

CHAPTER 10

Work

In this chapter, you will:

- Read about the steps that may gradually help you to return to work.
- Learn about looking for and keeping a job.

Returning to Work

Survivor Matters

Work is important to all of us. It brings in money to pay the bills. It helps give us an identity. It lets us do something meaningful. It is not surprising that many survivors want to return to work as soon as they can.

Returning to work after a brain injury is not easy. Studies show only half of the survivors who needed help returning to work were still employed at the end of a year. Of those who were still employed, only half were in the same job that they started at the beginning of the year. A different study showed that if a survivor did not return to work within six

months after the injury, they would likely never return to work. However, this will depend on the individual, the injury, the job, and many other factors. Giving yourself time and using whatever resources are available will improve your chances of returning to work successfully.

It is also true that your chance of keeping a job is higher if you were highly trained or experienced before the injury or illness. This does not mean that you will return to your old work.

Many survivors may never return successfully to the work place. Also, if your job provides medical benefits, they will usually not cover a pre-existing condition such as a brain injury. These situations may be very hard for you to adjust to.

It is important to know that there can be other difficulties, even when the return to work is successful. Sometimes the survivor and the family believe that things will get better once the survivor has a job. This is not always the case. Starting a new job is always stressful and more so for someone with a brain injury. You will be more tired. You will be learning a new

job or relearning an old one. You will be interacting with more people. You may also be coping with fears of failure. You and your family need to be prepared for the possibility that the job may make things more difficult at home.

It is important not to put job success ahead of your family. If your family life is suffering, it is probably a sign that you need a more gradual transition into the work world.

Family Matters

It is important to understand that when relearning a job, some of the survivor's social skills with the family may regress. Try to be patient at this time. Be sure to communicate to the survivor any changes in the way they are behaving to the family, as they may not be aware of it. If their behaviour has undergone changes, suggest that they slow down their transition back to work.

Survivor Matters

There are many questions that need to be considered when deciding whether to return to work, such as:

- How do you know when you are ready to go back to work?

- What is the best way to return to work?
- What help will you need when you return to work?
- Who can help you?
- What happens if the return to work is unsuccessful?

Signs of Readiness

The signs that you are ready to return to work are different from person to person, and they are relative to the job that you will be returning to, as well as to the type of boss and co-workers you have. In general, you are probably not able to return to work until you see some, or all, of the following signs:

- you have enough energy to work at least a half day,
- you can carry a conversation, know how to act towards others, and pick up important social cues (like when a person is upset);
- you can plan and follow through on simple tasks;

- you use aids, like a daily planner, when necessary;
- you are able to control your temper;
- you are able to recognize your own mistakes;
- you are able to initiate work on your own. (This may be more important in some jobs than in others. Also, you may be able to get support to help you with this).

Returning to the Old Job

When you try to return to work, your old job may be considered first. This is most likely to happen when:

- you had been in the old job a long time and knew it well;
- your insurance plan states that you must try to return to your old job first;
- your last employer is committed to you;
- you have problems with new learning.

The last point is important because learning new information is difficult for many

survivors. Returning to your last job means you do not have as much new information to learn, although you may still have difficulties with relearning information.

Even when returning to an old job, there are many things to consider. How many hours a day should you work at the start? Do work hours need to be changed? Should you begin with only some tasks? Which tasks should those be? Do there need to be changes to the workplace or to your work station?

When considering returning to the old job the following is generally recommended:

- Gradually return to work. Begin with a few hours a day or week, and slowly increase the work time over weeks, months or even years. No matter how much you want to go back to your old hours, force yourself to take it slowly. You may not know your limitations yet, and it is better to set yourself up to succeed than to fail.
- Gradually phase in different job tasks. You should start with the simplest and most frequent tasks and build to the more complicated and uncommon ones.

- Ask to change job demands to help you cope with your disabilities. Be sure to use empowering language when you do this. You are not asking for special treatment; you are asking for an adjustment that will give you the chance to produce equal work. Some examples of this might be: asking for a work station where noise levels are low, distractions are at a minimum, and lighting is appropriate. You might also ask for an extended timeline for assignments, if you do your best work when only working a few hours a day. Use devices like daily planners, earplugs, canes, or strategies such as scheduling rest time into your day, or tape recording important meetings so you do not have to rely on your memory.

Family Matters

- You may need to introduce the survivor to compensatory devices and skills. Try to introduce them to as many alternatives as possible (although not all at once) and let the survivor choose the ones that work best for them.

Survivor Matters

Sometimes the return to the old job does not work out. This is most likely to happen where

advanced work skills are needed or where the costs of making mistakes are high. For example, a successful return to work is less likely for a surgeon than for a store clerk. Surgeons need to remember lots of facts about people's health. They must also make good decisions when performing surgery. The cost of a mistake in their work could be a person's life. The store clerk needs to know how to work a cash register. They do not make life and death decisions. If they make a mistake, there is little chance of harm to others.

