25 Tips for Returning to Work After a TBI
(Or Other Disability)

Many people define themselves by what they do for a living. I am a physician, writer, construction worker, therapist, etc. While this may not be the most psychologically healthy approach to self-identification, it is a fact of life. When an individual sustains a traumatic brain injury or other health-related, extended absence from work - time may not heal all wounds.

In fact, over 50% of people with a traumatic brain injury can’t return to work within one year of being injured and 20% with a “mild” TBI remain unemployed or are only sporadically employed.[1] For others with a disability or who have been injured on the job, only 70% are capable of returning to work within one year.[2] Injuries, illnesses and how individuals respond to them vary greatly – therefore, the following behavioral tips are designed to make returning to work an easier proposition. (While these tips are meant for people with a traumatic brain injury, they just as easily apply to anyone returning to work after an extended, health-related absence.)

1. **Start part-time to build your endurance.**
   Going from zero to forty hours a week can be extremely taxing for anyone – let alone someone with a brain injury or other health issue. Rather than exhausting yourself and exacerbating your injury, start working a few hours a day and scale up your hours as your health permits.

2. **Stick to a daily schedule.**
   Developing a routine and sticking to it helps you become accustomed to the new demands work places on your mind and body. This schedule should include three meals a day, 8 hours of sleep and 30 minutes of exercise every day.

3. **Drink non-caffeinated beverages to reduce feelings of anxiety.**
   Starting work after an extended absence can be quite stressful. Feelings of anxiety are par for the course. If you’re experiencing any anxiety, stay away from caffeine until you are accustomed to your new employment and daily schedule. Stay hydrated by drinking water – this will also keep potential headaches at bay.
4. **Use productivity apps on your smart phone.**
The right app can keep you on time and on target in numerous areas of your life. Some even function as your very own personal assistant. (See Top 12 Smart Phone Apps for People with a TBI at LifeSkillsVillage.com for recommendations.)

5. **Focus on one task at a time.**
When most people claim to be overwhelmed at work, the culprit is often multi-tasking.[3] This isn’t to say that nobody should multi-task – some people find it enhances their creativity – but for most, focusing on a single task will allow your brain to pay attention to every detail and you’ll do a better job.

6. **Take copious notes (details, procedures, dates, times, etc.).**
Following an extended, health-related absence – whether brain injury-related or otherwise – your brain will need time to adapt to your new setting and activities. While that adaptation is taking place behind the scenes, you might miss things happening right in front of you. Stay focused as much as possible and write everything down. This will help reinforce the details in your memory.

7. **Ask for clarification if you don’t understand an assignment.**
If your boss gives you a task but leaves out some key points (or you just don’t understand what s/he wants), asking for clarification is the best solution. It’s always better to do a job right the first time than to deliver an incorrect or incomplete project.

8. **Don’t be daunted by a large project. Break it down into manageable bite-sized jobs and prioritize them.**
Not only will this strategy help relieve the stress of a big project, but it will also make you feel more productive as you cross those bite-size jobs off your to-do list.

9. **Learn to be a flexible thinker.**
Another fact of life is that everything changes. This is especially true in the workplace. Whether a new supervisor alters your duties or a deadline is moved up, you should be flexible enough to roll with the punches. Easier said than done, but being “easy going” will make moving forward in your job a less challenging prospect.
10. **Always double-check your work.**
This is important for a multitude of reasons. The two most critical:
- You will hopefully catch any mistakes before handing off the project to your supervisor.
- You’ll gain confidence from knowing you’ve done everything possible to complete the task correctly.

11. **Welcome feedback from co-workers and supervisors. Offer yours.**
Whether you’re a president or a pizza-maker, we can ALL improve our performance with a little feedback. Positive and negative feedback can both be useful when you’re trying to do the best possible job. Remember, just like you, people are more responsive to feedback provided in a positive tone.

12. **Build in short breaks to account for fatigue (cognitive or otherwise).**
Everyone needs a breather now and again – especially people getting re-acquainted with the workplace. Some companies have nap rooms, some are near parks where you can imbibe fresh air – but every company has a break room. Taking five minutes every couple hours for a bottle of water and a “brain break” will reduce feelings of exhaustion later in the day and keep you hydrated too!

