

John:

John is a 42 year old man who has worked for over 20 years for his current employer. He is in middle management and works in a highly skilled, technical role. He is responsible for training colleagues in the use of potentially dangerous equipment, therefore health and safety is paramount.

A close friend has recently taken their own life, there is a serious family illness in his immediate family and he experiences back pain himself which he manages with medication. He is a very private person and has not shared any of this with his employer.

His manager is a very straight-talking person who has high expectations from his team and who expects quick responses to queries. There is a weekly team meeting which can be quite stressful for all the team due to the manager's communication style. Although he has found it difficult, John has been able to cope with this level of stress over the four years he has been managed by this person. However, due to the bereavement and family illness he has found himself less able to cope with the demands. He experiences nightmares and his sleep pattern is disturbed which leaves him feeling tired and low during the day. He worries a lot about his family member with illness, who contacts him several times a day by telephone as they are struggling to cope at home alone. He believes colleagues have noticed the increased number of personal calls. He cannot answer the calls when he is delivering training and he also worries about this. He has been quiet and withdrawn at work as he fears that colleagues are being critical of him. He also believes that his mental capacity is what he describes as "dulled" as during the weekly meetings he finds it hard to remember facts quickly enough. This, he believes, makes him look incompetent and he begins to dread the meetings. He has noticed his manager becoming impatient as he struggles to recall and relay facts. He feels physically sick before and during team meetings and sweats profusely. He thinks this makes him look weak and unable to cope with the stresses of the job. He accepts he is not performing at his usual level but knows it is not to do with his ability to do the job, but because of the additional pressure he is under from personal issues. He has never had difficulty in the previous 20 years and has always had very good appraisals. He is afraid to talk to his manager about all of these matters because he thinks he will take the view that personal problems should be kept out of work.

He feels that he cannot go on, so he makes an appointment with his doctor who suggests a few weeks off work. He feels really bad about sending in a sick line citing depression and work-related stress as he knows this will not go down well with the manager, but he agrees and is initially relieved to be at home near his family and his sleeping improves a little. However, as the weeks pass, he starts to worry about going back to work, how he will be received by his manager and how his colleagues will feel about having to cover his work. He receives a letter from HR requesting his attendance at an Occupational Health (OH) appointment. He knows this is probably standard procedure, but the thought of it makes him feel sick and weak and his sleeping again begins to deteriorate. He realises that he needs to get back to work, he cannot afford to lose his job but he doesn't know how he will cope being back in the office as he will be going back to the same situation.

John almost doesn't make it to the OH appointment. He feels so ill and has not slept properly in days but with the help of his partner he attends. The OH doctor is very sympathetic and understanding. She gives John as much time as he needs, does not rush him and assures him that no information will be divulged to his employer without his permission. At last, John tells his story. It was difficult opening up but also beneficial to get it off his chest. He is so relieved when the doctor assures him that this is not by any means an unusual experience within the workforce and explains that she can advise his employer on some ways to help make the job easier. She suggests speaking to the HR officer to discuss reasonable adjustments in order to get back to work as soon as possible because John feels unable to speak directly to his manager. John has never heard of reasonable adjustments. For the first time in months, John sees a small light at the end of the tunnel.

John feels too nervous to ring the HR officer so he emails to ask about reasonable adjustments and what help he might get to get back to work. The HR officer replies to say that he would be happy to talk to him in person or he can email if would prefer this. The HR officer has seen the OH report and believes that he can get support for John. John agrees to an appointment. He is relieved that the HR office is nowhere near his own workplace so he won't have to face his manager or colleagues. The HR officer is very supportive. Together they make a list of adjustments that would help John get back to work and feel happier in his workplace.

These include:

- Explaining to the manager that he is having some sleep problems and pressure from his personal life that is affecting his energy, mood and concentration but that he wants to get back to where he was before this difficult episode in his life
- Highlighting that he finds it difficult to respond to questions as quickly as he would like to at the weekly team meetings so if he could have a list of questions in advance he would make sure to have all the information needed
- A phased return over four weeks to build up his stamina

John already feels a little better and his sleep pattern is improving. He has also shared more with his partner about the personal calls at work and his close family agrees that someone else can be the main contact person during working hours. They hadn't even realised this was happening. They purchase an emergency alarm for the ill family member and John is one of the contacts on it so he knows that if it something urgent he and a number of others will be contacted.

John's manager emails him to say that he is happy with his requests and asks if it would be OK to meet up before he comes back or to have a phone call. John agrees to this, although feels a lot of anxiety about the meeting. His manager assures him that they value his work and want to support him in any way. He knows he can be a bit direct at times as he too is under pressure but he assures John that this is not anything personal about him. He tells him to come and talk to him at any time if there is anything he needs.

John returns to work, and although it is still quite stressful, he is much better at coping and he is determined not to bottle up his concerns in future. He also attends counselling weekly for three months in the evening and finds this very useful.