

Returning to Work After a Traumatic Event

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Trauma can come from many sources, like crime and combat or emotional blows like the sudden loss of a child or spouse. Difficult experiences affect people differently. The road to trauma recovery is not the same for everyone either. Some people need more time alone. Others find they are stronger around family and friends. But as a rule, it helps to get back to the life you had before. If you were working before the traumatic event, going back to work can speed your healing. Work may be a place where you don't feel threatened and this can help you move through some long days.

But you may not feel like facing co-workers right away. Or you may worry that your boss may not understand what you've been through. You may not want to draw attention to yourself. You may feel your life should be private. If co-workers know little about what happened to you, you may want to keep it that way.

Even if work may seem like the worst place to be, it is usually safe, familiar and supportive. A smooth transition back to the workplace can do wonders.

Sound out your supervisor

A key factor in your decision to return is the attitude and behavior of your supervisor. It can be helpful if your boss understands your situation and gives you a chance to deal with it. This support can lower the expectation that you will do your job as if nothing happened.

Trauma can affect your performance at work. With physical trauma, such as a brain injury from combat, the problems can be obvious. But emotional trauma can hold you back, too. You can be fatigued because you have trouble sleeping. You may be less able to focus on tasks. You may have strong emotions that are hard to keep in check.

Being comfortable enough to talk with your boss about these issues before you return is a good sign. Talking can help.

But what if your boss doesn't understand? Author and expert Barbara Barski-Carrow, PhD, says your human resources (HR) department may be helpful. But it depends on the company. Find out if your HR department does post-trauma counseling of returning workers and/or supervisors. Barski-Carrow says employees should be counseled apart from their bosses. "I would never have three people [the counselor, boss and employee] together," she says.

Control the flow of information

Sometimes you can't keep your trauma private. You might be the victim of a well-known disaster or crime. Even then, there can be parts of your story that few know. You don't need to answer any questions unless you want to. And even if the trauma was not in the news, you should not feel forced to talk about it to anyone at work. That includes your supervisor.

Talking about a painful event with close friends can help. But remember that you have the right to decide what, and how much to say. When a painful event in your life needs to be announced, do it your way. As Barski-Carrow notes, "you have a choice": You can decide whether to send news via e-mail, in person, to a whole division or just a small circle of co-workers. Don't let others make this decision for you.

Give the ice some time to break

Your first few days back at work may feel strained. Old friends may not know what to say to you. Those you don't know well may avoid you. Don't think this means people don't care. They may not know what to say, or they may be afraid of saying the wrong thing. You can help by making it clear what you do or do not wish to talk about. Then be patient. It can take some time before your relationships with your co-workers get back to normal.

Resources

For veterans re-entering the workforce, the Wounded Warriors Project (at www.woundedwarriorsproject.org) offers both advice and advocacy. Its "Warriors to Work" page, at wtow.woundedwarriorsproject.org, is especially useful.

The federal government's America's Heroes at Work site has helpful "success stories" about re-entering the workforce at www.americasheroesatwork.gov/successStories#vet.employees.

When Trauma Survivors Return to Work: Understanding Emotional Recovery by Barbara Barski-Carrow. University Press of America, 2010.

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