



**Trinity College Dublin**  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin

# Navigating a Return to Work After Cancer

Living Well With and Beyond Cancer Conference 2021

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# Overview

- Cancer and Employment in Ireland
- Employment Rights and Entitlements
- Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue at Work
- Phased Return to Work
- Managing Cognitive Changes at Work
- Ergonomics – Organising your Workspace
- Assessing Readiness to Return to Work



# Returning to Employment following a Diagnosis of Cancer – February 2021

Average length of time off work: 40 weeks (range 0-240

weeks)

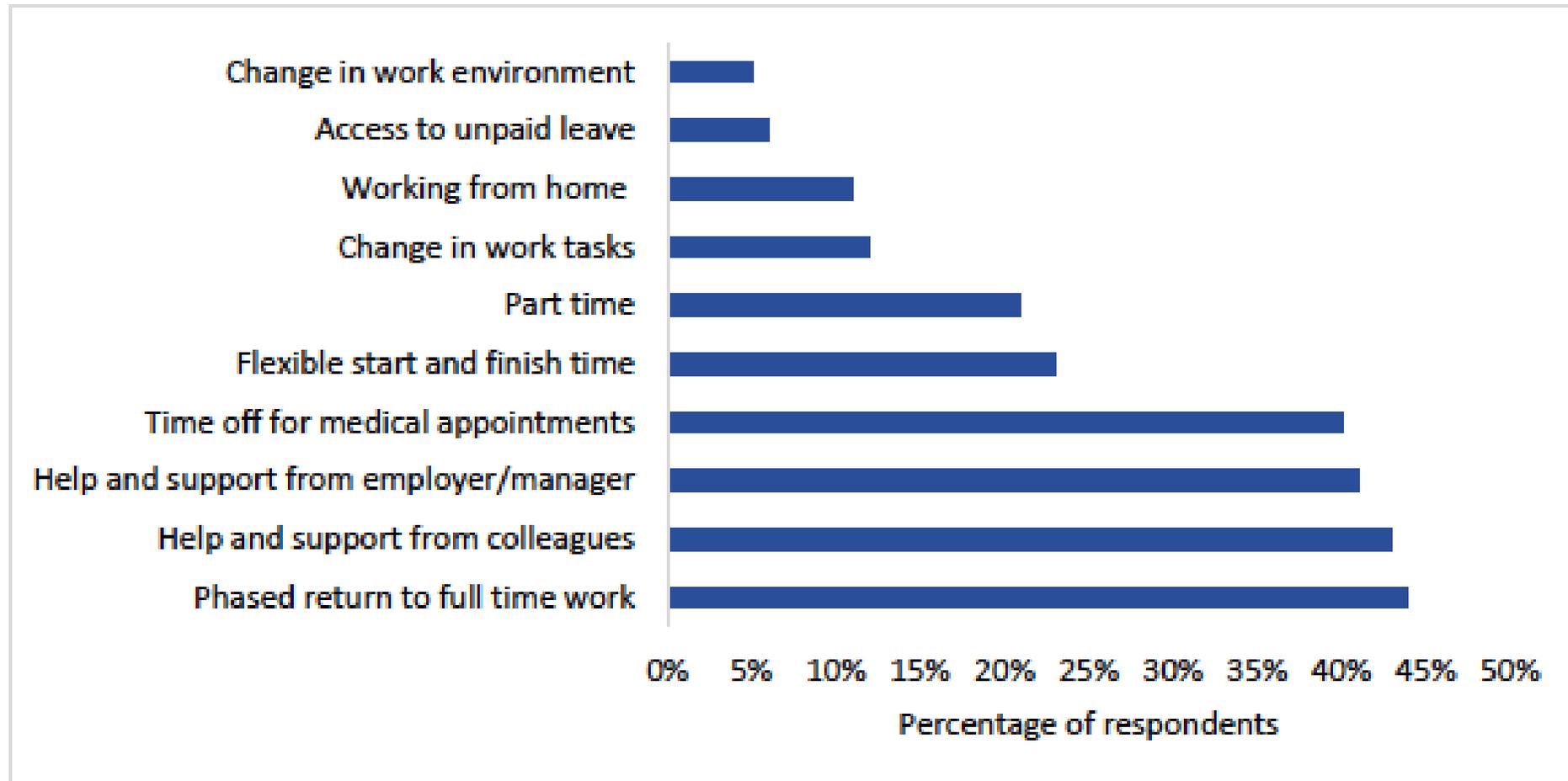
Can vary depending on many factors including cancer site and treatment.

