as much as possible and remain fully engaged in the task of leaving home and arriving at work.
- If someone is driving you, let the driver know you need some quiet time in the vehicle. Eliminate radio / music / conversation. Rest and breathe deeply to retain calm.

Public Transit

To create a calm commute on public transit, be prepared to reduce sensory input as much as possible. In addition, know beforehand how sensory overload may affect you. Pay attention to what you are thinking about and what is on your mind. To the extent possible, reduce any distractions.

- Have earplugs or noise cancellation devices to dampen sound
- Consider listening to calming music or other options to instil a calm attitude
- Have sunglasses to reduce glare
- Choose carefully whether to read something or not while in transit
- Walk slowly
- Breathe deeply
- Affirm your decision to return to work

Assess Your Reactions and Responses: Adjust Where Required

Whether you arrive at work refreshed or drained will make a key difference in your ability to engage with others and maintain your energy throughout the day.

To gauge this, pay attention to how you are feeling throughout the morning routine and while in transit. **For example, take note of the following factors:**

- > Physical strength
- > Emotional wellness and mood management
- > Energy levels
- > Capacity to engage with others
- > Ability to maintain concentration
- > Other

Once you become familiar with your reactions and responses, if you find your energy draining, make adjustments as required in order to support your efforts.

On the Job

If possible, set up a two-week trial / pilot return. This will allow you time to gauge your timing, schedule and energy levels during your time on the job.

NOTE: *You may wish to request reduced or graduated hours during this time.*

You might find that your first few days on the job may not go according to plan. For example, your energy may drain faster than anticipated, or the sensory input may be more than you planned for. With this in mind, always have a Plan B and an exit strategy developed and agreed to with your employer. Be sure to communicate and discuss any problems and/or changes to the plan with your employer.

Getting Back Home Again

Don't forget to include in the planning stage the process of getting back home again after work.

Make sure you have a plan for your commute home. How will you get back home? How long will this take? What time should you leave work?

After you arrive home, once you are settled in, give yourself some time to assess how you are feeling.

Take note of these factors:

- > Your physical strength
- > Your emotional wellness and mood management
- > Your energy levels
- > Your capacity to engage with others
- > Your ability to maintain concentration
- > Other

The information you have gained from your assessment will help you to plan for the following:

- > Morning routine and schedule
- > Commute to work
- > Time on the job
- > Commute back home

Initially, you may need to set some boundaries and be prepared to adjust your schedule. For example, should you find that you did not have enough time prior to leaving home, re-examine this and build a more realistic time into your schedule for the next day.

Ask yourself

- > What can I do to make this successful?
- > What do I need to let others know about / how can others support me?
- > Is there a way to plan this better / differently?

3

Tip Sheet: Conversations to Have with Your Employer

- Provide some education or resources to your employer about Acquired Brain Injury (ABI).
- Advise your employer that you are exploring a return to work, and that you would like to set up a time to discuss this.
- In advance of the meeting, advise your employer that you would like to review any policies or programs available that can help to make a return possible.
- Indicate that until you have actually returned to the workplace, it will be challenging to identify all of the potential symptoms that may occur.
- With the above in mind, inquire whether it would be possible to set up a pilot return – perhaps with graduated hours. Suggest perhaps a two week trial, where you can work together to assess needs / progress / support required.
- Confirm that while ABI is unique to each individual, there are some shared experiences that run in common with many attempts to return to work.
- Refer to support resources including Building Awareness and Understanding in the Workplace, and indicate that these strategies were identified by a working group with first-hand experience of ABI and returning to work.
- At this stage, you cannot say which – or if any – strategies will apply specifically to your situation. However, indicate you would like to request an opportunity to test these out with a pilot return to work.
- Consider seeking a Vocational Assessment and discuss the benefits of developing a vocational rehabilitation plan with your employer. This valuable step might help to identify work alternatives and recommendations to support your integration.
- Request a review of the policy for the provision of “reasonable accommodation” in the workplace. If you do not have one, recommend that some research be done together in order to support your request to return to work.
- Maintain control over the process, while at the same time take a positive and collaborative approach. You want to signal your willingness to explore various options available, while at the same time obtain concrete information that will help you to make your decision.
- Convey to your employer as much information about your symptoms as you can. Incorporate information from any medical, neuro-cognitive, psychological, functional or vocational assessments that you have participated in. Think and talk about your requirements, concerns, and explore options. Be comfortable in asserting your needs.

