

## **Rehabilitation after an acute episode of work-related stress**

### **A case study by an anonymous Civil Servant**

I was brought up in an environment where the Protestant work ethic was very much to the fore. Success was largely measured by completing tasks – whether schoolwork, or household chores - that were given to me. This work ethic translated itself in adult life as a desire to work consistently hard and to a high standard, both in my Civil Service career, and in the voluntary work and academic studies I undertook in my spare time.

For ten years I managed, through sheer will power and hard work, to juggle the conflicting demands of a career in the civil service working on high profile policy areas, and a variety of activities outside work. Occasionally the cracks would show, but I would paper over them, often by using holidays to complete work tasks.

Eventually, however, I could cope no more. The straw that broke the camel's back came one Sunday in February 1996 when a combination of factors, including a new, demanding job that I had taken on promotion and a difficult relationship in my personal life, resulted in me having a sudden, and complete nervous breakdown. One day I was coping with a full and varied work and social life; the next I was incapable of undertaking even the simplest tasks. I retreated in to myself and was only prepared to communicate with a handful of trusted friends and family.

Three painful and challenging months followed with spells in my local mental hospital. This period was made particularly difficult by the uncertainty about if and when I would ever recover, and by having to learn to engage with a bewildering number of different layers of bureaucracy. Linked to that was the question mark over whether I would ever resume my Civil Service career, and if not, how I would support myself financially.

Thankfully as spring gave way to summer I began to feel better. This was in no small part the result of the loving care and concern of my friends and family. By July 1996 I was in a position to consider a partial return to my Civil Service career.

The thought of returning to work was daunting, not least the uncertainty over how my work colleagues would react following my extended absence due to mental ill-health. Fortunately the staff counselling service had enabled me to maintain indirect contact with my manager and my work colleagues. I preferred this indirect approach, as I was a little anxious about dealing with my colleagues directly at first.

Through home visits from the staff counsellor, I agreed with my manager a staggered return to work. Initially I worked two days per week. In my early days back in the office my manager had weekly meetings with me to check that I was coping with my workload both in terms of quality and quantity. In addition, other colleagues were incredibly supportive and understanding. This helped me to rebuild my fragile confidence in my ability to undertake my job.

After my first month back at work my manager subsequently reviewed my progress with me on a monthly basis. These monthly reviews resulted in my work pattern changing initially to three days per week, then four. Finally, by October I was ready to return to a five day working week, although in contrast to before being ill I now had a much more realistic expectation of the amount of work I could undertake in a given period. I was also much more realistic about how much responsibility I should accept in my spare time.

Through this acute episode of work-related stress, I have learnt the hard way the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance. I know I have a tendency to work too hard, and can now spot the early warning signs of overwork and do something about it. Since 1996 I have also had the privilege to pass on what I have learnt to other people suffering mental ill-health as a result of work-related stress.

My staggered return to work demonstrates the value of active case management in ensuring successful rehabilitation. I was fortunate to have a competent and sensitive staff counsellor who was able to help maintain good communication between me and my workplace, and a manager prepared to be flexible in restructuring and reviewing my job to meet my changing needs.

Things might have turned out very differently if I had not had a staff counsellor to use as a trusted intermediary in the rehabilitation process, and the local support network to encourage me to rebuild my life.

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