

# WORKING WITH LONG COVID

Guide for line managers  
to support employees  
with long COVID

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 160,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

## Guide

# Working with long COVID: guide for line managers to support employees with long COVID

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# Introduction to the line manager support materials

Managers play a vital role in determining the health, wellbeing and engagement of their team. They also play an essential part in managing particular people management issues that arise in their team, such as bereavement, conflict, sickness absence and mental health problems, which can have a negative impact on employee health, wellbeing and engagement if not well managed.

CIPD research identified five key behavioural areas that are important for line managers to support the health, wellbeing and engagement of those who work for them:



Being open, fair and consistent



Handling conflict and people management issues



Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance



Building and sustaining relationships



Supporting development

A line manager's behaviour and the culture they create in their team is the biggest influence on an employee's work experience. Capability in these five behavioural areas, underpinned by an attitude of care, respect, compassion, wisdom and kindness, is vital for line managers to manage the health, wellbeing and engagement of their employees. Such capability will also provide the foundation for line managers to manage particular people management issues and will enable managers to take a positive approach, recognise employee needs in these situations and manage them in ways that are sensitive, supportive and inclusive.

The CIPD has created a range of support materials to help you adopt a management approach that supports good health, wellbeing and engagement in your team. Designed for anyone who manages people, the guidance and exercises are quick and easy to use. They can help you save time and get better results by managing people well – all of which is good for your own wellbeing as well as that of your team.

To build on these resources, the CIPD has also created a series of guides that aim to support managers in dealing with particular people management issues. Each of these guides provides practical information and advice relevant to that particular people management issue, as well as linking it to the approach covered in the support materials. The intention is that managers use the five key behavioural areas as the basis for managing all the issues, and draw on specific relevant behaviours to help with the particular issue in question. Look out for the icons to understand which of the behaviours is particularly relevant to the issues being discussed. You can then refer back to the exercises to develop these behaviours further.

## 1 Introduction to this guide

Supporting an employee with long COVID to return to and stay in work is important for their recovery, for your team and for your organisation. Employees are more likely to return to and stay in work when they are well supported by their line manager.

This guide is designed to help you, as a line manager, support and manage employees with long COVID in your team, drawing on the line manager behaviours identified by CIPD research as important to support team health, wellbeing and engagement. In particular, the key behavioural areas that will assist you in managing this issue are:



**Building and sustaining relationships**, including showing empathy, concern and consideration for all employees, taking an interest in them as individuals and offering opportunities for people to speak to you one-to-one. Having good relationships with all your team members is important for creating an open and inclusive environment where individuals feel comfortable to talk about their health issues.



**Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**, including giving advice and guidance if an employee needs it – for example, around the organisation's policies and support to help them manage their symptoms and adjustments that can be made to their work. This behavioural area also includes providing clarity about your own and the employee's roles and how you can work together to help them fulfil their job role.



**Being open, fair and consistent**, which will help you bring respect and openness, consistency, kindness and fairness to managing both the person with a health condition and the rest of the team, even when you are under pressure yourself. This also includes being positive and appreciative of team members.

**Exercises 1, 2, 4 and 5 in the [line manager support materials](#) offer advice on how to develop these behaviours.**

This guide has been developed by Affinity Health at Work, the University of Sheffield and the CIPD, and outlines practical recommendations developed from the CIPD [Working with long COVID](#) research. It draws on evidence and research with returning workers, line managers, occupational health, employment advisers, and rehabilitation professionals as well as HR professionals and the [Long Covid Support](#) group.

## 2 Why we need to support employees with long COVID

A growing number of people are experiencing ongoing symptoms from COVID-19 known as post-COVID syndrome or 'long COVID', which is a significant long-term health condition for some employees.

As a new, serious health condition, many people with long COVID face a period of great uncertainty as they wait for a diagnosis and an effective management plan. Many individuals often return to work too quickly. Consequently, their return to work is less likely to be sustainable and there are longer-term health risks. This has significant implications for sickness absence, return to work and ongoing work.

Having a long-term health condition like long COVID can have an impact on an individual's productivity at work, and their ability to stay in work. However, this impact can be lessened when work is designed and managed in a supportive and flexible way.

Supporting people's health and wellbeing is the right thing to do and part of ensuring that people feel safe and valued at work. If an employee is given the support they need to manage their long COVID symptoms, they are more likely to perform at their best and help to achieve the team's objectives.

### 3 What is long COVID?

Long COVID is defined by [NICE](#) as 'signs and symptoms that develop during or following an infection consistent with COVID-19 which continue for more than 12 weeks and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis'.

