

# IOSH RESEARCH ON RETURNING TO WORK AFTER MENTAL ILLNESS

*A new research study, commissioned by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) into workers' mental health problems, has called on employers to take greater account of an individual's needs, and emphasises the need for more tailored approaches when planning a return to work by their employees.*

**R**esearchers from Tilburg University in the Netherlands conducted the study, on behalf of IOSH, to gain a better understanding of individual variability in the return-to-work process for employees on sick leave due to poor mental health.

Having identified a range of trajectories that workers with mental health problems go through as part of their return to work – with some able to return quicker than others – the study emphasises the need for more tailored approaches.

“Considering an estimated 12.8 billion working days of productivity are lost globally, due to anxiety and depression, these are useful findings and insights,” according to IOSH Research Manager Mary Ogunbeje.

“With the costs to society of absenteeism, presenteeism and unemployment due to mental health problems, the study attempts to get a better understanding of individual variations and the return-to-work process,” she added.

Such attention to individual situations and conditions, the research suggests, could not only help prevent mental health problems from becoming more severe but also help employees achieve a more sustainable return to the workplace.

“The imperative to better understand the individual needs of those returning to work after experiencing mental health problems is likely to get even sharper focus over the coming months, of course, as employees worldwide re-enter the workplace after coronavirus lockdown,” the IOSH Research Manager noted.

“Many of these workers have been living with stress and social isolation as they continue to work at home and away from their ‘normal’ working environment.”

## HOPE AND PERSPECTIVE

The research also stresses the importance of giving hope and perspective to employees currently on sick leave with mental health problems. The study suggests that individuals will benefit from more frequent communication with their employer and more joined-up support from co-workers, stakeholders and the wider community. This includes tackling the stigma that can often be attached to mental health problems.

The study also observed that nearly half the number of those missing from the workplace, due to their mental health, return to work within four to five months on average. And it notes there is only a small chance of relapse during the return-to-work process. The differences as to how quickly the other half finds their way back into employment are wide.

Faster return-to-work trajectories were found to include



*The need to better understand individual needs of those returning to work after experiencing mental health problems will come into sharper focus over the coming months due to the pandemic.*

more employees with stress complaints and adjustment disorders, while slower trajectories featured more employees with burnout. These findings suggest timely interventions may prevent the development of more severe mental health problems and longer return-to-work trajectories.

A further finding showed that relapse in workers who had returned to the workplace from a mental health problem was more likely to be influenced by work or psychosocial factors. Trajectories, with or without relapse, did not vary with the type of mental health problem, the size of the organisation or demographical factors.

“With such significant societal costs associated with mental health problems, not to mention people’s quality of life, we need more insight into how employees who have these issues return to work and a greater understanding of the different ways individuals negotiate this process,” said Dr Margot Joosen, Senior Researcher at Tranzo, Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences and leader of the research study team.

For further information on the IOSH research visit [www.iosh.com/rtwmentalhealth](http://www.iosh.com/rtwmentalhealth)