Managing Sickness Absence

A short guide for HR, managers and leaders

ThriveWorldwide

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

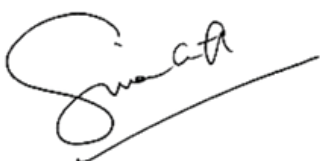## Managing sickness absence can be an extraordinarily complex challenge.

As a HR professional, manager or leader, you need to navigate the employee's wellbeing, legal compliance and operational continuity. Getting any of these things wrong can have serious consequences for both individuals and organisations.

It is a challenge that is evolving too. Remote working has made it harder to spot early warning signs. Mental health awareness has grown, but so has the complexity of supporting diverse needs. Neurodiversity diagnoses are increasing, leaving many managers wondering how to respond when this is cited as one of the reasons for a person's sickness absence.

Through countless conversations with HR professionals, managers, and employees themselves, we've witnessed the human cost when sickness absence isn't handled well: individuals who feel unsupported during vulnerable times, managers paralysed by uncertainty about what they can and can't do, and organisations struggling to balance compassion with operational needs.

But we've also seen how transformative it can be when sickness absence is managed thoughtfully. When employees feel genuinely supported through difficult periods. When managers are equipped with the right tools and knowledge. When return-to-work processes become opportunities for growth rather than sources of anxiety.

This guide distils our collective experience to help you navigate these complex waters. We'll explore the early warning signs that matter, the practical steps you can take before professional support is needed, and how to create a culture where seeking help is seen as strength, not weakness.

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Managing sickness absence well requires understanding the complexities that make it more challenging than ever before.

Here are the key trends we're seeing that are reshaping how organisations need to approach this issue:

Hybrid working has created both opportunities and blind spots.
While flexibility can prevent absence, by allowing people to work around treatments or manage chronic conditions, it has also made it harder to spot the early warning signs that someone is struggling. The casual conversations by the coffee machine, the visual cues of someone looking unwell, the subtle changes in behaviour – these natural early intervention points have largely disappeared. Managers now need to be more intentional about checking in on how people are doing, but many struggle to know how to adapt their approach to this new reality.

More employees are disclosing their neurodiversity, particularly ADHD diagnoses.
This helps to reduce stigma, but it's leaving many managers and HR professionals uncertain about how to respond appropriately. What reasonable adjustments are needed? What integration of strengths and working styles within the team will help the individual thrive? How can roles and responsibilities be shaped to make best use of the individual's strengths while addressing any barriers? The lack of organisational knowledge in this area means many are either overreacting or underreacting to these disclosures.

The relationship between performance issues and underlying health conditions has become more complex.
Stress, mental health, and neurodivergent conditions can all manifest as what initially appears to be poor performance. This creates a challenging dynamic where managers must navigate between addressing legitimate performance concerns while being sensitive to potential health factors that might be contributing to the situation.

Remote working has created new forms of presenteeism.
Presenteeism means people logging on when they're not well enough to work effectively, but feeling pressure to appear available. Unlike traditional presenteeism where someone's physical presence made their illness visible, digital presenteeism can be invisible, leading to prolonged periods of reduced productivity that go unnoticed and unaddressed.

Smaller organisations face particular challenges when key personnel are absent for extended periods.
The pressure to have mission-critical staff return quickly can compromise both their recovery and the organisation's duty of care. This creates tensions between operational needs and employee wellbeing that require careful navigation.

GUIDANCE FOR YOU & YOUR TEAM

Effective sickness absence management isn't just about responding to crises – it's about creating systems and cultures that prevent problems from escalating in the first place.

Whether you're looking to improve your current approach or facing a specific situation, here are key areas to focus on:

1. BEFORE YOU REFER ANYONE TO OH

Build your foundation

The time to think about sickness absence management is before it becomes critical. Establish clear policies that balance legal requirements with genuine care for your people. Identify a good OH provider, and know how the process with them will work. Ensure your reporting systems capture not just the data you need for compliance, but also the patterns that can help you identify emerging issues. Most importantly, create a culture where people feel safe to ask for help before they reach crisis point. This means regular wellbeing conversations should be normal, not something that only happens when problems arise.

Know the law

Occupational Health practice is shaped by the employment and equality legislation in your country, so it's important to understand your legal duties. In the UK, for example, the Equality Act 2010, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, as well as data protection laws such as the UK GDPR, all influence how health information is handled, what adjustments may be required, and how absence should be managed fairly.