13. **Feeling overwhelmed? Ask for help.**
If there is more work on your plate than you think you can complete in the allotted time, let your supervisor know that you will require help. There is no shame in this – your supervisor (or most, anyway) would rather know to add staff to a project than miss a deadline. No one knows your capabilities better than you and no one can read your mind.

14. **Limit socializing with fellow employees while engaged in a task.**
Distraction has its place, but the workplace isn’t one of them. If you must socialize or gossip, wait for a break or until you’ve completed the immediate task at hand. Until you’re confident in your capabilities and are comfortable being back at work, do your best to stay focused on the work.

15. **Stop and think before making a decision – be pragmatic and don’t allow your emotions to cloud an issue.**
It’s all too easy to make a snap decision based on passing positive or negative emotions. Rather than react to a problematic situation immediately, make the
decision to step back. Take a breather. Then review your options from a less stressed perspective. Inevitably, you will make a better decision.

16. **Keep a positive attitude.**
Remember that your mood/attitude affects everyone around you – just as their moods affect you.

17. **Before complaining about a problem, try to resolve the issue yourself.**
An employee is always more valuable to an employer if s/he can solve an issue on their own rather than running for help every time something goes awry. Within reason and the scope of your job, attempt to solve problems on your own before bringing in a supervisor to iron out the issue.

18. **View mistakes as lessons and write them down to reinforce them in your mind.**
Everyone makes mistakes. Don’t beat yourself up when you do – try to learn and gain something positive from the mistake. If you have a memory deficit, it is even more vital to write those lessons down in a notebook to reinforce them.

19. **Organize and prioritize your thoughts before speaking to supervisors or co-workers.**
If necessary, write them down so you stay focused and on topic during the conversation.

20. **When giving your opinion on a subject, make sure you ask the opinions of others too.**
Everyone wants to be liked. That’s why soliciting the opinions of others and listening to them is as important as having an informed opinion of your own. This is relatively easy way to maintain mutual respect between you and your co-workers.

21. **If you MUST interrupt someone during a conversation or meeting, be polite.**
As a general rule, interrupting a speaker mid-sentence is considered bad form. If there are extenuating circumstances (for example, the speaker is making decisions based on outdated information and you have the update), simply say “Excuse me, but I think you’ll want to consider X, Y and Z.” When interrupting, always be polite, never rude or arrogant.
22. Do not discuss religion, politics or sex at work.
These three topics are legendary for creating disputes everywhere from the home and office to the General Assembly at the UN. Everyone has a right to an opinion and keeping yours to yourself at work will not harm you in any way. On the other hand, delving into one of these topics can cause impassioned arguments and, ultimately, a toxic work environment. Stay above the fray.

23. Even when you’re having a bad day, put on a “positive face.” This can help your attitude and those of your co-workers too.

The old saying, “Smile and the world smiles with you” is easily confirmed by smiling at one of your co-workers or even a random person on the street. Almost inevitably, they will smile back. Unfortunately, negativity is equally contagious. So if you’re not feeling up to snuff or something at work has raised your ire, try to keep it to yourself.

24. Don’t take the behavior of others personally.
When a co-worker is in a bad mood or blames you for something you didn’t do, chances are good that the real issue has nothing to do with you. Your co-worker is blowing off steam at your expense. Don’t take this behavior to heart – keep your positive attitude and, with any luck, your co-worker’s malaise won’t infect anyone else.

25. Take a walk or get some other form of exercise during the day.
There’s nothing like a lunchtime stroll to get your blood moving again. Research also shows that walking 20 – 30 minutes during lunch can boost your productivity.[4]

Reaching the “return to work” stage after an injury or an illness is a major accomplishment. It’s one of the final steps in returning your life to normal and regaining your independence. Success is very dependent on preparation - especially for people with a traumatic brain injury. If possible, utilize the services of a vocational rehab therapist or join a “work hardening” or work re-entry program to redevelop or hone the soft skills required for the workplace. Wherever you begin the work re-entry process, utilizing these tips can make the difference between failure and success.

Have you recently re-entered the workforce after a TBI or other health-related absence? If so, I would enjoy hearing what has worked for you…please share your experiences in the comments section below.
Thanks for reading! For more helpful information on traumatic brain injuries, please visit LifeSkillsVillage.com or call 833.TBI.HELP (833.824.4357)