An organisation's guide to supporting the recovery-at-work and return-to-work of a worker experiencing a psychological illness or injury

A tool to support the Victorian Mentally Healthy Workplaces Framework

Victorian Government

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the First Peoples of the lands and waters across Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters on which we live and work and pay our respect to their Elders past and present.

We recognise that poor mental health disproportionately affects First Peoples' communities. Further, there are long-lasting, far-reaching and intergenerational consequences of the dispossession of First Peoples and their Country that are a direct result of colonisation and the establishment of the State of Victoria. This history, and the systems it gave rise to, continue to harm First Peoples today. It is only through community-led approaches to supporting healing and structural transformation to enable true self-determination that we can begin to right the wrongs of the past.

Acknowledgement of Lived and Living Experience

We acknowledge people with lived experience of mental ill-health and recovery and the experience of people who have been carers, families, or supporters. Some of the most powerful evidence to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System came from the personal experience of people living with mental ill-health, their families, and carers. There has been extraordinary determination and courage as people have revisited painful memories in the hope of shaping a better future for themselves and others. We and other Victorians are deeply appreciative for this.

This website uses language to describe and discuss themes and concepts relating to mental health, but we acknowledge others might use different words to communicate their experience which are also valid.

Disclaimer

This guide is intended for general information and guidance purposes only and should not be considered or relied upon as an official compliance tool or advice. Using this guide does not ensure compliance with Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) regulations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004. Additional resources such as those provided by WorkSafe Victoria need to be considered / adopted to abide by regulations.

While efforts have been made to ensure information presented is accurate and reliable, it is important to note that laws, regulations and requirements can change over time and may vary by jurisdiction.

This guide does not constitute legal, professional or regulatory advice. It is recommended that you consult the appropriate jurisdictional resources and consult with qualified legal or compliance professionals if you require specific compliance and regulatory guidance.

Crisis support services

If you or someone you know or work with are experiencing a mental health crisis, please contact one of these 24 hours, 7 days services

Lifeline: 13 11 14
Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467
Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636
MensLine Australia: 1300 789 978
QLife: 1800 184 527 (3pm to midnight daily)
Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800
13YARN: 13 92 76

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Introduction

People experiencing injury, whether physical or psychological, often benefit from staying connected with work and their colleagues during times of recovery; this is called **recover-at-work.**

In some circumstances, it is appropriate for a worker to step away from work for a period of time, and be supported during that time, before returning to work; this is called **return-to-work.** For further information about returning to work, see [Worksafe Victoria.](#)

This guide has been developed for organisations supporting workers recovering-at or returning-to-work and maintaining health at work after experiencing a psychological illness or injury. This guide is relevant for organisations whether the worker was injured in the workplace or not.

This guide does not cover how a workplace may support a worker to recover-at-work or return-to-work after a physical injury. References to 'illness' or 'injury' refer to psychological illness or injury only.[1]

The guide is designed to:
- Build awareness and understanding about recovery-at-work and return-to-work after psychological illness or injury and what this means for different types of workers and organisations.
- Outline the behaviours and actions organisations and people can take to ensure a supportive workplace for recovery-at-work / return-to-work.

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[1] Where an employee has experienced a compensable mental injury it is recommended you seek appropriate information on supporting these employees through WorkSafe Victoria, Safe Work Australia or relevant resources within your operating jurisdiction.

