

## Work

### What issues will you face when you go back to work?

Going to work during early recovery poses some new challenges for everyone. You may be grateful to have a job, or you may be discontent with your work situation and dread returning to it. Either way you are likely filled with anxious questions, such as

- Do my co-workers know I've been in treatment?
- Are my co-workers or superiors judging me for having the disease of addiction?
- What should I tell people if they ask where I've been?

Of course, your co-workers' attitudes will vary, and there's no way you can be certain how they'll respond to you until you interact with them at work. It's good to remember that in some places, there is still a stigma associated with addiction. You may want to be careful about how and to whom you share the fact that you have an addiction. Talk this over with your sponsor or others in recovery before you decide whom to tell at work.

Remember that many people have little or no experience with addiction as a disease. You may have kept your addiction a secret, and it may be a shock to your co-workers to learn where you've been and what you've been through. Be patient with them. They may or may not want to know about treatment. If your co-workers have substance use disorders or have been hurt by a person with a substance use disorder, they may be very defensive about hearing about abstinence or treatment.

It may also be difficult to go back into a workplace, particularly if it is stressful or if you used on the job to get through the day. It is very important that you carefully plan out how to handle stress without chemicals. Talk with your sponsor or others in recovery for support. Be aware that you may experience cravings and urges while on the job. Make a plan to handle triggers. These could threaten your recovery by leaving you at risk for a relapse or eventual return to use.

If you think the stress of returning to work might jeopardize your recovery, you may want to see if it is possible to go back to work on a reduced schedule.

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Remember to make your recovery your first priority. If a stressful job is going to put your recovery in jeopardy, you may want to rethink how important that job is to you.

### **How can you protect your recovery while facing the stress of going back to work?**

#### ***See a counselor***

If your employer offers an employee assistance program (EAP), you might want to take advantage of that opportunity to see an employee assistance counselor for free or at a reduced rate. A counselor can offer you guidance and support to deal with issues of returning to work during recovery. A human resources professional at your company can tell you if they offer an EAP and can give you details on benefits and contact information.

#### ***Go to meetings***

When you attend Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or other Twelve Step meetings, you may find other recovering people who are in the same situation—they are returning to work or have recently returned. Talk to people in your recovery support group and share your feelings and concerns with your sponsor. These people have more experience in recovery than you do. They can help you cope with fears, anxiety, and uncertainty as you return to the workplace.

#### ***Take a leap of faith***

Once you decide whom to tell, take a leap of faith and realize that some of your fears about co-workers' responses to your addiction may be more conjecture than reality. It's true that some of them may feel awkward and might not know what to say. It's helpful to remember that this type of fear and uncertainty bother most people in early recovery.

You may feel very vulnerable as you interact with people seeing you for the first time after treatment. Remember that you will gain their respect by your actions and not your words. If you show up for work clean and sober and on time, and you do your work with a good attitude and are approachable, others will take notice.

#### ***Avoid triggers***

Many people drink after work. Coming home after a hard day at work could be a trigger for you, a prime time for cravings to drink alcohol or use other drugs.

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Some days you may be so busy that you neglect your care of HALT (hungry, angry, lonely, tired), which could put you at risk for a relapse or eventual return to use. If you anticipate these triggers, you can create a relapse prevention plan to cope with them. Some people put a picture of their home, spouse, or children on the dashboard to remind them to drive straight home or drive directly to a meeting. Ask your sponsor and recovery support group to help you develop a relapse prevention plan for your specific triggers.

### **Should you tell co-workers about your treatment and recovery?**

In many cases you don't have to tell anyone. You may decide that very few people, those closest to you, should know. It may not seem necessary to tell people whom you have casual contact with. If you need help with your decision, talk to your sponsor or recovery support group. They can assess your personal work situation and offer experience and guidance. When you feel comfortable talking about your treatment and recovery, use your own judgment about whom to tell and when. Making these decisions and being at peace with your choices will help you develop a new sense of trust and confidence in yourself.

### **What if you don't have a job?**

If you are accustomed to a regular job and then lose it, whether you get fired, laid off, or downsized, it can leave a huge vacuum in your life. You may feel a loss of identity and perhaps strong feelings of depression, confusion, and resentment. Healing from this type of blow can take time. Finding a new job that fulfills you, makes you feel useful, and meets your basic financial needs will help. It may also help to tell your story to others who understand: supportive friends and family members, your sponsor, and your recovery support group. A counselor can offer valuable advice on how to approach looking for work and help you explore your goals.

The good news about not having a job is that you can focus more energy on your recovery and self-development, on creating a new life. You will need a plan, though. You will have eight hours a day that will need to be filled with scheduled activities. Once you have some experience in recovery and your sponsor agrees that you are ready, you might want to invest time in taking a few college courses to advance your career in a new, interesting direction. Whatever you do, don't sit around and wallow in resentment and blaming; take this time to work on you.