Commonly reported symptoms include:

- Fatigue
- Breathlessness
- Brain fog and poor concentration
- Short-term memory loss
- Slurred speech
- Chest pain
- Muscle and joint pain
- Headaches
- Sore throat
- Vertigo
- Hair loss and changes
- Digestive difficulties
- Autoimmune conditions
- Insomnia
- Heart rate changes
- Blood pressure changes
- Loss of taste
- Loss of smell
- Menstrual changes/early menopause
- Poor skin
- Depression
- Anxiety

Everyone's experience of long COVID is unique to them. Symptoms can be unpredictable and fluctuate over time, so your team member may have a period of recovery followed by a sudden relapse, sometimes with new or different symptoms. A relapse is most likely when people push themselves to perform to the level they did before they were ill. Long COVID symptoms can last for many months, and recovery can be very slow.

To find out more about long COVID, see our report [Working with Long COVID](#).

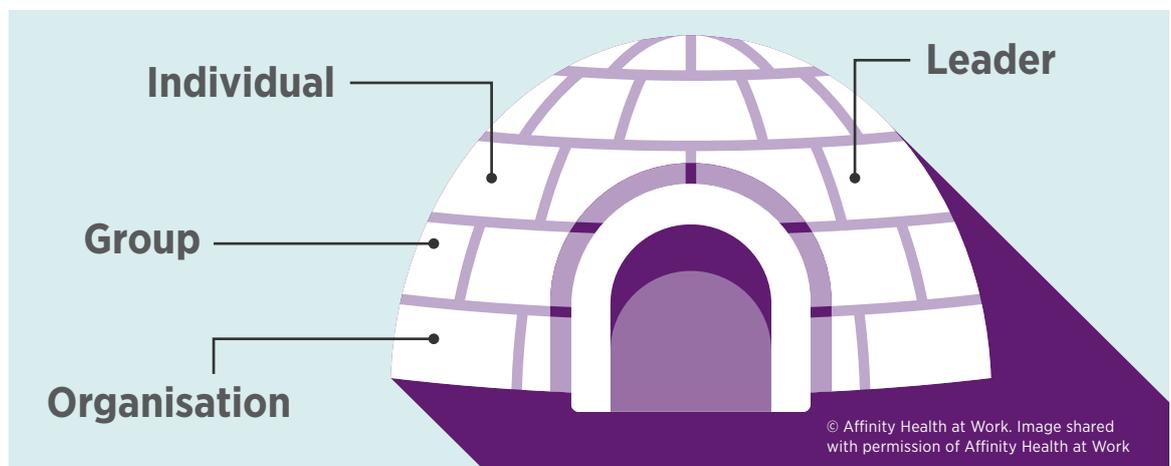


It's important when managing someone with an ongoing, fluctuating health condition to take a flexible, individualised and compassionate approach. This relates closely to the behavioural area **Building and sustaining relationships**. [Exercise 5](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.

## 4 Shared responsibility for supporting employees with long COVID

Everyone has a role to play in helping employees with long COVID to get support so they can thrive at work. The [IGLOO framework](#) for thriving at work, developed by the University of Sheffield and Affinity Health at Work, outlines the different resources at the individual level, the group level, the leader/line manager level and the organisational level that can help an employee when managing a long-term health condition such as long COVID.

### IGLOO framework for sustainable return to work



As a line manager you can help employees access the work adjustments and support that they need to manage their health and work safely and effectively. What you do and how you behave can affect:

- whether the employee feels able to take steps to manage their condition in work
- how early action is taken to help prevent symptoms worsening or recurring
- ultimately, whether someone is able to stay in work.

It's important to understand what your role is for supporting and managing people with a health condition such as long COVID. This also means maintaining clear boundaries. For example, you are there to provide support, but you are not a medical expert or counsellor. This means helping someone with the work aspects of the situation and ensuring that work is not part of the problem. It also means signposting to specialist sources of support, such as occupational health or an employee assistance programme if available.

Supporting someone with an ongoing health condition can be challenging for you as a manager. It is worth considering what specific support is available within your organisation, like expert advice from HR on people management policies or from occupational health on medical issues if available.

Debrief sessions with your own manager might also be helpful (with confidentiality and no specific case details) as well as regular wellbeing conversations and catch-ups.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Being open, fair and consistent**. Look at [Exercise 1](#) for advice on how to develop this area.



**Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. [Exercise 4](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.