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Who this guide is for

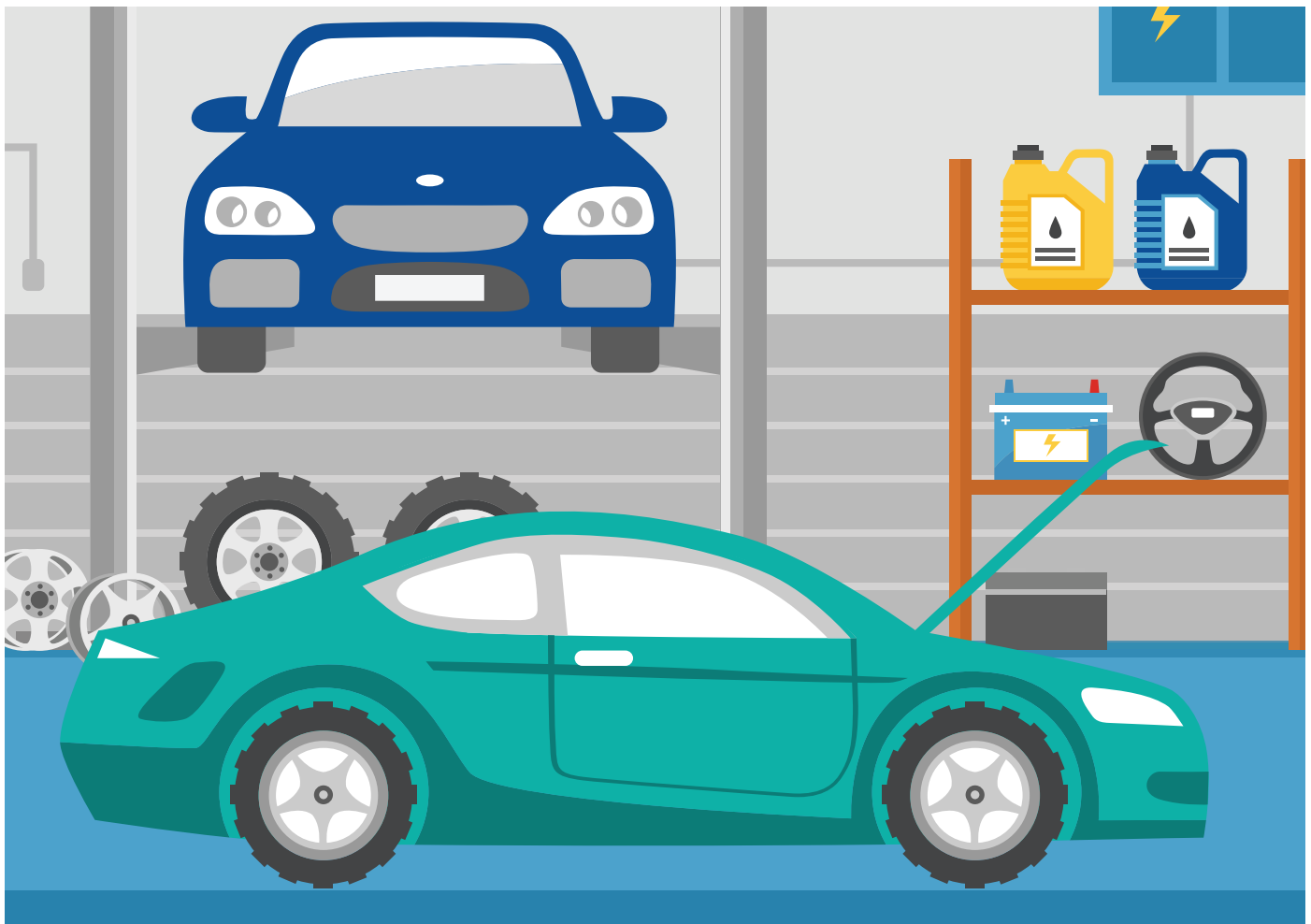This guide is for individuals across all organisation types with roles in:
- management / leadership,
- people and culture,
- work health and safety,

responsible for formally coordinating the recovery-at-work / return-to-work of workers.

Key terms and their meaning:

Business Types: This framework has been developed for all Victorian Businesses, including sole-traders, small business, not-for-profit organisations, for profit organisations, government organisations and volunteer organisations. Either the term "**workplaces**" or "**organisations**" has been used in this framework as a catch-all to represent all different types of businesses and places where people conduct work. Unless specifically mentioned, the information provided is guidance for all Victorian business types and all workplace types, including working from home or remote work, and working outdoors.

Employment Type: This framework has been developed for all Victorians engaged in work. It recognises that people are engaged in work as full-time, part-time or casual employees, self-employed, contractors, subcontractors, volunteers, apprentices, student-workers and other types of work. The term "**worker**" has been used in this framework to represent all different ways Victorians are engaged in work. This includes all forms of work, including short term, casual, irregular or insecure work.

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How to use this guide

To effectively use this guide please:

1. Read through the Quick Facts information below about recovery-at-work and return-to-work.

2. Complete the checklist to assess your preparedness for supporting a worker recovering-at / returning-to work and refer to the 'Handy Tips' column for practical advice. Note, there is a separate checklist for sole traders.

3. Refer to the 'Additional tips' sections for more practical steps if suitable.

Quick Facts

What is recovery-at-work and return-to-work, and why is it important?

Recovery-at-work: When a worker who has experienced or is experiencing an illness or injury chooses to remain at work during their recovery. This is often a personal preference (under guidance from their GP or medical practitioner) and with the support of the organisation.

Usually, when the workplace supports recovery at work for a worker, the workplace offers modified duties, tasks and roles to accommodate and cater for the needs of the worker during their recovery (e.g. reduced hours, task modification). It may be helpful to offer the 'recovery at work' option to the ill or injured worker, who may not be aware that this as an option, during times of illness or injury.

