

# Return-to-work interview questions: examples and a rea

A return-to-work interview is a short, supportive conversation held after every absence - it is not a legal requirement, but it is widely regarded as the single most effective absence-management practice. Ten minutes is enough: check the person is well, ask what support they need, agree any adjustments, and record the essentials. Acas publishes a formal meeting template if you'd rather start from theirs.

## Why do return-to-work interviews matter?

Two reasons, and they pull in the same direction. For the employee, it's the moment someone actually asks "are you OK?" - the point where a work-related cause, a struggling home situation or an emerging health problem can surface early, while it's still easy to help. For the employer, the simple knowledge that every absence ends with a friendly conversation is consistently associated with fewer casual absences - not because anyone is being policed, but because absence is visibly noticed and taken seriously.

Three rules make it work:

### The three rules

- Do it for every absence - even one day. Consistency is what makes it routine rather than suspicious.
- Keep it supportive, never disciplinary. It is a welfare conversation. If a separate formal process is ever needed, that happens elsewhere, under your absence policy.
- Keep it short. Ten minutes, in private, on the first day back if you can.

And the honest caveat up front: this is not a legal requirement. No law obliges you to hold one, and it must never feel like an interrogation - if it does, you'll get less honesty, not more.

## What questions should you ask in any return-to-work interview?

These eight cover a routine absence of any length. Ask them conversationally - it's a chat with a structure, not a script read aloud.

- How are you feeling now - are you sure you're well enough to be back?
- Can you tell me briefly what the absence was for? (As much as they're comfortable sharing.)
- Did you see a doctor, pharmacist or other healthcare professional?
- Is the problem fully resolved, or is it something that might recur?
- Was there anything at work that contributed to you being unwell?
- Is there anything we can do to support you now you're back?
- Shall I catch you up on anything important you missed?
- Is there anything you'd like kept private, or anything you're happy for the team to know?

Question 5 is the one managers most often skip and most often shouldn't - it's where workload, conflict and environment issues come out.

## What extra questions should you ask after a longer absence?

After days or weeks away (remember: employees self-certify for the first 7 calendar days; a fit note applies from day 8), add:

- How have you been keeping while you've been off?
- Does your fit note say "may be fit for work" - and did it suggest any adjustments? (Fit notes can suggest a phased return, altered hours, amended duties or workplace adaptations. You don't have to follow the suggestions, but if you can't accommodate them the note counts as "not fit for work".)
- Would a phased return help - shorter days, or fewer days, to begin with?
- Are there any duties you don't feel ready to pick up yet?
- How would you like us to handle questions from colleagues about your time off?

## How do you handle sensitive or mental-health-related absences?

Slow down, soften, and let the employee set the depth. Useful openers:

- Thank you for telling me - how are you feeling today?
- Are there particular situations or pressures at work that make things harder?
- Is there anything that has helped before - in work or outside it?
- Would regular check-ins help for a while - and how often would feel right?
- Do you have support outside work? (Asked once, kindly - you're checking they're not alone, not auditing their care.)

What not to ask: don't press for a diagnosis or medication details, don't ask "are you sure it isn't just stress?", don't compare their absence with colleagues', and never imply you doubt the illness was real. If a condition may amount to a disability, your duty is to consider reasonable adjustments - Acas's absence guidance covers the ground well.

## How do you discuss a phased return?

Where a phased return is on the table - suggested by a fit note or simply sensible - agree the shape of it together:

- What would a comfortable first week look like for you?
- Which days and hours would work best to begin with?
- Which duties should we phase back in later rather than straight away?
- When shall we sit down and review how it's going?

Put the agreed pattern in writing, however informally - a shared note beats a fuzzy memory when the review comes round. Bear in mind that pay during long sickness has its own rules: since April 2026 SSP is payable from day one for up to 28 weeks, and statutory holiday an employee couldn't take because of sickness can be carried over for up to 18 months from the end of the leave year in which it accrued (gov.uk).

## How should you structure the 10-minute conversation?

- Minutes - Focus - What it sounds like

- 0-2 - Welcome back, in private - "Good to have you back - grab a seat, this is just our usual quick catch-up."
- 2-5 - Their health and the absence - Core questions 1-5: how they are, what happened, anything work-related.
- 5-8 - Support and adjustments - What would help now; fit-note suggestions; phased-return shape if relevant.
- 8-10 - Catch-up and next steps - What they missed, what's agreed, and any follow-up date - then back to normal.

## What should you record afterwards?

Brief and factual - a record of care, not a case file:

- The date of the conversation and who held it.
- The absence dates and the broad reason category (not clinical detail the employee didn't volunteer).
- Any adjustments or support agreed, including a phased-return pattern.
- Any follow-up date you committed to.

Store it against the absence record with sensible confidentiality - sensitive detail stays between the employee, their manager and HR. Consistent records are also what make any pattern measure, like the Bradford Factor, fair: the score can only prompt the right conversation if every absence was logged the same way. If you'd rather use a formal document, Acas's return-to-work meeting template is the standard alternative to this page.

A free template from CoDash - [codash.co.uk/templates](https://codash.co.uk/templates). Edit it to match how your company actually works, and take advice on anything unusual.