4 Building Awareness and Understanding in the Workplace

Because Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) is primarily an invisible disability, there may be extra and added effort required to educate others, to advocate for support, and to ultimately arrive at a suitable arrangement for a successful return to work. In many cases, this will involve developing strategies to support the provision of “Reasonable Accommodation” in the workplace process.

Therefore, given the unpredictable and episodic nature of brain injury, how can employees and employers work together to create supportive conditions for the return to work?

- Understand that the process of recovery includes the time spent at work. Given that ABI is largely a non-visible disability and can also be unpredictable, **some flexibility during the transition period is required.**
- Returning to work is a process – not an event. After leaving the controlled environment of home life, individuals may experience an inconsistent period of transition and symptoms. **Trust, patience and understanding are key factors during this time.**
- Individuals want to be productive and actively contribute to their workplace. Some will struggle with a range of emotional and psycho-social impacts during the initial transition period, which can be compounded with fatigue. These may include: feeling overwhelmed; having a lack of confidence; inability to deal with stress; questioning themselves about their abilities; behaviour changes; uncertainty about job and income security; not wanting to let others down; or, vulnerability about their future. **Providing factual information about the emotional and psycho-social impacts of ABI, as well as having someone available to talk to, will support both the individual and the workplace.**
- Many will underestimate the time it will take to transition back to work. The decision to return is typically made when symptoms are manageable at home and the individual believes they have the capacity to re-engage with work. However, when adding in the extra effort required to be back on the job, setbacks can occur. **Be prepared, and plan for this. It may take more than one attempt for the transition back to work to occur.**
- The ability to maintain energy levels is severely impacted with ABI, in particular when returning to work. The activities of normal pre-work routines and taking transit or driving can easily exhaust an ABI survivor, leading to debilitating fatigue upon arrival at the workplace. **Allow for some time to rest and re-engage prior to beginning the work day.**
- It is important for the employee and the employer to plan collaboratively and to set some SMART goals (Specific – Measureable – Achievable – Realistic – Time-bound). **Allow sufficient time for this to occur and as the return to work process unfolds, be prepared to make some adjustments. Refer to the SMART goal template on page 29.**

- ABI survivors may not know what support they will require, how to articulate their needs, or what this might look like in practical terms. Their abilities remain, yet it may take longer than previously thought to access these. **Allow some time for the individual to become familiar with the new normal, and to ease into the new routine. Remember – back on the job does not always equal recovered. As a temporary measure, together, consider developing different performance goals or benchmarks to measure success. Consider the need to learn and master a new skill before taking on a new one. Adjust these over time.**
- Noisy work environments, distractions, lighting, unpredictable work demands, activities involving multiple steps or high cognitive tasks can all lead to challenges for the individual returning to work. Identify some options for the individual to adjust their work environment so as to allow for the maximum control over these factors. **These may include, but are not limited to: reduced work hours; graduated hours; moving to a quieter location; removal of overhead or fluorescent lighting; working with desk lamps; finding the right light-bulb; the use of noise dampening devices; eliminating glare from screens; working with coloured paper to reduce eye strain; experimenting with the lighting options / background colours / resolution on computers or other devices; limiting the number of interruptions throughout the work day; responding to e-mails at specific times throughout the week; having meetings and other high cognitive activities when the individual is at peak energy times.**
- Given the episodic and sometimes unpredictable nature of ABI, if possible, identify work that can be handled from home. **Build work at home time into the overall return to work schedule.**
- Concurrent to the return to work, there will likely be ongoing follow-up appointments with members of the medical community or other specialists who are engaged in the care and support of the individual. These appointments are crucial to the successful outcome of recovery and cannot be missed. **To the extent possible incorporate any appointments into the daily or weekly schedule.**
- Support and education can take many forms. **A dedicated program providing information about ABI, what to expect, how to support your colleague – along with having someone identified as a point person – are valuable steps in demonstrating a commitment to a successful return to work.**

