

A photograph of several police jackets hanging on a rack, overlaid with a teal gradient. The jackets are dark-colored with reflective stripes and a crest on the chest. The text is overlaid on the lower portion of the image.

Supporting Mental Health in First Responders:

Supervisor Role in Stay at Work/Return to Work

BCFirstRespondersMentalHealth.com

Introduction

Supervisors (including line managers) play an important role in facilitating safe and effective work accommodations. Supervisors with positive leadership qualities can decrease the time a worker is away from work following a traumatic incident or other forms of occupational stress.

From beginning to end, the support supervisors provide their workers will contribute to the best possible outcomes. Their knowledge of internal processes, their ability to provide appropriate and meaningful accommodated work, and their positive supervisory qualities will help prevent unnecessary work disability in your organization.

The role of supervisors

Depending on the needs and capacity of your organization, supervisors may — and should — perform some or many of the functions involved with an employee's stay at work/return to work (SAW/RTW). Supervisors' relationships with employees and their co-workers is pivotal to the success of an employee's RTW plan. For complex cases, supervisors will need the support of someone more skilled in managing mental health issues. Supervisors are the face of the employer for their employees, and having an open and collaborative communication style encourages employees to communicate with them if they have difficulties performing their duties due to mental health conditions. Having respectful early and ongoing communication with an employee on a SAW/RTW plan, or while the employee is off work, demonstrates that the employee is valued. This ongoing communication is also known to increase the likelihood that the employee will return to work earlier.

Further, the supervisor's intimate knowledge of the work, coupled with the authority to make temporary accommodations, will help prevent employees from unnecessary time off work due to mental health conditions. It is important to work collaboratively with the employee when developing these accommodations — each employee is different and it is important that individual needs are taken into account. Any work performed needs to be meaningful and receive buy-in from employees in order for their return to work to be sustainable and to ensure that it doesn't exacerbate any mental health limitations that they may have.

The role of the supervisor with all employees:

- Ensure all staff receive education and training on SAW/RTW policies and processes
- Intervene early when employees are exhibiting symptoms and signs of poor mental health
- Provide employees with SAW/RTW information and support, while ensuring employees know what is expected of them
- Foster a supportive work environment for employees

The role of the supervisor with employees who are off work:

- Maintain regular respectful communication with an employee who has mental health problems
- Work jointly with the employee to identify limitations and appropriate and meaningful modified or alternate work
- Participate in the SAW/RTW process as required by the organization's processes
- Communicate with SAW/RTW professionals
- Monitor and adjust the SAW/ RAW plans as necessary
- Follow up regularly with employees who have resumed their full work

Supervisor competencies and functions

Competencies	Functions
Ability to foster supportive and trusting relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide opportunities and an environment for employees and co-workers to feel safe to communicate about difficulties with their job duties or performance
Good observational and active listening skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify employees who may be in distress or having difficulty performing their usual job duties• Provide a safe environment for employees to communicate
Ability to be empathetic and respectful	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initiate early contact with employees off work and struggling at work• Maintain respectful contact while an employee is off work or back at work
Ability to work collaboratively	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work collaboratively with the employee towards a shared goal of recovery• Provide the employee with meaningful work accommodations, without burdening co-workers• Share appropriate information with co-workers to be supportive of the employee's SAW/RTW
Knowledge of internal and external mental health resources to support workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide information to employees who may need to access work resources such as EFAP programs, or community resources such as mental health services
Intimate knowledge of workplace jobs and duties	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use their knowledge of the work and job duties to assist with or plan suitable and meaningful work accommodations

Competencies

Functions

Introductory knowledge of mental health conditions and typical limitations for common mental conditions in the workplace

- Identify issues that may be causing mental distress in the workplace
- Help to match job demands with the worker's temporary functional limitations

Knowledge of relevant legal requirements

- Ensure work accommodations and communications are in compliance with relevant legal requirements (e.g., acts, regulations, and guidance relating to workers' compensation, employment standards, human rights, freedom of information and protection of privacy)

Ability to solve problems related to SAW/RTW plans

- Identify when employees are having difficulty with their job performance, and work collaboratively to identify factors that can be modified — this means giving the employee the opportunity to provide solutions first and having conversations to reach a compromise
- Monitor progress of SAW/RTW plans and work collaboratively to solve issues if they arise

Ability to facilitate temporary work accommodations

- Facilitate temporary accommodations, monitor progress, and revise plans as changes occur

Ability to negotiate and facilitate SAW/RTW opportunities in the workplace

- Facilitate early and respectful communications with the employee, other supervisors, and co-workers, and coordinate suitable and meaningful work accommodations