Your employer may be willing to give you a different job if your old job does not work out. If this happens, it is important to look for a new job that fits your strengths.

Use of an occupational therapist or vocational counselor to help set up the return to work is usually recommended. They can prepare your work place, help you anticipate problems, and help negotiate the return to work. In addition, they may be able to arrange a support person or job coach to assist you with your initial return to work. Also, there are often tests and interviews to decide how ready you are to return to work.

Looking For a New Job

There are many reasons why you might choose to look for a new job. These reasons include:

- possibility of failure at your old job;
- loss of key work skills that do not allow returning to the old job;
- loss of the old job (like when absence from work leads to replacement).

There are professionals who can help you assess what skills you will need to be successful at various jobs. Most survivors need some help in returning to work. A vocational rehabilitation counselor or an occupational therapist is usually the best support. These professionals can be of most help if they know both about brain injuries and the job market.

Most employers will not provide you with an occupational therapist or vocational counselor but there are some organizations that provide these services to survivors for free (see Chapter 13 for the contact number of your local Alberta Brain Injury Network office). You might also get help with this from your

rehabilitation centre or hospital. If you have the financial resources, you could hire a professional vocational counselor or occupational therapist to help you with your return to work.

An occupational therapist or vocational counselor will often take the following steps:

- **A vocational assessment:** This usually involves testing to discover what job skills and interests you have. It may also include short job placements.
- **A neuropsychological assessment:** The tests used in this assessment measure your thinking ability. This includes abilities like memory and attention. There is a possibility that this test will group you in the normal range. But, ultimately, your day to day functioning after the injury is a better measure of how you have been affected by your brain injury.
- **Job skills training:** Some places offer training in job skills needed for any workplace. This includes skills like being on time, being respectful, dressing correctly, and learning specific tasks related to your job.

- **School or retraining:** Before starting a new job, it is sometimes necessary to get more education. This education usually teaches you how to do a job that you have never done before.
- **A job try-out:** Many survivors have trouble taking what they have learned in one place and using it in another. For these survivors, it does not make sense to learn about a job in the classroom. They need to learn on the job. A job try-out also shows whether you work fast enough and well enough to get a paid job, as well as whether you would enjoy the work. Finally, the try-out can reveal how much support you may need to get or keep a job.
- **A job search:** A job search involves writing a resume, looking for jobs, speaking with employers, applying for jobs, and going to interviews. There are programs that help with this. Check with your local Alberta Brain Injury Network office to find a program near you (see Chapter 13, Resources, for contact information).

Some people will need help only with the job search. Others will need help with all of the

steps. You may need something in between. The amount and type of help needed is usually decided based on testing, your wishes, and the results of job try-outs or education.

Job Coach

Many people could also benefit from having a **job coach**. A job coach spends time helping you learn the job. They also help you to see how well you are doing on the job and how well you are getting along with others. Social skills are the biggest reason for success or failure in jobs. You may avoid the lunch room because it is so noisy and crowded that it exhausts you, making it difficult for you to concentrate in the afternoons. Other people may think that you always eat lunch in your office because you do not like them. A job coach can help you see these problems and may be able to suggest alternative solutions, like inviting a few of your co-workers to eat in your office with you, and explaining to the rest of your co-workers your problem with crowds.

The job coach may work alongside you for some time. This will only happen if your employer is willing. This may be needed where there are deadlines or work quotas. This support may continue until you can work efficiently enough on your own.

If the job try-out works, you might have a job. Sometimes it is necessary to try working in several places. By trying out several jobs as part of the assessment, you will be better able to see what sort of work suits you best. Job try-outs can also help you practice important work skills, like getting to work on time and listening to your supervisor.

Keeping the Job

Finding a job may be easier for survivors than keeping a job. The most common reasons for losing a job are:

- poor conduct (temper problems, social problems);
- poor attendance (coming late too often or missing work);
- high levels of distress experienced by the survivor.

Having someone like a job coach can sometimes keep these problems from resulting in losing your job. The job coach can increase your awareness of potential problems and help bring about change. A job coach can also educate

your co-workers and employer about brain injury. Long-term follow-up is also important.

Often when the survivor starts work, co-workers and employers put up with poor conduct, rather than talk about the problem. Then one day they get fed up and fire the person. Follow-up has to be long enough to cover this possibility. Even if you do not have a job coach, try to keep the communication open. Ask your boss and co-workers questions like, "How have I been doing this week? Is there anything I could improve on?"

There are no guarantees of staying in a job, but specialists tell us that there are some things that are more likely to lead to success. The most important thing is social skills. Social skills include talking with others, knowing how they are feeling, and treating them with respect.

Other qualities that will help you to get and keep a job include:

- having well defined job interests and abilities, and considering them when choosing a job;

- being assertive rather than aggressive;
- being able to move about well and having good vision;
- being able to work on your own for a long time;
- using strategies to help with problems like memory;
- enjoying your job;
- having a good support network;
- having good communication skills.

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