Whether returning to work, or welcoming back your colleague, remember that all involved are finding their way. There is an opportunity to learn and build awareness from both the employee and the employer perspective.

Following are some steps that can be taken to make this happen:

- Seek out ways to collaborate, and together with regular communication identify and bridge any knowledge gaps.
- Commit to and develop a realistic re-entry plan which incorporates the principles of providing “reasonable job accommodation” in the workplace, and the respective rights and responsibilities of the employee and the employer.
- Engage in collaborative goals development. There is no “one-size-fits-all” or one-way solution – if something is not working, be open to exploring new options.
- Discuss and provide meaningful support, including environmental, logistical, and psycho-social supports.
- Create opportunities for on-the-job practice and confidence-building.
- Demonstrate encouragement and recognize both employee and employer successes.
- Implement ongoing review, assessment and adjustment, as may be required.
- Contact your local and/or provincial brain injury associations, along with any other support resources in your community.
- Network with other workplaces engaged in acquired brain injury return to work arrangements and share successful practices.

5

Shared Experiences When Returning to the Workplace Following an Acquired Brain Injury

Possible Symptoms and Strategies

Possible Symptoms Include

- Physical
- Emotional
- Cognitive
- Reactions to environmental conditions
- Logistical impacts
- Psycho-social impacts

Shared Experiences Include

- Debilitating fatigue and exhaustion
- Headaches, eye strain, pain
- Lack of emotional control
- Feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable
- Riding transit can be exhausting prior to arriving at work
- Hyper-sensitivity to noise, lighting, distractions, unpredictable work demands, music
- Inability to fully engage in meetings, conversations, training sessions
- Feeling energy deplete as the work day unfolds
- Worry about income security and anxiety about the future
- Mood management is important - irritability or frustration can occur
- Difficulty thinking, focusing: limited attention span
- Challenges such as computer work, multi-tasking, reading, tasks with multiple steps
- Anxiety about the future
- Higher cognitive output = lower available energy
- Pressure to return to work before being ready

Breakthrough Moments

- Recognize the gains being made, no matter how small or incremental
- Gradually increase the time spent on the computer / screen work
- Learn to prioritize based on new conditions and realistic symptom assessment
- Combination of hours working from home and working on the job. From there, gradually increase the number of hours spent on the job.

Some Tips and Strategies

- Recognize that leaving the controlled home environment can bring on or worsen symptoms; prepare for potential set-backs and manage these as they may appear.
- Understand that it may take more than one attempt to return to work.
- Some individuals may struggle with a range of emotional impacts during the initial transition process. These can be compounded due to fatigue. Be open about your experiences, and take some time to re-set prior to beginning the workday.
- Two-way communication is critical. There is no “one-size-fits-all” or any one-way solution. If something is not working, be open to exploring new options.
- Reflect on the activities that deplete your energy and those that either give or allow you to maintain your energy. Map your energy to various activities and determine the best times during the day to carry out certain tasks.
- Accept where you are in the recovery process and plan for new performance benchmarks instead of comparing your performance to pre-injury accomplishments.
- As work activities may be added into your routine, the time and energy available to invest in other areas may need to be adjusted. When returning to work be prepared to test out what works the best to bring about a good balance for you, your family and friends, and your workplace.
- Remember that everyone is finding their way. Be patient with the process and build awareness through communication. Additionally, trust in your abilities!