Develop your referral skills

When you need to involve Occupational Health, approach the referral as a genuine opportunity to support your employee. The quality of your referral directly impacts the usefulness of the advice you'll receive, so be specific about your concerns and clear about the questions you need answered. Include concrete examples rather than vague descriptions. Remember that the person being referred will see this information, so write with both transparency and sensitivity while keeping the focus on support. Always obtain the employee's consent before making the referral. Most importantly, explain the process clearly to the employee so they understand this is about support and finding solutions, not investigation.

Support your managers

Sickness absence management often falls to line managers who may feel out of their depth. Provide them with clear guidance about when to seek advice, how to have sensitive conversations, and what they can and can't ask about health conditions. Consider offering training on recognising signs of distress and having supportive conversations. Remember that managers are human too – supporting someone through sickness can be emotionally challenging, and they may need support themselves.

Be fair

Health and absence patterns can be shaped by factors that are not always visible or openly discussed. Menopause and menstrual health can affect sleep, concentration, and stamina. Disabilities and long-term health conditions may require ongoing treatment or cause fluctuating capacity. Mental health conditions can vary in their impact over time. Cultural or religious practices, such as fasting during Ramadan, can influence energy levels or work patterns. Caring responsibilities for children or dependent relatives can also create health-related stress or fatigue. Being aware of these realities helps managers respond with fairness and avoid unintentional bias in sickness absence decisions.

Know when to make a referral

Knowing when to involve Occupational Health can make a real difference to how effectively you support an employee and manage operational needs. A referral is often helpful when someone has frequent absences due to illness, when there are concerns about their ability to carry out their role because of a health issue, or after a workplace accident/incident. It's also valuable when you're exploring potential reasonable adjustments for a disability, so you can base decisions on expert, impartial advice.

2. WHEN YOU MAKE A REFERRAL TO OH

Act early when a problem arises
The most effective absence management happens in the conversations before someone goes off sick. Train your managers to recognise the subtle signs that someone might be struggling – changes in communication patterns, decreased engagement, or simply someone who seems less like themselves. Create space for regular check-ins that go beyond task completion to genuine wellbeing conversations. Remember, asking "How are you really doing?" and creating space to hear the answer can prevent many absences from occurring.

Navigate transitions thoughtfully
When someone moves from 'self-certifying' as sick to requiring a sick-note from their doctor, this is a crucial moment for demonstrating your organisation's values. Use this as an opportunity to understand what support the person needs, rather than simply processing paperwork. Consider whether this might be the right time to involve occupational health – not as a last resort, but as a proactive step to better understand how to support the individual's return to work.

Communicate well throughout
When a colleague is absent, communicate with the team in a way that respects the person's privacy while providing enough information to manage workload and maintain trust. And for the team members who are sick, agree on how and when to keep in touch during their absence, ensuring contact feels supportive rather than pressuring, and is sensitive to their health situation.

Embrace creative return-to-work solutions
Move beyond standard "phased returns" to genuinely creative thinking about how someone can contribute while they recover. Could they take on different types of tasks that better suit their current capacity? Are there ways to maintain their connection to the team and mission even if they can't perform their usual role? The goal is finding ways for people to contribute meaningfully while prioritising their recovery – this often leads to better outcomes for both the individual and the organisation.

When performance concerns arise, consider underlying health factors
It's good practice to ask directly: "Is there anything about your health or wellbeing that might be affecting your work?" This isn't about avoiding performance management, but about ensuring you're managing it appropriately. Sometimes occupational health can help determine whether adjustments or support might resolve performance issues, or whether they need to be addressed through normal performance procedures.

Plan for extended absences

Have honest conversations about what happens if key staff are absent for extended periods. This isn't about pressuring people to return early, but about ensuring business continuity, and reducing the guilt and pressure that employees often feel about being away. Clear contingency plans, even if imperfect, can reduce stress for everyone involved. Sometimes this means accepting that certain activities will pause or slow down – and that's okay.

Consider whether further assessments may be needed

For those on long term sickness, it may be that an OH assessment every 3 to 6 months can be helpful in assessing what progress there has been in a person's health, and what impact on return to work. For some, a review might also be helpful if they have returned to work on a phased return. Before they return to their role, another check in may help you see the impact that current measures have had and to receive further recommendations where indicated. The OH clinician will recommend a further OH assessment when they feel it is necessary and suggest a specific time frame.