## Main reasons to return to work:

- 38% Financial
- 28% A sense of 'normality'
- 8% Work important to them
- 3% Pressure from employer



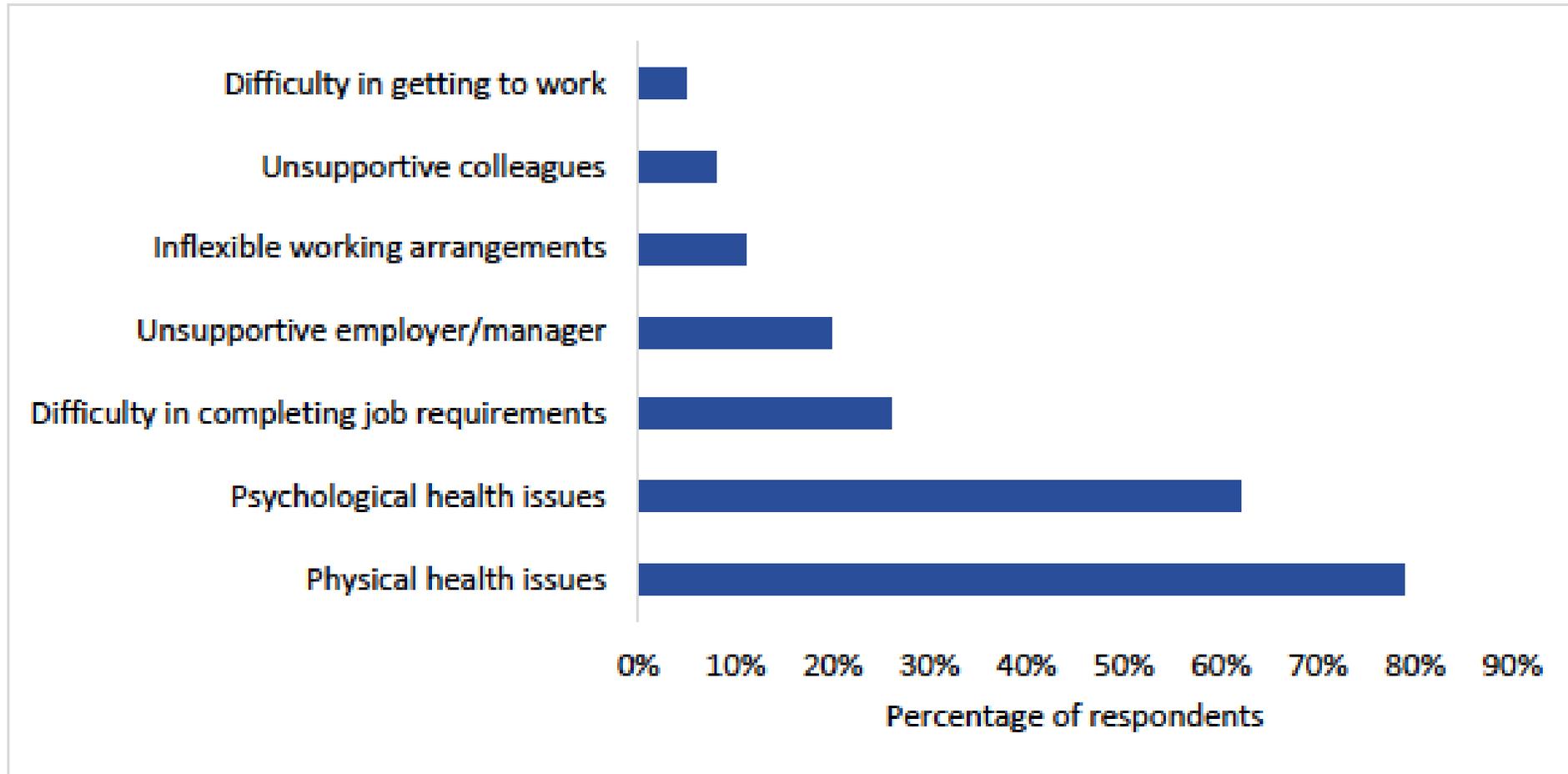
# What can help a Return to Work



*Source:* Authors' analysis of the 'Returning to Work' questionnaire.

