

True or False?

Before answering these questions you will need to view the film called *The Return* which is located at:
www.shift.org.uk/employers

This section explores some of the things you can do;

- When a member of staff is off sick with a mental health issue.
- To help plan their return to work
- To assist them when they first return to work
- To maintain support once they are back at work



To help you find the answers to these questions and/or address other questions you may have on managing and supporting people with mental health problems, see the Shift Line Managers' Resource (LMR) at www.shift.org.uk/employers

1. When Sarah was off sick the following are things Bernie should have done. True or False?

- | | |
|--|----------------------|
| A. Kept in touch to see how Sarah was getting on | TRUE or FALSE |
| B. Not kept in touch so that Sarah would not feel hassled | TRUE or FALSE |
| C. Left things up to occupational health to sort out | TRUE or FALSE |
| D. Invited Sarah to work social events | TRUE or FALSE |

2. It would be best practice for Bernie to consider the following when planning Sarah's return to work. True or False?

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| A. Discuss with Sarah any potential adjustments that would make her return more manageable or help address any factors that contributed to her absence | TRUE or FALSE |
| B. Explore if it would be helpful for Sarah to have a phased return to work | TRUE or FALSE |
| C. Put pressure on Sarah to name a return date | TRUE or FALSE |
| D. To leave Sarah's work unattended whilst she is away, as it may look like people are interfering and she will be able to pick up projects when she gets back | TRUE or FALSE |

Visit shift.org.uk/employers for more information.

- 3.** When Sarah returned to work it would be good practice for Bernie to do the following. True or False?
- A.** Have a 'return to work' interview **TRUE or FALSE**
 - B.** To brief Sarah on what's been going on socially as well as any work developments **TRUE or FALSE**
 - C.** To tell Sarah's colleagues why she has been off **TRUE or FALSE**
 - D.** Take time to have frequent informal chats **TRUE or FALSE**
- 4.** The following are some of the reasonable adjustments that Bernie could make in response to Sarah's requests. True or False?
- A.** Look at aspects of the job that Sarah finds particularly stressful and rearrange responsibilities **TRUE or FALSE**
 - B.** Give Sarah time off for attending therapeutic sessions **TRUE or FALSE**
 - C.** Offer flexible working **TRUE or FALSE**
 - D.** Review training, development and/or support needs **TRUE or FALSE**
- 5.** Now that Sarah is back at work it would be right for Bernie to assume the following. True or False?
- A.** That Sarah is 100% better **TRUE or FALSE**
 - B.** That making 'reasonable adjustments' will be enough **TRUE or FALSE**
 - C.** That Sarah's behaviour could be affected by the side effects of her new medication not necessarily the illness **TRUE or FALSE**
 - D.** That Sarah should be treated differently and given less work as she will not be able to cope as well to start with **TRUE or FALSE**

Answers

1a. True. If there was little or no communication, misunderstanding and barriers could have quickly arisen and Sarah may have felt isolated or forgotten, which could have worsened her condition. Regular contact will not only help keep Sarah up to date with developments at work, and continue to feel part of the team, it can be an opportunity to discuss how she is progressing and to prepare for Sarah's return to work. It was therefore essential for Bernie to keep in touch. Bernie should have also informed Sarah that she too had a responsibility to keep in contact.

1b. False. There is still a lot of stigma surrounding mental ill health which can lead to someone being embarrassed or ashamed about how they are feeling and behaving and may therefore ask not to be contacted at all. In addition many managers are also hesitant about getting in contact in case they say the wrong thing or are perceived to be hassling someone, e.g. pressuring them into a quick return to work. All the evidence shows, however, that severing all contact hinders the person's recovery and greatly reduces the chances of a successful return to work. Lack of contact or involvement from Bernie could therefore have made Sarah feel forgotten and less able to consider a return to work.

1c. False. Although occupational health would get involved, as her line manager Bernie would have been the first person she spoke to when she went off sick and it would have been good for him to have kept in regular touch with Sarah. It would have been important to co-ordinate approaches to Sarah, as receiving a number of uncoordinated contacts could have been confusing or overwhelming for her. In some instances if the manager concerned is perceived as being a factor in the member of staff becoming unwell it may be worth considering the services of another manager and/or making use of an intermediary such as a friend, family member, colleague or trade union official to stay in touch. Any underlying issues between employee and manager should be resolved before the employee returns to work.

1d. True. Although it is not common practice for someone off sick to be socialising, in cases where people have a mental health problem it may well be appropriate, and help recovery. If there is little or no contact with an employee then they may feel isolated, that they are not missed or valued and this can exacerbate already low self esteem. By inviting Sarah to work social events, Bernie would have been demonstrating that she had not been forgotten and that he was still thinking of her as one of the team. Just because someone can make an event however does not mean that they are ready to return to work but it may aid recovery and be a good way to help ease their eventual return. *(See page 17 of the LMR for further tips on what to do to support an employee who is off sick)*

2a. True. Making 'reasonable adjustments' are a requirement under the DDA. Bernie and Sarah would need to discuss what might be helpful and what would be possible i.e. realistic to implement. Most adjustments are based on common sense and many that can help someone with a mental health condition are simple, inexpensive and may need only be temporary. What is reasonable to introduce will vary according to the job role, the size of the company and the resources available to it.