## 5 How to manage and support someone with long COVID

### Understand your organisation's policies, procedures and support

Make sure you understand your organisation's framework for managing and supporting employees with a long-term health condition like long COVID. This includes health and people management policies, procedures for making workplace adjustments and managing sickness absence, and the support available such as occupational health or an employee assistance programme.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance**. Look at [Exercise 4](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

### Manage absence and return to work with compassion and flexibility

If your team member is returning to work after a period of absence, they are likely to be experiencing mixed feelings. They might be looking forward to returning to a sense of normality, but may also feel apprehensive about how they will manage their work and whether they will be able to maintain their health when back at work. Many people with long COVID need to return to work slowly, gradually building up their work hours and tasks, sometimes over a period of months.

Absence and return to work are often managed as a one-off event, but many employees with long COVID will need to take multiple absences as their condition fluctuates over time.

Taking a flexible, compassionate and individualised approach to sickness absence can help prevent unhealthy presenteeism (working when unwell).

The CIPD guide [\*Managing a Return to Work after Long-term Absence\*](#) sets out guiding principles to follow when navigating an effective return to work:

- 1 maintaining communication while absent
- 2 preparing for a return to work
- 3 supporting the employee during the immediate return
- 4 supporting the employee on an ongoing basis on return.

Employees are more likely to return to work safely and productively following a period of sickness absence if they are well supported during their absence and on their return. How you manage these situations will make a difference to whether the individual returns effectively and sustainably to work.

The behavioural areas that are particularly important in this context are:



**Building and sustaining relationships.** [Exercise 5](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.



**Being open, fair and consistent.** [Exercise 1](#) and [Exercise 2](#) in the line manager support materials offer advice on how to develop these behaviours.



**Providing knowledge, clarity and guidance.** [Exercise 4](#) in the line manager support materials offers advice on how to develop these behaviours.

### Discuss and implement helpful workplace adjustments

Some employees may require adjustments to their job role, work environment or work schedule to manage their long COVID symptoms while working. Ensuring employees have access to work adjustments can help them to continue to be productive at work. Remember that once aware of an employee's health or disability information, an employer also has a legal duty to consider making reasonable adjustments.

The type of adjustment(s) will differ depending on many factors, including the nature of the employee's job and their unique needs. As the symptoms of long COVID can be many and varied and also fluctuate over time, different work adjustments may be needed at different times.

It's important to recognise that you do not need to be an expert on long COVID – it's a new and complex condition that even health professionals are still learning about. It's more important to show good people management skills, including sensitivity, empathy and understanding.

Many people with a long-term health condition like long COVID learn over time about the most effective ways to manage their symptoms. This means the employee is often in the best position to know what adjustments or support can help them in their job. This could be particularly challenging for people with long COVID, however, because they could experience unpredictable or new symptoms.

You should discuss and agree any adjustments with the employee. CIPD research on [working with long COVID](#) identifies a number of work adjustments or conditions that have helped employees with long COVID to stay in work. These include:

- home or hybrid working
- flexible working times
- reduced or off-peak commuting time
- making work tasks physically, mentally or cognitively less demanding
- a wellbeing room for downtime during the working day
- a supportive organisational culture.

The behavioural area that will be particularly helpful in this context is:



**Being open, fair and consistent.** [Exercise 1](#) and [Exercise 2](#) in the line manager support materials offer advice on how to develop these behaviours.

### Have ongoing supportive and empathetic conversations

Many people find it challenging to tell others about their health. For someone with long COVID, this could be even more challenging because they may not be able to obtain a clear diagnosis or treatment pathway.

Everyone's experience of long COVID and potential symptoms is unique and individual to them. Symptoms can vary from mild to severe and some require changes to their job or working pattern. Conversations will help to identify what workplace support is needed to help the employee to manage their symptoms and carry on working.

A regular catch-up or one-to-one is an opportunity to continue to show your support for someone when they have returned to work. Remember, recovery from long COVID can be slow and unpredictable, and some people may need ongoing support. Ask simple, open and non-judgemental questions to give the employee ample opportunity to explain their health situation in their own words. Developing your capacity to build and sustain relationships, particularly around showing concern for people and interacting with them in a friendly way, can help with this.

Listening, treating people with respect and bringing kindness and consistency will help you provide this support, as will your capacity to build and sustain relationships, while skill at handling conflict and people management issues may also be needed.



This relates closely to the behaviour area **Being open, fair and consistent**. Look at [Exercise 1](#) for advice on how to develop this area.

