

# Getting back to work

Getting back to work when you have a mental illness can be a challenge. Whether you have never worked, or have not been in work for months or even years, it's important to be as prepared as possible, to be realistic, and to know where to get information and support.

## How do I get started?

### *Returning to a job*

If your employer is holding a job open while you recover – discuss with your supervisor, human resource manager, health professional or employment support worker about your approach to returning to work. Consider what supports you might need, such as working part-time while you build back up to more hours.

### *Finding new work*

Centrelink can refer you to a Job Network or Disability Employment Network (DEN) agency for assistance, or to vocational rehabilitation through an agency such as CRS Australia. Visit the JobAccess website for useful information. A private career counsellor may also be able to help. Remember to be patient – looking for a job can take time.

### *Other types of work*

Volunteering can be a good way to build up skills and help you get back into a routine. If you feel ready, consider registering with a recruitment agency for temporary work to ease back into employment with short-term contracts.

## Should I tell an employer about my mental illness?

Deciding whether to tell an employer that you have a mental illness can be difficult. Discuss with your doctor or support worker at an employment agency the reasons for and against disclosure in your circumstances. This is especially important if your symptoms may affect your work and health and safety issues (such as operating machinery). Discuss, too, whether you need (or want) to tell co-workers, and how this could be done. Possible concerns about disclosure include being treated unsympathetically, not offered a job or promotion, or even being fired. Benefits can include the employer being understanding and prepared to help if you need time off, and feeling supported if you become unwell at work.

Disclosure and many other issues are covered in the *SANE Guide to Getting Back to Work*, a guidebook specially developed for people with a mental illness looking for employment and full of helpful information, tips and useful contacts. There is also the *SANE Guide to Mental Illness for the Workplace* written to help employers, managers and co-workers understand the

impact of a range of illnesses, with practical tips on what they can do to help that benefit everyone.

## What can I do to stay at work?

An essential part of being a productive and valued employee is making sure your symptoms are well managed, and that you feel understood and supported by managers and co-workers.

Handling stress at work is very important as this can be a factor in the onset or worsening of symptoms. Some strategies include taking slow deep breaths, talking about how you feel to someone you trust, making sure you take holidays, and planning occasional 'mental health days' using annual leave, rather than calling in sick at the last minute. Talk to a health professional about other stress management techniques.

Try to keep your life in balance by doing things that help you stay well, such as taking any prescribed medications, psychotherapy, exercise, getting enough sleep, doing things you enjoy to relax, and socialising with friends and family.

Decide soon after you start a job what action is best for a manager or co-worker to take if you start to become unwell. This may include providing a quiet space and making a call to a family member or friend, treating doctor or crisis team. Remember that support can also be available to employers through employment services to help you stay in work. See the [www.jobaccess.gov.au](http://www.jobaccess.gov.au) website for details.

## What can I do about being a smoker at work?

Discuss giving up smoking with your doctor before taking steps to stop. The doctor can provide helpful advice, especially where there may be an interaction between quitting aids and medications. See the *SANE Guide to a Smokefree Life* for more about how to quit. If you do need to smoke at work, minimise its impact by using breath mints, making sure you don't take more breaks than your co-workers, smoke discreetly in designated areas and dispose of butts appropriately.

## How do I find out more?

It is important to ask your doctor about any concerns, as well as a contact worker at an employment agency if you have one.

- ② Visit [www.jobaccess.gov.au](http://www.jobaccess.gov.au) or call 1800 464 800 for help and advice.
- ② To order SANE Guides mentioned on this Factsheet, visit the SANE Bookshop at [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org) or call 1800 18 SANE (7263).