The benefits of recovery-at-work

Recovery-at-work plays an important role in helping workers to get better. Benefits include:

Benefits to the worker	Benefits to the employer/ supervisor	Benefits to the workplace/team
• staying connected with colleagues and peers, reducing social isolation • keeping a daily routine which is good for wellbeing • less disruption to daily life • continued income • sense of purpose and contribution to team and work • opportunities for upskilling	• retain critical skills, capabilities and talent • demonstrates your commitment to worker wellbeing and care for their welfare • reduced costs associated with lost productivity • reduced costs associated with replacement of role or work re-distribution • role models good behaviour and standards	• increased morale due to visible commitment of the organisation to worker wellbeing and team welfare • promotes psychological safety • strengthens peer relationships • teams can demonstrate commitment to peers

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Return-to-work: An individual worker returning to work after having a period away from work due to illness or injury. The worker may not need to be 100% well to return to work. Obtaining guidance from their treating health practitioner can be helpful in determining the ideal time for a worker to return to work.

The benefits of returning-to-work

Returning to work as soon as it is safe to do so after illness or injury has many benefits including:

Benefits to the worker	Benefits to the employer/ supervisor	Benefits to the workplace/team
• increased likelihood of a quicker recovery • improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes • increased confidence in ability, rather than focusing on disability or injury • reduced risk of long-term disability and unemployment • greater independence and social interaction • likely to return to daily activities at home and work more quickly	• retain critical skills, capabilities and talent • increased worker engagement and productivity • become desiable workplace by demonstrating your commitment to worker wellbeing • reduced costs associated with turnover and recruitment	• increased morale due to visible commitment of the organisation to worker wellbeing • fosters a psychologically safe workplace • retaining valuable skills and talent • strengthens workplace relationships and team cohesion

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As an employer or supervisor, you play a valuable role in supporting someone's recovery from psychological injury or illness. There are several easy steps that any organisation can take to ensure that you are supporting a worker's recovery-at- or return-to-work.

This can look different for everyone and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Consider gender or other attributes such as being a young individual, migrant individual, person with disability, an individual identifying as LGBTIQ+ or an individual from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

As such, it is important to consider the potential gender and/or intersectional impacts, and barriers these individuals may face to recovery-at or return-to-work.

It is also important to recognise, understand and respect people's lived / living experiences and not to pass judgement, or apply your own experience or bias on how a worker approaches or handles their injury, illness, and recovery. Respecting your worker's privacy is essential.

The needs of your workers may also change depending on the length of time that they have been away from work. You should support your workers in a way that is tailored to their individual circumstances.

Confidentiality is an essential element that you need to consider. It is best agreed between the person experiencing the illness or injury and the person who is managing their recovery-at or return-to-work. It requires clarity on what is shared (or not), with whom and under what circumstances. It is helpful to review and update the confidentiality agreement from time to time.

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Additional Tips

Quick Tips for supporting recovery-at / return-to-work from psychological illness or injury

- Provide new training and learning opportunities where previous roles and capabilities may not be suitable for the worker for a period of time (e.g., high stakes or high stress situations)

- Check in regularly to see how the person experiencing the psychological illness or injury is feeling and how they are experiencing work, noting that their needs and preferences are most likely to change over time.

- In consultation with the worker, review and modify daily tasks, particularly tasks which may be unhelpful or triggering for an individual experiencing psychological illness or injury. This may include; decrease the frequency or durations of meetings, decrease the frequency of client/customer interactions, provide longer time-frames to complete tasks, provide written instructions (not just verbal), provide regular rest breaks, encourage walk and talk meetings, etc.

- Look at modifying/ reducing working hours / providing flexible work arrangements including working from home.

- Consider developing a confidentiality statement with the worker and reviewing it regularly.

- Be supportive and understanding of the worker's lived/living experience

- Make arrangements to accommodate worker attending appointments to support their recovery (e.g., scheduling client meetings around these appointments. The best practice is to ask the person what will be most helpful to them to support their recovery)

- Establish 'liaison' or 'peer' roles to support workers from culturally diverse communities

- Encourage leaders and/or senior managers to also reach out and check in. This demonstrates that the organisation really cares about wellbeing

- Ensure the workplace is accessible and safe to accommodate the given illness or injury (i.e., Is the lighting helpful or does it need to be modified? Is the workspace too noisy or quiet?)

- Support your worker in accessing additional resources and support if they require

Please note: This guide is specific to a Victorian context and does not cover processes, policies and legal requirements of other States and Territories. Organisations that operate across different States and Territories are advised to understand processes, policies and legal requirements of each jurisdiction as appropriate.