*Note:* N = 312. The percentages are based on the weighted data.

# What can challenge a Return to Work



Source: Authors' analysis of the 'Returning to Work' questionnaire.

Note: N = 139. The percentages are based on the weighted data.

# Employment Rights and Entitlements

# Disability

*"A substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the Irish State or to participate in social or cultural life in the Irish State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment"*  
- The Disability Act, 2005

Anyone living with or beyond cancer can be considered to have a disability under Irish law, even if they no longer experience any physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual restriction.



# Reasonable Accommodations

*‘A change or modification to the tasks and/or structure of a job or workplace, which enables employees with a disability to complete the job and enjoy equal opportunities’ (Citizen’s Information, 2021)*

However, under EU law, employers are not obliged to provide special treatment or facilities if the cost of doing so is excessive or disproportionate

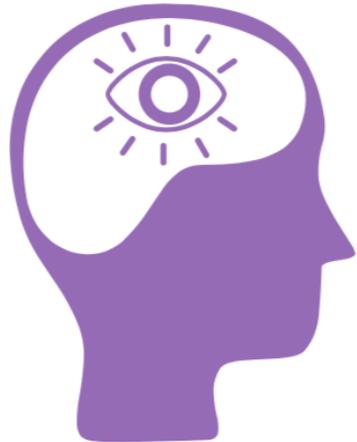


# Reasonable Accommodations



# Reasonable Accommodations

“And in terms of reasonable accommodations...I'd tend to think about someone who had an injury or in a wheelchair. I don't even know how I would consider it in terms of my situation.” (P28)

