

## RETURNING TO WORK

Most people, who have received a head injury, regard a return to work as a very important goal to aim towards. When you return to work, you will look fine. There will be no obvious signs of your injury. However, chances are you will be a mess inside. You will be tired, overwhelmed, overstimulated, slow to sort tasks and organise your day, and quick to rest. Your work may be less accurate than you expect of yourself. Your attention span may be shorter and you could be prone to staring off into space. Paying attention at a meeting may be close to impossible. However, there is no absolute, right way to approach returning to work, but there are a number of sensible pointers which can act as guidelines:

### **Work hardening**

After a person has been away from the workplace for a while, getting back into the groove may be stressful. Getting up early, getting out the door, being on time, working all day, and returning home at the end of the day are all skills gained and honed over years of experience. Your stamina may not be up to the total task 100 percent when you return to work.

Working your way back to full employment gradually may be a reasonable alternative. Can you work part-time or have flex time? What would work for you? What would work for your employer? Decisions that are focused on conserving energy and enhancing attention span have a better chance of succeeding. A vocational rehabilitation specialist can help evaluate these issues. Together you can develop a “work hardening” or stamina increasing program of rehabilitation tailored to your needs. Include driving as part of your daily effort tally. Drive to avoid rush hours. Consider shorter workdays as full days when the drive time is included in the equation.

### **Return at the right time**

There is an almost inevitable tendency for the person with the head injury to attempt to return to work too early. Because a good physical recovery has been made, people assume a similar cognitive recovery. At the same time the person with the injury invariably over-estimates his own ability. This very often results in a premature return to work, creating difficulties and then failure. Returning to work too early and failing can have a positive and a negative effect. The positive effect is that it often increases insight and awareness and helps the person to readjust their expectations to a more realistic level. The negative effect is that it can severely dent the person’s confidence and produce feelings

of depression and demoralisation. This fine balance between improving insight and the negative effect on confidence needs to be carefully considered.

### **Start small**

It is better to start on a part time basis if possible, beginning with as little as two-three hours for two to three days a week and then work up slowly. It is important not to take on too much. It is often a good idea to start with a sheltered work placement, or to carry out some voluntary work to test strengths and weaknesses.

### **Pacing**

Working slowly can be important at first. Allowing your brain to get used to the pace of work will allow it to work longer and more effectively.

Fuzzy thinking can happen when the pace is too fast and all the brain parts cannot keep the pace.

Pacing is important. If you forget to pace yourself, your brain will shut down and you will end up losing more time in the long run. You cannot push the river. Your brain will be telling you how fast and for how long. You are only in charge of how often you overload the system. Pay attention and adopt pacing as a strategy.

### **Break the job down into small skills**

The job becomes more manageable if broken down into a number of smaller skills or building blocks. Make a list of all the skills needed to do the job. Once skills have been broken down into smaller units and described they can be understood and learned more easily in a step-by-step approach.

### **Use compensatory strategies**

This means using any external aids to help memory, concentration and organisational ability. It is helpful to use lists, diaries, charts on the wall, tape recorders, and labels and so on. It is better to plan important meetings early in the day if tiredness is a problem.

### **Arrange for careful monitoring and feedback**

The person with the injury is not always the best person to judge how he is doing. It helps to have somebody else monitoring progress, identifying problems and giving feedback about strengths and weaknesses. It is better to anticipate and expect difficulties and then treat them as challenges. The person who thinks that they will have no problems is more likely to fail.

### **You need an advocate**

An advocate will be helpful in interpreting your needs to your employer. Ask for such a person so that you will be perceived as receiving help. Your employer should be advised of the nature of your deficits and assist when possible in restructuring your job so that you will be more successful at it. Working with your environment so that you will succeed, adjusting your hours to maximise your abilities while nurturing your healing process and being sensitive to changes in your needs are vital to your success and your employer's satisfaction. You may even need a leave of absence until you can return to work part time.

You may be able to return to work with little or no workplace changes, except perhaps more frequent and longer breaks in the day. Work with your employer and advocate. The advocate will also help to offer you support as you re-enter the workforce. He may help you obtain the correct perspective regarding your return, offering you encouragement when a bad brain day hits. He may remind you that you are not sloughing off but, in fact, rehabilitating and recovering from a serious injury. Resist the urge to allow your ego to get in the way of recovery, especially at work.

### **Educate the employer**

Employers simply do not understand the subtle, hidden, long term side-effects of head injury. Like everybody else, they view disability in physical terms, expecting a wheelchair or a stick. If they do not understand they will usually reach faulty conclusions, thinking 'he's just lazy' or 'he's malingering'. The employer can be helped to understand if he is provided with information. This will prepare him for the fact that there will be difficulties, which can be overcome if they are anticipated.