

**Maria:**

Maria works in a technical role for a private sector company where timescales are demanding and the environment is dynamic and challenging. She is a highly skilled employee and her role is very specific to the industry she works in. She believes her skills would not lend themselves to many other local companies, so she is very concerned about keeping her job.

Maria has a history of depression. She looks after her mental health by maintaining a healthy lifestyle including diet, exercise and rest. However, every two/three months, particularly following a stressful work schedule, she will begin to feel her mood dip and experience lower energy and resilience. She is afraid to tell her employer so she struggles on until eventually she feels she cannot cope any longer. Her doctor signs her off work for two weeks, however she feels so low and exhausted that she does not return to work for several weeks. On her return to work, her workload is as high and unrelenting as ever. In addition, she is afraid of receiving a warning for her absence and this, in turn, makes her feel anxious and affects her sleep. She decides to take a three-week holiday to recuperate and finds this very useful. This pattern repeats itself over a two-year period and she knows that at some point the organisation will no longer ignore her high level of sick absence. As well as that, she is aware that it is an unsatisfactory way for her to live, with no light at the end of the tunnel and is unhappy that her holiday leave is used to recuperate rather than for travel and other experiences. Through working with her therapist, she identifies a way forward for herself but is very nervous about how her employer will react.

Maria contacts a disability organisation that her therapist signposts her to. It offers support and advice which she finds very helpful. Together with a support worker, she meets with her manager and reveals her fears and struggles. Her manager has had disability awareness training and, with guidance from HR, accepts that Maria is a disabled person and that the reasonable duty applies. HR organises for an Occupation Health (OH) assessment to provide suggestions for adjustments and to support Maria's request. She has identified that she wants to stay in her job, that although it does cause her stress and fatigue, she values it greatly and worked hard to get the skills and qualifications need for her chosen career. She believes that, in order to help her cope with the work levels, which she accepts cannot be changed significantly, she needs a short break from work when she feels work-related stress has begun to affect her mental health. She hopes this would give her the chance to recuperate and build up her resilience before it becomes a crisis. She cannot exactly predict the exact pattern, but perhaps two or three days every four to six weeks would be sufficient. Maria is surprised at how supportive her manager is, and this is supported by the HR and OH personnel.

The organisation trials this strategy and Maria has on average two days' sick leave per month, a huge reduction on her previous record. Her team believe they can cope with this as there are no longer any lengthy periods of sick leave, and she has been reassured that it will not affect her job in any way. She is so pleased by the positive outcome that she approaches HR and asks if she could speak at any upcoming equality training to highlight the great support she received and to encourage others to ask for help instead of struggling on for years as she did. She is extremely nervous about telling her story, which is a very personal one, but she

strongly believes that there needs to be a better culture in the organisation where employees are not afraid to discuss their mental health and ask for adjustments and feels that sharing her experiences would contribute to this. Her presentation is well received by managers and colleagues and she agrees to be featured in her company's in-house magazine.