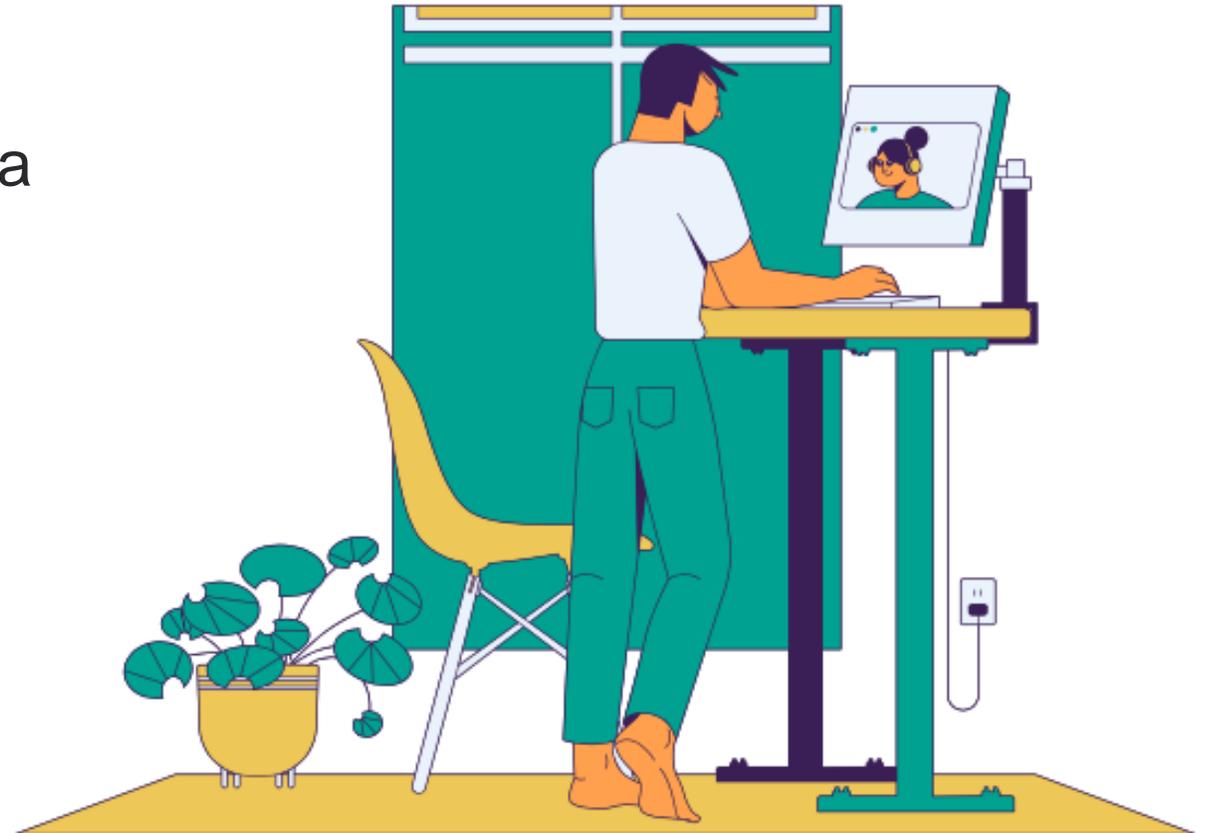


“I think some employees might think 'reasonable accommodations' and they think disability and when they think 'disability' they think visual impairment or a physical wheelchair user rather than coming back from breast cancer or anything like that.” (P29)

# Private Sector: Grant called Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant (WEAG).

- Assistance for employers, employees and self-employed who need to adapt the workplace or purchase specialised equipment for staff with a disability.
- Max grant: €6,350 (Citizen's Information, 2021)

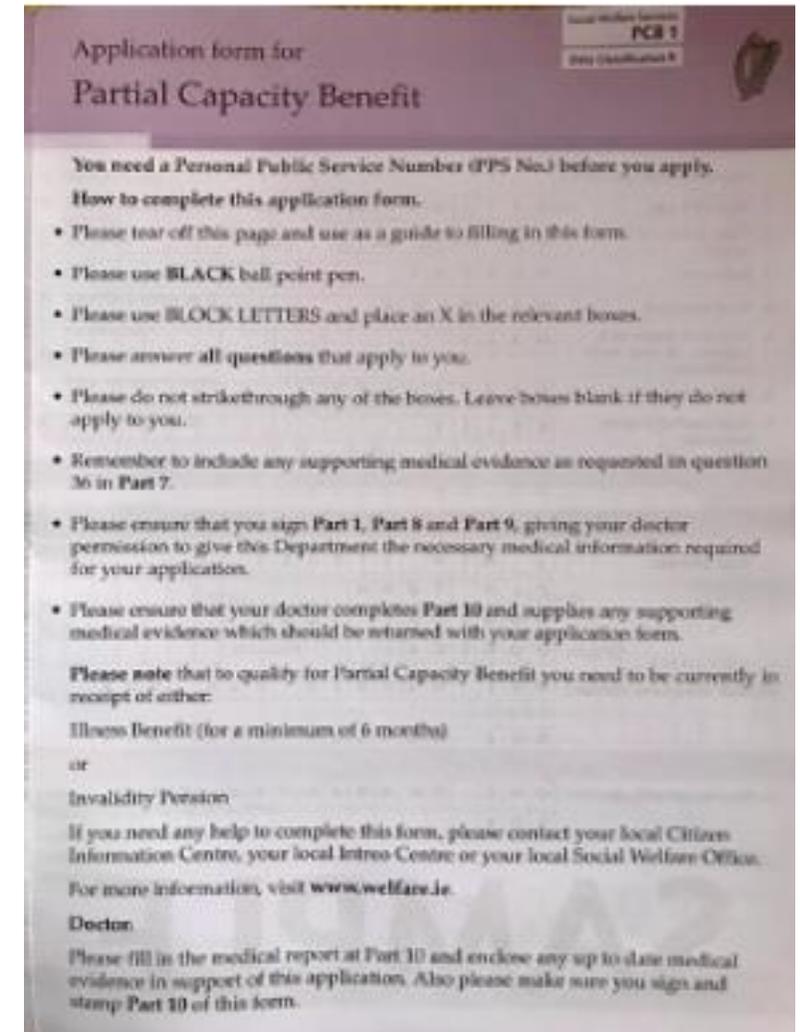
**Public Sector:** Employers must make assistive technology, adaptive equipment and facilities, aids and appliances available via their own resources.