Read and reflect on the report carefully

Every OH report makes recommendations to both the employee and employer. These recommendations are specific without being prescriptive. For employers, each one should be weighed against other factors like available resources, impact on other employees, fairness, and precedent-setting.

When discussing reasonable adjustments (under the UK's Equality Act 2010, for example) the word 'reasonable' is crucial - adjustments that place undue burden on colleagues or are so expensive they impact organisational objectives would fall outside reasonable scope. So read your report carefully, and ask us for clarification if needed. Liaise with your HR team for input, then meet with the employee to develop an action plan with timescales and review dates. Finally, arrange follow-up meetings to review progress and authorise additional OH assessments if necessary.

3. WHEN RETURNING TO WORK

Create psychologically safe return conversations

The return-to-work conversation sets the tone for someone's ongoing relationship with your organisation. Focus on understanding what they need to be successful, rather than what went wrong. Ask about any ongoing support requirements and be genuinely open to making adjustments. Use this as an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with the employee and demonstrate your commitment to their wellbeing.

Support the individual after their first day back

Returning to work can be a relief for many people, but it doesn't mean their health challenge is necessarily over. Some illnesses and struggles — especially mental health conditions, chronic illnesses, or recovery from significant life events — are not always visible. Once they have been welcomed back, it's easy for everyone to slip back into the normal groove and forget to check in. Intentional follow-up conversations at agreed intervals (for example, after one week, one month, and three months) can make a big difference. These regular touchpoints help you spot if further adjustments are needed, reinforce that the employee is valued, and prevent small issues from escalating again.

WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

Here's a few things to help you know when and how to access it:

Know the remit of the Occupational Health profession
OH doctors have a wide understanding of physical and mental health, but their role is not to diagnose or to treat. It is to evaluate the impact of a health issue on a person's work, and to make recommendations to the individual and their employer, in order to forge a way ahead. On occasion it may be necessary to refer an individual to, for example, one of our psychiatrists or medical doctors, especially if we feel more information is needed in order to make suggestions for the next steps.

Occupational Health isn't just for crisis situations
In fact it can be most valuable when used proactively. Consider it when you're dealing with unfamiliar conditions, when an individual receives a medical diagnosis, when there are complex interactions between health and performance, or when you need expert guidance on reasonable adjustments. The earlier you act, the more options you typically have available.

OH professionals are accountable to both employer and employee
Their role is to provide fair, balanced advice that considers everyone's interests. Use their expertise not just for individual cases, but to understand broader patterns & improve your overall approach to absence management.

Consider investing in training for your HR team and managers
This could be topics like mental health awareness, having difficult conversations, and understanding reasonable adjustments. The more skilled your internal team becomes, the better you'll be able to handle routine situations and know when to seek external support. You will see some of these courses in the 'Further Support' section below.

Accessing ongoing advisory support (see options below)
We offer this so that you can discuss situations informally before deciding whether a formal referral is needed. In complex situations, it can help build your confidence and ensure you're taking the right approach.

FURTHER SUPPORT

Occupational Health Assessment
Medical support & guidance for employer and employee when sickness stops someone from doing their job.
www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/occupational-health-assessment

Work Health Assessment
Medical support & guidance to ensure an employer can offer any new employee the best possible start to their job
www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/work-health-assessment

Workstation Assessment
Support for those experiencing pain or other health issues related to desk-based work.
www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/work-station-assessment

Advisory Support for HR & leaders
A confidential space with a staff care specialist to share concerns, think through solutions, and seek advice
www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/advisory-support-leaders

FURTHER READING

Inside an Occupational Health Assessment
What is Occupational Health? How does an assessment work? And what does it involve for both employer and employee? Two of our team answer this and more:
www.thrive-worldwide.org/blog/inside-an-occupational-health-assessment

Thriving In Hard Times: Reflections From A Clinical Psychologist
Two of our team explain how HR, leaders and managers can best support neurodiverse people to resolve workplace challenges and unlock unique strengths.
www.thrive-worldwide.org/blog/neurodiversity-at-work

Cancer & The Workplace: The Role Of Occupational Health
We share some of the ways HR and managers can best support people following a cancer diagnosis.
thrive-worldwide.org/blog/cancer-and-the-workplace-the-role-of-occupational-health

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Want to talk?

We're ready to support you
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