



# ***Keeping in contact with staff on extended leave due to a health condition: A guide for managers and supervisors***

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*Developed by:*

*Staff Support and Rehabilitation Advisor*

*Human Resources Division*

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## Introduction

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Keeping in touch with a staff member during extended work absence helps to provide emotional support to the staff member during recovery and assists a smooth transition back to work once it is medically appropriate. This guide aims to help you support staff members who require planned or unplanned leave from work due to a disability, injury or health condition (hereafter referred to as a 'health condition') that extends beyond 10 business days. Extended leave may be due to compensable or non-compensable health conditions, parental leave or complex personal circumstances.

Line managers are often hesitant to contact employees while they are off work. However, maintaining contact with the employee during their absence is generally both welcomed by the employee and is associated with a range of positive return-to-work outcomes.

Initiating and maintaining open communication with staff about sensitive matters, such as those associated with a health condition, is part of your role as a manager/supervisor. You may feel apprehensive about raising these issues and staff may also feel concerned about discussing their personal health information with you. This guide aims to help you to feel confident when keeping in contact with your staff member, so you can best manage your work area's needs and meet your health and safety responsibilities.

Familiarise yourself with UQ's policy and procedures regarding staff leave entitlements (PPL 5.60) and workplace rehabilitation (PPL 2.25.02) so you can discuss these readily with staff members.

Related information is also included in *Working with a disability, injury or health condition: a guide for staff and managers*.

### Watch for potential signs

Keep an eye on how your staff are travelling, and be aware of signs that might indicate a possible health condition or complex personal circumstance.

#### ***What are signs that might indicate concern or difficulty coping?***

- *Erratic start/finish times*
- *Increased errors*
- *Not meeting deadlines*
- *Repeated or increasing use of sick leave without explanation*
- *Reports of frequent illness, injury, pain, discomfort, emotional distress, poor sleep, tension, headaches*
- *Noticeable memory, decision making or concentration difficulties*
- *Social withdrawal from others*
- *Reduced focus on work and productivity*
- *Uncharacteristic behaviours*
- *Emotionality eg. crying or angry outbursts.*



## Ensure communication with staff is sensitive and supportive

### Plan for discussions

When you first become aware that a staff member needs to take extended leave, or if you notice signs that might indicate a staff member is having difficulty coping at work, initiate an open and sensitive conversation to discuss any support that might be needed.

“Are you OK? You don’t seem yourself...”

“I’m sorry to hear you’ve been unwell. What could we do to help?”

Prepare for initial and subsequent discussions by gathering relevant information, organising your thoughts, preparing your approach and allowing sufficient time for communicating in a supportive manner. If the staff member is still at work, arrange an appointment in a private work location. If the staff member is not at work, in most circumstances it is appropriate to phone the staff member. Encourage

discussion around concerns and work together with the staff member to develop solutions. Communicate in a warm, supportive and respectful manner.

If workplace relationships are complex or if you feel uncertain, seek advice from faculty HR or the Staff Support and Rehabilitation Advisor.

### Tips for Effective Communication

- ☑ Use active listening skills
- ☑ Accept the other person without criticism
- ☑ Ask open questions that can’t be answered with yes, no or a single word
- ☑ Pay attention to the feelings of the other person
- ☑ Seek to understand the other person’s perspective
- ☑ Offer reassurance where you can
- ☑ Ask for the staff member’s ideas to develop solutions together
- ☑ Maintain a positive, problem-solving attitude
- ☑ Avoid thoughts or actions based on assumptions or stereotypes
- ☑ Try to use the same words or medical terms as your staff member

#### LISTEN TO YOUR STAFF MEMBER

- ☑ Use the staff member’s name
- ☑ Eye contact
- ☑ Nodding
- ☑ Open-ended questions
- ☑ Listen without judging
- ☑ Double check you’ve understood

### Maintain privacy

UQ has policies in place to manage the privacy of personal information and the conduct of staff who receive such information (*Privacy Management PPL 160.02* and *Staff Code of Conduct*).



Maintain strict confidentiality with respect to any information given to you by a staff member about a health condition or personal circumstance. Ask the staff member what information they would like communicated to colleagues about their absence, if any. You may be required to discuss confidential information with other staff members (e.g. HR) for the purposes of occupational management. It is important that you discuss this with the staff member and explain clearly why you would be sharing 'need to know' information about their health status. Ensure personal information is not inadvertently accessible to others (i.e. through shared emails, diaries and directories) and store any medical information related to the staff member in a confidential locked area.

## QUICK GUIDE: Keeping in touch with staff on extended leave

**Advise your staff member that you would like to keep in touch**, ask how they would like you to do this (e.g. telephone, email) and decide how often you will make contact.

"I'd love to keep in regular contact while you are recovering. Does that sound OK?"

If the staff member agrees to keep in touch, **decide together** when you will next contact them (once per week or fortnight is recommended).

"Is it OK if I call you or would you prefer an email?"

Sometimes it can be appropriate to **share simple information** about what has been happening at work to help absent staff feel less isolated and ensure they still feel part of the team, however it is important to discuss this preference with the staff member in the first instance and be careful not to burden the staff member with workplace concerns. Advise that there is no expectation for them to access UQ emails during their work absence, but that they may access work emails if they wish to.

**Keep a record of your communication with your staff member.** Note details of meetings, phone calls and email communication with the staff member. Date and sign all relevant documentation, including emails and text messages. Make certain these records are kept strictly confidential and consider all documentation as discoverable. Ensure documentation is accurate, factual, impartial and focuses on behaviours rather than personality traits or impressions.

**Plan towards your staff member's return to work when medically suitable**, but avoid implying pressure to return. Staff need to provide you with a medical certificate for extended leave. Check that leave applications and entitlements are current, and offer to seek HR advice if leave entitlements are limited.

"We look forward to welcoming you back when you are well."



## Support your staff member's return to work after extended leave

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UQ supports the earliest practicable return to work of staff members with a health condition. Written recommendations from the staff member's treating medical practitioner/s will indicate when a return to work is medically practicable and will guide any changes to the staff member's duties or work hours.

For further advice and support, contact your faculty HR representative or the Staff Support and Rehabilitation Advisor.

## Frequently asked questions

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### **What should I do if there is a sudden absence and no contact from the staff member?**

It is appropriate for you to phone the staff member on the day that you become aware of the work absence, to sensitively express concern and to ask about their intentions regarding work.

### **How do I effectively manage a potential high-risk situation?**

This may indicate broader concerns that require specialist advice. Speak to your manager immediately and call Human Resources for advice.

***If you hold grave concerns for the staff member or any other person's safety, seek immediate advice from your manager and/or Human Resources or call 000 in an emergency.***



### **What do I do if my attempts at supportive communication are rejected?**

It can be very difficult to disclose personal and/or medical details and the staff member may choose not to tell you. Reassure the staff member that 'your door is always open'. You should however ask them to provide medical certificates for their absence and to advise their expected return to work date, once this is medically endorsed.

### **Where can I get more advice?**

UQ provides a Manager Assist Hotline for confidential advice on workplace matters, including managing the health and performance of employees. Contact Davidson Trahaire Corpsych on 1300 360 364 for Employee Assist or Manager Assist services.

If the circumstances are highly sensitive and/or you require general (non-emergency) assistance at any stage, please your local HR representative, the Staff Support and Rehabilitation Advisor (mental health related non-compensable injuries) or the OHS unit (work-related injuries).

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