# Partial Capacity Benefit

Social welfare scheme that allows you to return to work (if you have reduced capacity to work) and continue to receive a payment from the DEASP. To receive this you need to:

- Have been claiming Illness Benefit (> six months) or Invalidity Pension
- Have your restriction on capacity to work assessed. It needs to fall under moderate, severe or profound. Mild does not qualify.
- You **must** receive written approval by DEASP and doctor **before** returning to work to claim. No restrictions on earnings or hours.



Application form for  
Partial Capacity Benefit

You need a Personal Public Service Number (PPS No.) before you apply.

How to complete this application form:

- Please tear off this page and use as a guide to filling in this form.
- Please use **BLACK** ball point pen.
- Please use **BLOCK LETTERS** and place an X in the relevant boxes.
- Please answer **all** questions that apply to you.
- Please do not strikethrough any of the boxes. Leave boxes blank if they do not apply to you.
- Remember to include any supporting medical evidence as requested in question 36 in Part 7.
- Please ensure that you sign Part 1, Part 8 and Part 9, giving your doctor permission to give this Department the necessary medical information required for your application.
- Please ensure that your doctor completes Part 10 and supplies any supporting medical evidence which should be returned with your application form.

Please note that to qualify for Partial Capacity Benefit you need to be currently in receipt of either:

Illness Benefit (for a minimum of 6 months)

or

Invalidity Pension

If you need any help to complete this form, please contact your local Citizens Information Centre, your local Intreo Centre or your local Social Welfare Office.

For more information, visit [www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie).

Doctor

Please fill in the medical report at Part 10 and enclose any up to date medical evidence in support of this application. Also please make sure you sign and stamp Part 10 of this form.

# Partial Capacity Benefit

<b>Medical Assessment</b>	<b>Person previously getting Illness Benefit at the maximum personal rate €203 (from 25 March 2019)</b>	<b>Person aged under 66 and previously getting Invalidity Pension at the maximum personal rate €208.50 (from 28 March 2019)</b>
Moderate	€101.50	€104.25
Severe	€152.25	€156.38
Profound	€203	€208.50

# Paid Sick Leave – Am I entitled to it?

**Short answer is no.**



In Ireland, employer is not obliged to provide payment during sick leave

However

Some employers do offer it and this will be outlined in your contract. Check your contract to see:

- (i) If you are entitled to sick leave
- (ii) If so, is there a cap on time in which you can receive it?
- (iii) Is there a % of your pay that you would receive? Does it decrease over time?