Tip Sheet: Creating the Conditions for Successful Workplace Re-Entry

It is Important to Respect:

- > The people involved
- > The process as it unfolds
- > The fluctuating pace of recovery and transition

Consider these elements to a successful re-entry into the workplace:

- > The effects of Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) are UNIQUE to each individual.
- > Re-entry is a PROCESS, it is not an EVENT.
- > It is important to INTERPRET and COORDINATE workplace policies and legislation.
- > Engage in collaborative planning for "REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION", including working from home and allowing adjustments to the work environment.
- > Have PURPOSEFUL discussions around your ABI symptoms and your capacity to return to work.
- > Explore your ABILITIES.
- > Develop SMART goals for transition and re-entry: review, assess, adjust, repeat.
- > REVIEW your performance goals: consider revising or letting go of some responsibilities.
- > Identify what MEANINGFUL SUPPORT might look like when back on the job.
- > Create opportunities for on-the-job PRACTICE and confidence building.
- > Recognize both employee and employer SUCCESSES.
- > Contact local or provincial Brain Injury Associations for ASSISTANCE.

***FLEXIBILITY + TIME + PATIENCE + TRUST
THESE WILL HELP YOU TO PROGRESS***

7

Learning from Others

As you undertake the transition to return to work, it is normal to feel a variety of emotions that can range from excitement and anticipation to anxiety and uncertainty. You may also feel out of your depth at times, as you prepare to leave your home environment. Should the fear of the unknown grip you, do your best to balance out your thinking, and remember that you are taking positive steps to plan and prepare.

The following are some thoughts and tips shared by others who have both attempted and who have returned to work.

"Typically, once you have communicated you are going back to work, your household might breathe a collective sigh of relief and there may be an expectation that all will return to normal. Beware of this!"

"Give yourself and others a couple of weeks to assess how things are going. Make any adjustments required."

"Do not underestimate the energy it will take to return to work. You will need to be strong and firm in establishing and maintaining boundaries."

"To the extent possible, have an exit strategy or back-up plan:

- What will you do if something unexpected happens?*
- What steps can you take if your energy fails?*
- Who can you call on if you need some assistance with getting home?"*

"Realistic logistics planning prior to returning will be key in your progress."

"Understand the difference between feeling ready and being ready to return to work."

"I wish I had known that the process of recovering from a brain injury is long. I thought I was "done" when I returned to work. Then when I couldn't do what I used to do – I panicked. I realize now that I've been slowly recovering over the past year and a half since I've been back at work."

"Your brain is healing and needs time – don't expect to be able to handle the same workload right away."

"I was focusing so much on pre-injury me, I was not leaving any room for exploration and adjustment – it was either I was going to return flat out or I was failing."

"I have learned that there is a continuum for the transition involved in returning to work. Success can be measured in many different ways. I also learned the importance of open/honest communication of my limitations and the benefits of asking and receiving help – this concept was very new/difficult for me."

"There are positive elements to learn about which can help (meditation, pacing, energy mapping)."

"Although not a workplace requirement, support at home is critical. The effort required to return to work took all of my energy, there was nothing left over and I was not able to engage in anything else outside of that. It's important to communicate to family and friends that you will require some time to adjust during this transition."

"Recovery is a very individual process, and so too is the return to work."

"It's important to access the power of any group support that is available."

"It's critical to arrive at self-acceptance, and also acceptance of others in dealing with brain injury."

"The importance of a holistic view is key, along with understanding that work and home life directly affect each other."

"Prioritize cardio exercise, sleep, staying hydrated and maintain a healthy diet."

"Although I have not been able to return to work in any meaningful way, I still continue to contribute in my field because it is important to my self-worth and my outlook on life."

"Keep trying, adjusting, and trying again."

"Realize that the gains will likely be incremental. When you believe you have reached another level, spend some time at this level before accepting increased responsibilities and/or workload. Be sure that your energy and the level reached is sustainable before advancing to the next level."

"Learn to articulate and assert your needs."

