

Returning to Work Introduction



There are an estimated 25,500 new stroke events in Ontario each year¹ and approximately 25% of stroke survivors are people under the age of 65². Research indicates that return to work rates after stroke are as low as 7%³.

Employment is one of the most important social roles that a person fulfills and not working has negative impacts on a person's overall quality of life, health, finances, social isolation and self-efficacy^{4,5}. Stroke survivors and health care professionals need resources to help them navigate the process of returning to work after stroke. The Quality-Based Procedures: Clinical Handbook for Stroke (Acute and Postacute) (2016) recommends that "All patients who were previously employed should be assessed for and provided access to vocational counselling for assistance in returning to work."⁶

This Return to Work resource provides stroke survivors, family members and healthcare providers with assistance to navigate the process of returning to work including information on local and provincial resources. Included is an online self-assessment guide. The self-assessment can assist in determining your individual strengths and limitations and the results can then be used to help inform discussions with your health care provider with respect to your readiness to return to work.

Heidi, a stroke survivor living in southeast Ontario has experienced the return to work journey and shares her story below.

Dealing with a life-changing health issue is heavy. It completely changes your perspective, your priorities and your own capacity for a time, or permanently. The need to be fluid and willing to adjust and re-adjust is vital. The support from my direct supervisor was the main reason that I was able to return to work when I did. Optimally,

¹ Ontario Stroke Network. www.ontariostrokenetwork.ca

² Public Health Agency of Canada

³ Saeki S: Disability management after stroke: Its medical aspects for workplace accommodation. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 2000; 22: 578-582.

⁴ Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario: Canadian Stroke Best Practice Recommendations: Managing transitions of care following Stroke, Guidelines Update 2016

⁵ Vestling M, Tufvesson B, Iwarsson S: Indicators for return to work after stroke and the importance of work for subjective well-being and life satisfaction. *J Rehabil Med* 2003; 35:127-131.

⁶ Health Quality Ontario and Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (2016) Quality-Based Procedures: Clinical Handbook for Stroke (Acute and Postacute).

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having more time off would have been the best course of action to allow my body to heal without the stresses of attempting to reintegrate into the workplace, but financial constraints made it necessary for me to go back. I'm a single Mom and mine is the only source of income our household has. Working closely with my direct supervisor and coordinating with my family doctor, we were able to develop a schedule that would allow me to work mornings Monday and Tuesday, off on Wednesday to recuperate, and mornings on Thursday and Friday. After 2 months of this schedule, I returned to work full time. I fully credit my supervisor's ability to gauge my true capacity for handling the stimulation of working with my health needs. He fully recognized that in order to make this successful for everyone, it was vital to ensure a realistic return and not tip the scales to a situation where I had burn out from trying to do too much, too soon. I'm not sure that I can properly articulate how drastically important it was for me, mentally and emotionally, to return to some sense of 'normalcy' and resume my 'regular' life while continuing to recover from the stroke. I truly feel that this contributed to the level of cognition that I am blessed to return to; I'm very fortunate. Each day I come to work, I'm able to do so with a sense of pride knowing that I'm contributing to the organization's goals and doing my part. Had I not had the full support and genuine care and concern from my supervisor, my story may not have had such a positive context around work. I'm grateful that I was given the chance to recover and resume my duties and thankful that my supervisor not only allowed me the time to do this, he didn't give up on me – not once. That allowed ME to push forward and not give up on myself. For anyone facing a similar situation, I can honestly say it's all in who surrounds you and supports you. Find your tribe; treasure it! Recovery is constant. Expect the unexpected and be willing to do what works on that specific day (and this will always fluctuate!) and roll with it. Be kind and patient with yourself and now, a few years down the road, I'm happy to report it has all been well worth it!

As Heidi's supervisor, Joe also shares his experience in supporting a stroke survivor's return to work:

Heidi was the first return to work employee that I had ever needed to work with. Prior to her return, she had worked in another unit, so I did not really know her that well. I did know that Heidi was a highly productive employee, so I felt that it was important to re-invest in her as she worked her way back to full-time hours.

Returning to work, after an injury, is always a struggle to balance between the ideal of full restoration of health and the financial constraints that demand a quicker return to work. Heidi and I worked on a realistic timeframe and workload for her return. We closely monitored her physical and mental energy levels to ensure that Heidi was able to smoothly reintegrate back into her work routine. After a couple of months on a reduced schedule, Heidi successfully transitioned back to a full-time schedule.

I was very pleased with the positive outcome of Heidi's journey back to work. I attribute the success primarily to Heidi's effort, realistic goals, communication and monitoring, and the patience and flexibility of her co-workers.