



Working with a disability, injury or health condition: A guide for managers and supervisors

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Introduction

The University of Queensland supports and contributes to the provision of reasonable disability adjustment, workplace health management and rehabilitation for employees whose capacity to carry out their duties is affected by disability, injury or a health condition.

The University has a duty to all staff members who are working with a (temporary or permanent) health condition to provide reasonable adjustments to enable the performance of the inherent requirements of the job.

Sometimes a health condition requires a staff member to take extended leave. In such circumstances the aim is to ensure that return-to-work occurs as soon as medically advisable. Early return-to-work programs benefit both the staff member and the University.

The University supports a flexible approach to disability adjustment and return-to-work programs so that, where practicable and operationally reasonable, the adjustment and rehabilitation needs of an individual can be accommodated.

Typically, medical guidance is provided by a treating, registered health practitioner/s and any adjustment and/or rehabilitation plan focuses on the pattern of work and/or adjustment to substantive duties. Some adjustments may be ongoing with regular review and others may be temporary. In terms of return-to-work it is expected that rehabilitation goals should be achieved within a realistic time frame (usually no more than 12 months following initial return) and should take reasonable account of any organisational constraints within the staff member's work unit.

Watch for potential signs

What are signs that might indicate a possible health condition or difficulty coping?

- *Sudden decline in performance*
 - *Taking significant amounts of leave*
 - *Not meeting deadlines*
 - *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 e.g. crying or angry outbursts.*
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Steps for a Manager or Supervisor

Establish an inclusive workplace culture

Ensure that all staff are treated with dignity and respect, and disability is just one element of diversity in the workforce.

Plan for discussions

When you first notice signs that might indicate a staff member is having difficulty coping at work or may have a health condition impacting at work, initiate an open and sensitive conversation to

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

discuss any support that might be needed.

“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. Be aware that the staff member may be feeling quite

vulnerable and may wish to bring a support person. 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 your faculty HR or UQ’s Staff Support and Rehabilitation Advisor.

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

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





If a medical condition is disclosed thank them for being so candid and express your dedication to hearing any of their suggested 'solutions' and to seeking advice and/or assistance as necessary to manage the issue/s in the workplace. Don't make a commitment until the situation is duly considered. Withdrawing a commitment made in haste, however small, is not good practice and undermines trust.



Be aware that some disclosed issues, (e.g. allegations of a serious nature or the threat of self- harm or harm to any other person) MUST be reported immediately to your own manager and Human Resources (07 33652055) or call 000 in emergencies.

Based on any suggestions, offer further support from yourself and direct the staff member to relevant policy or procedure documents and guidelines, if appropriate.



Consider the following pathways:

1. In the case of less serious health concerns, a minor but reasonable adaptation to your managerial style (e.g. regular 'support' meetings until the issue is resolved, task dissemination, communication, feedback) may be sufficient in managing the issue/s and may mean further intervention (e.g. reasonable adjustment of the staff member's duties or hours, sick leave etc.) may not be required.
2. Seek assistance from additional resources:

Mental Health Advice	Staff Support and Rehab Advisor	3365 1146
Physical Health/ Work Issues	Faculty HR	Faculty HR
Workplace Issues	Employee Relations	3365 2055
Superannuation Options for temporary incapacity	Employee Benefits	3365 2055
Employee Assistance Program/ Manager Assist	Davidson Trahaire	1300 360 364
Disability Legislation	Equity office	3365 3052
Workers Compensation Injury Rehabilitation	OHS and/or Work Injury Management	3365 2365



Seeking medical advice

Flag with the staff member that, if they are being treated by a registered health practitioner/s, it would likely be helpful if the University could seek medical guidance (staff member must provide written consent for this).



The University's rehabilitation advisor or HR representative can further discuss this with the staff member and, if appropriate, provide the staff member a consent form to complete and sign.

The staff member can revoke their consent (in writing) at any time. If consent is provided, the University will write to the health practitioner seeking relevant information on the nature of the health condition, the functional implications for the staff member's work, any suggested reasonable adjustments to duties/tasks/work schedule and any other information pertinent to the staff member's occupational management. Any information returned to the University will be used to inform a management plan before being filed on a confidential file (not the personnel file).

Plan next steps

Agree on any 'next steps', for example you might set up a meeting between the staff member and Rehabilitation staff or explore other solutions.

- Ensure you follow up in a timely fashion, even if there is no progress to report. Employees will appreciate that you are keeping them informed and this helps circumvent feelings of alienation or of being 'forgotten' in the system.
- Maintain appropriate confidentiality. Consider carefully who, if anyone, you need to disclose the staff member's private information to. Explain to the staff member who you will tell and why. When discussing any medical or sensitive issues with an appropriate third party, keep a strictly work-related focus.
- Seek guidance/assistance for yourself from any relevant sources and potentially also from the EAP's 'Manager Assist' Service (1300 360 364). This service allows you to call and seek timely, professional, confidential advice on how to approach an issue with a staff member.

Document your own notes to record the conversation/s but make certain they are held confidentially.

Ensure that your notes are appropriately written and worded so that, if required, you are comfortable with these notes being viewed by the staff member should they request to do so in the future.



In response to your genuine enquiries, the staff member may report that they are fine. They may assert there may be no relevant health concern at all. Alternatively, it can be very difficult to disclose personal, medical issues and the staff member may choose not to tell you.

Remember that this is their right. Generally, a decision not to disclose to you should be respected and you should move forward.

Reassure the staff member that 'your door is always open'. If they are receptive, provide the staff member with written resources to take away (e.g. EAP contact details).

If there are ongoing performance/conduct concerns these should then be dealt with under the relevant performance management/conduct frameworks.

Rehabilitation or HR staff will discuss with you any relevant medical guidance and, in particular, the functional implications of any health condition for the staff member's work.

Your input regarding operational needs and available resources will be taken into account when agreeing any reasonable adjustment/s and/or rehabilitation program.

Your ongoing assistance will be sought to put any plan into place and to review progress/challenges.

Medical Conditions Affecting Performance Policy (PPL 5.70.13)

After further discussion it may be determined that the most appropriate course of action is to have the employee independently medically examined pursuant to the relevant clause within the Enterprise Agreement.

This would be particularly relevant where:

- a. The University has serious concerns about the well-being of the staff member;
- b. Limited/no useful medical guidance has been provided to the University;
- c. The health condition is of a particularly lengthy duration and/or is very complex and/or where there is significant doubt about the capacity of the employee to safely perform the inherent requirements of their job or to return to their substantive position within a reasonable time period.