# Managing Cancer-Related Fatigue in Work: The 4 Ps of Energy Management

# Cancer-Related Fatigue and the 4 Ps

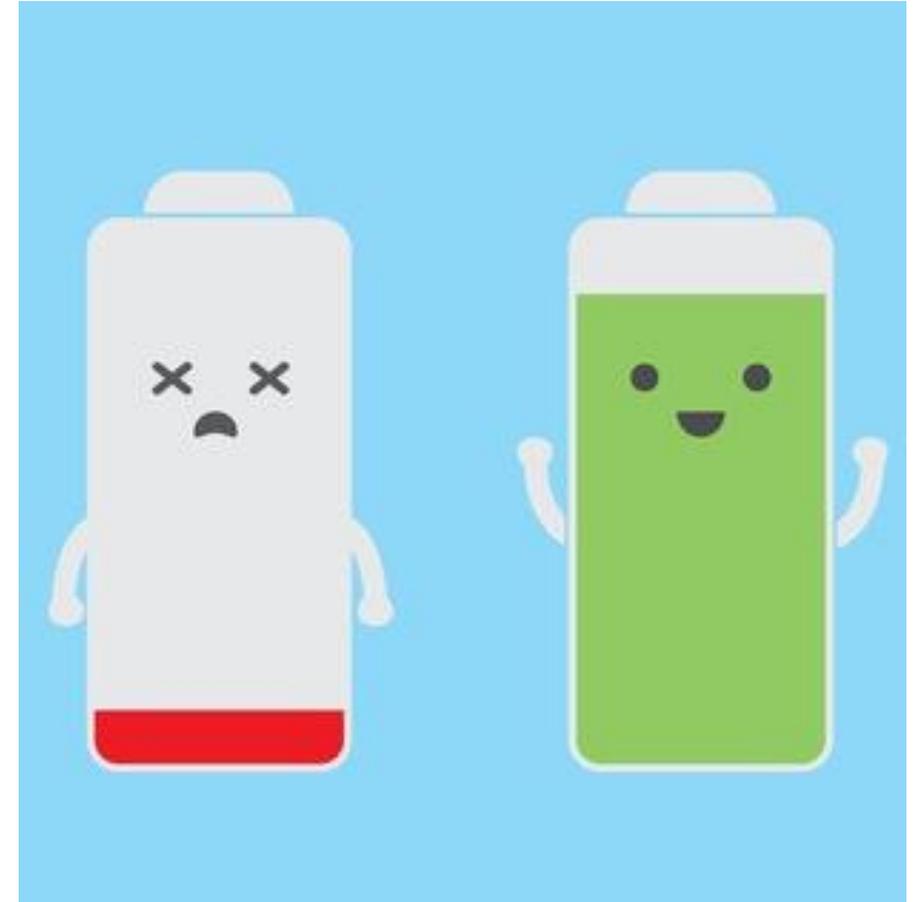
86% experience cancer-related fatigue

Different from regular fatigue

- Can be physical or mental

## 4 Ps of Energy Management

- Planning
- Prioritising
- Pacing
- Posture/Position



# Planning using the Traffic Light System

**RED:** Heavy, energy-draining tasks e.g., presenting to colleagues, attending an interactive training course, managing the tills in a busy retail store

**AMBER:** Medium level tasks e.g., Attending a short meeting, writing a short report, commuting the work (depends on commute!)

**GREEN:** Lighter tasks e.g., making a phone-call or checking emails.



# Planning using the Traffic Light System

*Plan to alternate heavy & light tasks. For example, you have an important meeting scheduled at work. Before and after, do lighter jobs such as checking your emails or writing quick notes.*

- Know you'll have a very busy day at work? Plan to do very little the next day.
- Planning your work day (if able)? Switch between physical & cognitive tasks.
- Plan the most difficult activity when you know you'll have most energy.
- Assemble necessary items before starting a task.



# Prioritising and Pacing

## Prioritising:

- Do I *need* to do this today? Can it be done tomorrow?
- Begin with most important task first.
- Do I have to do this? Can I delegate?

## Pacing:

- Add frequent rest breaks between activities.
- Stop before you become over tired.
- Break up larger tasks into smaller segments.
- Don't fight fatigue. Monitor energy levels.



# Posture / Position

**Did you know?** You save ~25% energy by completing a task in sitting vs. standing.

- Poor posture consumes more energy - Maintain an upright and symmetrical posture.
- Support elbows and forearms on a firm surface while you work e.g. typing at a computer, making a phone-call.
- Slide, rather than lift objects.
- Avoid excessive bending , reaching, twisting and stretching



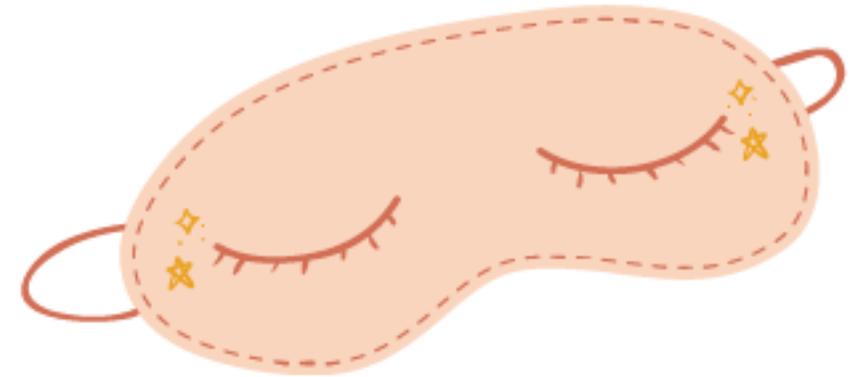
# Mental Fatigue

Reflect: When you're 'resting', are you really resting?

Some ideas to switch off:

- Meditation Apps
- Guided Imagery
- Box Breathing

Busy office/workspace? Request desk in quieter spot if able, try noise cancelling headphones, use breaks wisely.