"Explore how technology and various apps might assist you with planning and scheduling your day; when to perform specific tasks and carry out various commitments; tracking the time it takes to perform certain tasks; monitoring your break times; communicating with family members, friends and/or colleagues."

"Understand that as you prepare to return to work, the natural rhythm of your life will be interrupted, and a narrowing of your life scope will be a reality. This will be for a limited period and your routine will adjust over time."

"There are so many factors involved it is easy for things to get muddled up. As you prepare, remember to break things down; make a plan; take one step at a time; develop goals and communicate openly."

"It may take more than one attempt to return to work. Re-visit your needs and adjust when indicated."

"Resist becoming overwhelmed and believing this is too much trouble and that not returning to work is your best option. Watch your self-messaging and, to the extent possible, remain positive."

"Ask yourself: How can I prepare in ways that will support my return to work?"

"Navigate through the process with confidence."

8

Brain Injury Associations

Alberta

- Southern Alberta Brain Injury Society
- Brain Care Centre

British Columbia

- Braintrust Canada
- Bulkley Valley Brain Injury Association
- Fraser Valley Brain Injury Association
- Comox Valley Head Injury Society
- Kamloops Brain Injury Association
- Nanaimo Brain Injury Society
- North Okanagan Shuswap Brain injury Society
- Northern Brain Injury Association of BC
- Powell River Brain Injury Society
- Prince George Brain Injured Group Society
- South Okanagan Similkameen Brain Injury Society
- West Kootenay Brain Injury Association
- Vancouver Brain Injury Association
- Victoria Brain Injury Association

Manitoba

- Manitoba Brain Injury Association

New Brunswick

- Brain Injury New Brunswick

Newfoundland and Labrador

- Newfoundland and Labrador Brain Injury Association

Nova Scotia

- Brain Injury Association of Nova Scotia

Ontario

- Ontario Brain Injury Association
- Brain Injury Association of Quinte District
- New Beginnings – Chatham-Kent
- Brain Injury Association of Durham Region
- Brain Injury Association of Fort Erie
- Hamilton Brain Injury Association
- Brain Injury Association of London and Region
- Brain Injury Association of Niagara
- Brain Injury Association of North Bay and Area
- Brain Injury Services of Northern Ontario

- Brain Injury Association of the Ottawa Valley
- Brain Injury Association of Peel Halton
- Brain Injury Association of Peterborough Region
- Brain Injury Association of Sarnia Lambton
- Brain Injury Association of Sault Ste Marie Seizure & Brain Injury Centre
- Brain Injury Association of Sudbury
- Brain Injury Society of Toronto
- Brain Injury Association of Waterloo/Wellington
- Brain Injury Association of Windsor Essex
- Brain Injury Association of York Region

Prince Edward Island

- Brain Injury Association of Prince Edward Island

Quebec

- Regroupement des Associations des Personnes
- TCC du Québec (RAPTCCQ)
- Association des traumatisés crâniens de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue
- Association des personnes ACVA-TCC du Bas-Saint-Laurent
- Association des handicapés adultes Côte-Nord
- Association des accidentés cérébro-vasculaires et traumatisés crâniens de l'Estrie
- Association des TCC et ACV de la Gaspésie et des Îles-de-la-Madeleine
- Association des personnes handicapées physiques et sensorielles du secteur Joliette
- Centre d'aide personnes traumatisées crâniennes et handicapées physiques Laurentides
- Association des traumatisés cranio-cérébraux
- Mauricie-Centre-du-Québec
- Association des Traumatisés cranio-cérébraux de la Montérégie
- Association québécoise des traumatisés crâniens
- Association des neurotraumatisés – Outaouais
- Association des TCC des deux rives
- Association Renaissance des personnes traumatisées crâniennes du Saguenay / Lac-Saint- Jean

Saskatchewan

- Saskatchewan Brain Injury Association
- Lloydminster and Area Brain Injury Society



A BRAIN INJURY CAN HAPPEN TO ANYONE



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