



Bouncing back

A career break can knock your confidence. Here's how to feel better about stepping back into work

If you've ever taken a period of time away from your job, you may have experienced a dip in confidence or rise in anxiety, on your first day back at work. A break of any length can shake your faith in your own capabilities or leave you feeling 'out of the loop', research has shown. It doesn't matter whether you've been off for a couple of weeks due to sickness, bereavement or holiday, or for a longer period to start a family, care for relatives, undergo medical treatment or travel. When the time comes to go back to work, it's perfectly normal to feel nervous or uncertain. You might be worried that things have changed in your absence, that you've missed important training sessions or updates, that favourite colleagues have left or new faces have started. Most workplaces are in constant flux, after all. But catching up doesn't have to knock your confidence.

Why do I doubt myself?

If you're unsure about going into the office after time out, you're not alone. A report commissioned by Vodafone UK found that a third of all people returning to work after a break experienced reduced confidence – and this was twice as prevalent among women, who may be more likely to take career breaks for maternity leave, family reasons or caring for elderly relatives.

Ross White, from Belfast, is a clinical psychologist and author of *The Tree That Bends: How a Flexible Mind Can Help You Thrive*.

He says it's important to remember that you are feeling worried or uncertain 'because you care'. He explains: 'The stakes are high. You likely place value on doing a good job and making a contribution with your work. There is also an element of jeopardy because you rely on the income that job provides, and the feelings of security and autonomy this engenders.'

Ross also explains that it can be human nature for the mind to race ahead with 'what ifs' and 'shoulds' – which can mean you spend the days or weeks before going back to work imagining negative outcomes that may never happen. 'Your mind is a great time traveller,' he says. 'You can spend a lot of time contemplating and catastrophising your return to work, which can exacerbate the impact of your anxiety.' Before you know it, you're worrying about new technologies or processes you may not understand, new ways of working to get to grips with and letting your boss, colleagues or clients down.

How does it impact my identity?

Struggling to jump back in, especially into a role where you previously felt capable, can shake your self-belief. When you're working, especially if you're a person who has placed a lot of importance on your career, your identity can be very much tied up with your job. Ross explains how self-determination theory maintains that humans have three basic psychological needs:





autonomy, relatedness and a sense of mastery. All of those can be impacted by a career break and subsequent return to work.

However, you can also use that feeling of identity to your advantage, to make going back to work easier. ‘An identity mapping exercise involves making a note of all your different identities,’ he says. ‘So, as well as your career identity, you might also be a parent, a son or daughter, a carer, a dog owner, a sports person or hobbyist. People are multifaceted and it’s important to remember that your professional identity is only a small part of who you are. People are not their professions.’

You can also boost your confidence over going back to work by thinking of the ways your time off has boosted and shaped your other identities, and how those self-developments can now help you bring additional skills to your role at work. If you’ve had time off to start a family, your empathy and ability to multitask will have become stronger. If you took a career break to travel, you will have developed other life skills, new understandings and perspectives. And if you’ve had time off due to illness, you may find the experience has made you more resilient, and given you a renewed sense of purpose.

How can I help myself?

When going back to work, Ross suggests focusing on what he calls ‘psychological flexibility’. He explains: ‘I tell people to think about adopting a “strong intention, light attachment” approach. This might mean thinking about what really matters to you in your job, such as being true to your values and a sense of purpose but understanding there might be different ways of doing things, and not being too attached to old ways of working that might have been updated. Psychological flexibility gives you a bit of mental wiggle room.’

In Ross’s book, he uses the analogy of a tree with strong roots, a flexible trunk that leans into the wind willingly, and a canopy that powers the tree and lends a sense of purpose. ‘The roots remain anchored, the trunk is willing and the canopy is empowered,’ he explains. ‘Drawing on these qualities can help us thrive as we navigate change.’

Amanda and Martine Braid, from Glasgow, had just founded their life-coaching business, The Braid Sisters, when they had to take five months away from work to care for their mother

who was terminally ill. In the wake of her death, they both felt they’d hit ‘rock bottom’ and weren’t sure how to restart their business. Amanda says: ‘We realised when we returned to work after caring for our mum that we weren’t coming back as the same women. That experience changed us – it strengthened us, softened us, stretched us and made us see life differently. It completely changed us.’ She explains that trying to step back into your ‘old life and old identity’ can feel hard because ‘you are not that person anymore’. She adds: ‘We focused on what we could do and rebuilt ourselves from the inside out.’

What is confidence?

Another way of tackling return-to-work anxiety is to think about what notions of confidence and competence really mean. ‘Confidence might just be the absence of doubt or anxiety,’ says Ross. ‘In the context of going back to work, it might be a case of allowing your feelings to be there and still committing to doing what matters to you. You can doubt and still do!’ He also explains that being willing – like that tree bending in the wind – can involve a frank examination of your emotions. ‘If you are worried about going back into the office, be curious about how that experience of worry manifests in your body,’ he advises. ‘Where in your body are you feeling this worry? If it had a colour, what would it look like? If it had a temperature, what would it be? When you face your fears head-on, you can also make choices about how you react to them that are aligned with your values.’

Amanda and Martine, authors of *Notes From Your Sisters: Helping You Rise Again One Season at a Time*, agree that rebuilding your confidence often isn’t about waiting until you are ready, but about allowing yourself to ‘feel fear, doubt and worry and still begin’. Martine adds: ‘Most people wait for the confidence or motivation before they feel ready – but you don’t have to feel ready. Confidence comes after you take the first step, not before.’ The sisters recommend ‘showing up for yourself with small, everyday positive choices, like a moment of gratitude, deep breaths when you feel overwhelmed, a walk in nature or speaking kindly to yourself in the mirror.’

Martine concludes: ‘Send a message to yourself that you matter and you can do this.’

ILLUSTRATIONS: KUBA FERENC

YOU’VE GOT THIS

Practical steps to returning with confidence

Speak up. Perhaps you’re worried that your boss or colleagues will think less of you if you voice your worries, but actually one of the worst things you can do is bottle it up. Arrange a meeting with your manager or a colleague that you trust and seek reassurance.

Ask for details. If there have been changes to working practices, technology or personnel, ask for information beforehand so you can be prepared. What will your new working day look like? Have new processes been implemented? What targets or clients are important now?

Access support. Many workplaces offer support for employees returning to work from a long absence, parental leave or illness, such as contact days to bring yourself up to speed, or reduced hours if your health needs have changed. If you have an HR department or union, they may be able to advise you.

Professional shadowing. In some hands-on roles, such as medical professions or jobs where you operate machinery, you may feel your core skills have got a little rusty. You might benefit from a period of shadowing or buddying with a colleague or trainer while you settle back into your working environment.

Extra training. Ask to be brought up to date on any professional training or upskilling you have missed during your absence and find out about new opportunities for professional development. If something has changed, remember that it’s okay to ask for help.

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Find out more about Ross White and sign up for a monthly ‘5 to Thrive’ newsletter at strive2thrive.co.uk. Follow Amanda and Martine Braid on Instagram @the_braid_sisters