# Phased Return to Work



1. 'Review' date not decision date



2. Staircase Approach



3. Working non-consecutive days

## The 3 Principles of the Phased Return



## Review Date not Decision Date

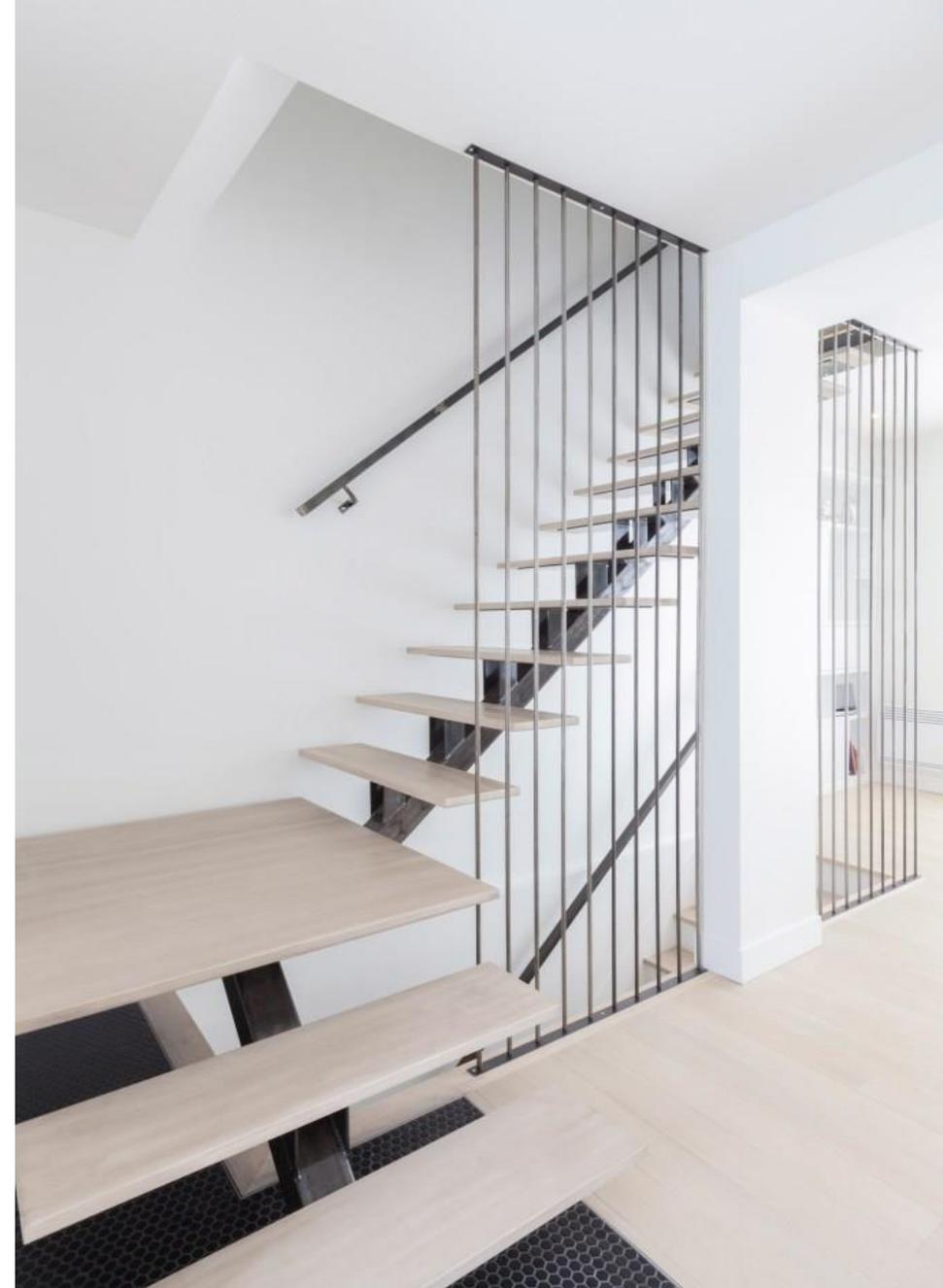
- Avoid setting formal goal-posts
- This can ↑ pressure on you
- Consider your language. Instead of :  
*“I’ll be back to work in three months”*