The CIPD *People Managers' Guide to Mental Health* has useful tips and a conversation checklist that can be followed when having a conversation about someone's health and its impact on their work.

Other top tips for supporting and managing people with long COVID

- **Wellness action plans** are a simple but empowering tool for people to look after their wellbeing while working, and to help employers know how best to support them. They set out how someone feels and behaves when they are well, what they need to do to maintain their wellness, any signs or triggers known to impact health, and the preferred action or response if these signs are noticed by others. [Mind](#) has downloadable wellness action plans that can be readily adapted for any condition.
- **Take health into account when considering performance:** Approach performance conversations supportively and positively. Take any ongoing symptoms of long COVID fully into account where there is underperformance on the part of an individual. Identify any extra support the person may benefit from, such as more training or supervision.

CIPD research [working with long COVID](#) also identifies a number of recommendations. When people are unwell or have a health condition that requires ongoing management, there are certain things that can help them manage their health and work. These include:

- Individual actions
- Group actions by their colleagues
- Line manager actions
- actions taken by their Organisation
- help and support from Outside their organisation.

We call this the *IGLOO for working with long COVID*.

Use this checklist to see what you can do to help your team members with long COVID. Read the statements in the 'Do I...' column, answering 'yes', 'no' or 'sometimes' and marking your answer in the column provided.

## Checklist to support the IGLOO for working with long COVID

Actions for IGLOO level	Do I...? Yes, No, Sometimes	I need to... If you answered 'sometimes' or 'no', what else would be helpful?	I can make this happen by... Need help and advice? Ask friends and family, HR, occupational health, colleagues, charity/support groups, union reps and so on.
<b>Individual level</b>			
Do I... help my colleague to pace themselves and encourage them to rest when they need to?			
Do I... encourage my colleague to share with me (where they feel comfortable) how their symptoms impact their ability to complete certain work tasks?			
Do I... know where and how to signpost information about their <u>employment rights</u> in relation to their condition?			
<b>Group level</b>			
Do I... ensure that my team understand what long COVID is and how it might impact the employee at work?			
Do I... encourage my team to offer practical support, such as offering to help with challenging tasks?			
Do I... ensure that my team treat the employee in the same way as they did before, not as someone who is different or damaged?			
Do I... encourage our whole team to prioritise and talk openly about our health and wellbeing?			
<b>Line manager level</b>			
Do I... understand what long COVID is and how it can impact on the employee's health and work?			
Do I... take time to discuss and put in place individualised work adjustments for the employee to help them manage their health and work?			
Do I... discuss with the employee what they want me to share with others about their condition and how it impacts them at work?			
Do I... make myself available for regular check-ins with my employee to see how they are?			
<b>Organisational level</b>			
Do I... know what the absence management policy and processes are and who to ask if I need further advice on implementing the policy?			
Do I... know how to put in place flexible and creative work adjustments to support the employee's health and work?			
Do I... put in place support and adjustments based on the employee's symptoms, not their diagnosis (which may take some time)?			
Do I... work in a company where inclusion and wellbeing are prioritised? If not, could I share information on the benefits of <u>wellbeing at work</u> to start the conversation in my organisation?			
<b>Outside level</b>			
Do I... know where my team member can access support outside of the organisation, for example: access to occupational health, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, long COVID clinics, vocational support, psychological therapies, charities, for example the Long Covid Support group?			

You can also share the checklists for employees with long COVID and for colleagues to help your team in supporting those with long COVID.

## 6 Signpost to helpful services and resources

Make sure you signpost team members to helpful services and resources like occupational health and employee assistance programmes if you offer them, or point to external sources of support. You may also find some of these resources useful.

### COVID-19 and related resources

[NHS advice on long COVID](#)

[NHS: Your COVID Recovery](#)

[Society of Occupational Medicine COVID-19 return to work guide for recovering workers](#)

### Sickness absence management and return to work

[CIPD guide to managing a return after long-term absence](#)

#### Consider using the full range of support materials if you haven't already done so

If reading this guide has highlighted areas of people management capability that you would like to develop, why not use the full range of support materials?

You can get insight into your management capability across all five behavioural areas by completing the [quiz](#) and then using the [step-by-step guidance](#) to help you get feedback, identify strengths and areas to develop and plan the action you will take. There is also an [action plan sheet](#), which can be used to note down and track your actions; there is also a [quiz](#) to help you identify potential barriers and develop strategies to overcome them; and a series of [exercises](#) to provide ideas and inspiration relevant to each of the behavioural areas, some of which have already been highlighted above.





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