

CASE STUDIES

The right time for return to work: Optimising work participation for patients/clients recovering from injury or illness

Marie

Patient background

Marie is a 40-year-old driver for a medium-sized transport business. She has been experiencing pain in her lower back off and on for months. The pain has made it increasingly hard for Marie to do her job and has resulted in her taking sick days from work. Marie is also the primary carer for her elderly father who lives with her. Her pain is impacting her ability to care for her father.

Presenting symptoms

Marie went to her family doctor who did an examination. The doctor found no obvious signs of fracture or nerve damage. The doctor ordered back X-rays, which showed signs of degeneration and wear and tear. Marie was prescribed a week off work, some anti-inflammatory medication, and advised to return to the doctor in a few weeks. Marie left the doctor's office worried about the changes in her back and wondering if her work had contributed to them and whether she would be able to continue to do her job and care for her father.

After a week at home, Marie was still in pain and becoming increasingly upset about her back and the impact it might have on work and her caring responsibilities. She was afraid to return to work in case the pain and damage got worse, so she used additional leave to remain at home. By the time she got another appointment with the doctor two weeks later, Marie was quite depressed about having been off work for three weeks. Her doctor tried to reassure her that her injury was only back strain and tried to convince her to return to work, but Marie wanted a specialist opinion. The first available appointment for a specialist was in two months.

Work participation

When Marie initially notified her work about her injury, she found she had very few days of sick leave left. Her co-worker suggested she apply for workers' compensation, which she did. Marie accessed her personal leave while off work waiting for a decision about her claim, which was accepted 8 weeks from when she first took time off work. During her time off and the claim process, Marie had minimal contact with her employer.

Dan

Patient background

Dan is a 35-year-old human resources (HR) officer for a retail chain. Dan takes work seriously and his mood is impacted when he is feeling down. During difficult periods, Dan often leaves work early and takes long periods of sick leave. Dan's supervisor reached out to him regarding changes in his behaviour. Dan disclosed that he has a history of depression and anxiety and had previously sought treatment after his marriage ended.

Presenting symptoms

Following the discussion with his supervisor, Dan went to his treating GP regarding the change in his mental health. He presented with angry outbursts, irritability and frustration, noticeably over small matters at work. He was also experiencing feelings of worthlessness and fixations on the past, particularly on his marriage breakdown. Dan's GP referred him to a psychologist.

Work participation

Dan's supervisor wanted to take a proactive approach and engage a rehabilitation provider to help manage Dan's situation. Initially, Dan was reluctant to engage with the provider, but once they were onboard, Dan started to develop a good working relationship with them. Dan's supervisor maintains consistent communication with both Dan and the rehabilitation provider, particularly during periods Dan is off work. Dan's supervisor also worked with him to redesign some work processes to ensure he can access treatment and services when needed.

Jennifer

Patient background

Jennifer is a 33-year-old production worker in a small manufacturing plant. She is a single mother, with three young children who are minded by a relative when Jennifer is at work. Jennifer recently injured her right shoulder by tripping over some debris on the floor at work. She has been off work on workers' compensation for 6 weeks.

Presenting symptoms

Jennifer presented to her doctor with right shoulder pain. She was diagnosed with a rotator cuff strain – possibly a minor tear. Jennifer was prescribed pain medication, given three weeks off work, with guidance to return to the doctor at the end of that time. The doctor knew of Jennifer's demanding family situation and thought she needed the opportunity to rest. After three weeks, Jennifer was reporting significant pain, and the doctor extended her leave. At the six-week point her doctor suggested that she try going back to work on the modified work program offered in her workplace.

Work participation

Jennifer's employer has an active rehabilitation program, composed of representatives from management, health and safety representatives and occupational health/rehabilitation experts. The rehabilitation manager has maintained contact with Jennifer throughout her absence from work. In anticipation of her return to work, a meeting was set up prior to the six-week point with Jennifer, her supervisor and the rehabilitation manager to plan her return-to-work program.