2b. True. Having a phased return to work is often a useful way to reintegrate back into the work environment. Bernie and Sarah could discuss if, by starting with part-time and building up to full time it will help ease Sarah's return to work.

2c. False. This could actually be counter productive. It is important to avoid putting pressure on Sarah to name a return date. When someone is in crisis it may be impossible for them to know how long their recovery will take. Deadlines will only add to the pressure and could make the condition worse.

2d. False. Failing to deal with Sarah's work whilst she is away could jeopardize business and may also lead to a build up of unfinished work. It is therefore important to ensure that Sarah's work is dealt with whilst she is away so that she does not return to a situation which creates unnecessary pressure and endangers or hampers her recovery. Would you want to return to an impossible in-tray and thousands of unanswered emails? *(See page 19 of the LMR for more tips on how to plan an employee's return to work.)*

3a. True. It is good practice to have a return to work interview when someone returns after being off on sickness absence. This should happen for all absences - not just mental health related absences. For Sarah, this would be a good opportunity to further discuss any adjustments or other support that could be made to ease her return and to agree how progress will be monitored.

3b. True. To help Sarah quickly reintegrate it would be good practice for Bernie to inform her about what has been happening in the office. This could be part of the return to work interview.

3c. False. Sarah may not want people to know about her mental ill health. Before speaking to the rest of the team, Bernie should agree with Sarah exactly who will be told what, by whom and when. You should never talk about sensitive personal details in front of a person's work colleagues without prior agreement - which Bernie nearly did when Sarah first walked back into the office after having been away. It is imperative to be guided by the wishes of the individual, as any inappropriate breach of confidentiality or misuse of information might constitute discrimination under the DDA.

3d. True. It is really important to continue supporting someone once they have returned after a period of absence. Taking time to have frequent informal chats with Sarah will give her reassurance, assist her swift reintegration, and give an opportunity to discuss any problems outside a formal, and possibly intimidating, setting. *(See page 19 of the LMR for further tips on what to do when an employee returns to work after sickness absence)*

4a. True. Bernie could look at aspects of the job that Sarah finds particularly stressful and rearrange responsibilities. He could also think about adjusting the content of the job. Depending on circumstances these changes can be either a temporary or permanent nature.

4b. True. If Sarah had an ongoing dental problem that required help she would seek treatment for this, which would undoubtedly be during work time. It is therefore fair and reasonable that the same policies apply for dealing with both physical and mental health problems. Taking time off to attend therapeutic sessions should be seen as a reasonable adjustment.

4c. True. Bernie could offer Sarah the option of working from home for some of the time or explore different work options such as compressed working (e.g. working ten hours a day, four days a week) part-time, job-share, flexi-time or offer a later or earlier start e.g. to avoid rush hour or take account of side effects of medication.

4d. True. After Sarah's return to work it may be helpful to have a review of her training, development and/or support needs around the specific job requirements and/or around skills enhancement such as: communication skills, time management. Improving a person's ability to perform their job can reduce stress and benefit both the individual and the organisation. *(See page 20 in the LMR for further ideas of reasonable adjustments.)*

5a, False. Just because Sarah has returned to work it is important for Bernie not to assume that she is 100% better. Almost no-one is ever fully fit when they return to work after a physical or mental illness and waiting for people to become 100% fit for their work before allowing them back is unrealistic. It can lengthen absences unnecessarily and may ultimately even compromise their future employability. It would therefore be better for Bernie and Sarah to consider if they should adjust Sarah's work in the first few weeks or months to help promote full recovery and to ease her back into productive employment.

5b, False. Although making reasonable adjustments are important to help support Sarah and may be a requirement under the DDA it would be wrong to assume that they are always going to be successful or by themselves that they are sufficient. It would therefore be important for Bernie to monitor Sarah's progress and continue to have quick informal chats to see how she is doing and if any other support is required. *(See page 21 of the LMR for tips on what to do if the return to work is not successful.)*

5c. True. Sarah is on a new medication and this may cause her to have distressing side effects. It can be easy to confuse side effects with the illness. Any effects on work may be temporary and/or Sarah may only need to take the medication for a short time.

Bernie, however, should make sure that the impact of any side effects are considered against her job requirements. For some people for example, medication may make it unsafe for them to undertake certain tasks (such as operating heavy machinery). Managers should discuss this with staff in a sensitive fashion and possibly make adjustments to their role if necessary.

5d. False. Returning from absence, Sarah should be treated in the same way as someone with a physical illness. In general it is best to talk to someone experiencing mental health problems in an honest, matter-of-fact way. Mental health problems are common and they should not be shrouded in secrecy nor should they be a source of office gossip or conjecture. It's also important not to make assumptions about Sarah's workload and her capacity to cope with the demands of the job. The most important thing for Bernie is to make Sarah feel welcomed back and not like she is a 'special case' as this could cause resentment both with her and amongst her peers.