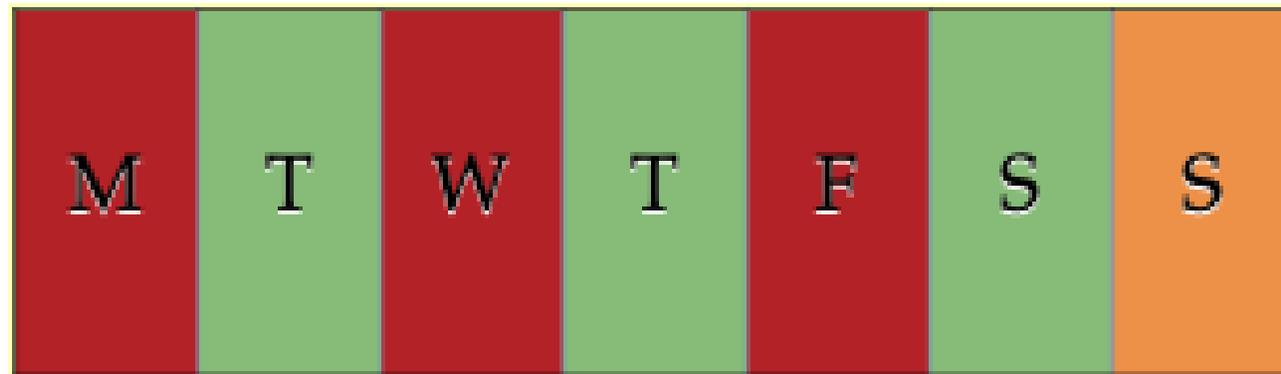
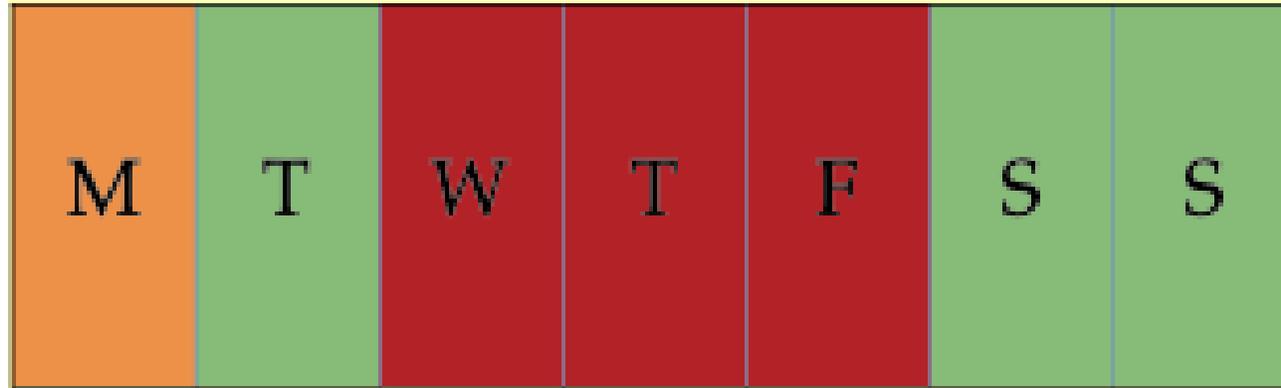
*“I have a medical certificate for another three months, closer to the time I will be in touch to review the situation following discussion with my medical team”*

# Stair case approach

- A phased return doesn't have to mean a consistent increase/incline in hours over time
- When you make an increase in hours – is it sustainable?
- If feel comfortable and not too fatigue, gentle increase again.
- An increase doesn't have to be full day. Consider half day increments too.



# Consider working Non-Consecutive Days



# Communicating with your Employer and Colleagues

# First things first...

- It is **highly** recommended you keep in touch with your employer while you are out.
- **Set expectations** – too much contact from employers can be pressurising. Agree on your terms the level of contact e.g., an email every month.
- Keep a link with close colleagues etc.
- No contact with employer and/or colleagues can ↑ anxiety prior to returning.



# Strategies when approaching your Employer

## Before the Meeting:

- Make a bullet point list of all the items you want to cover
- Practicing the conversation to someone or out loud.
- Send an email agenda – no surprises!

## During:

- Use leaflets to supplement your conversation.
- Take brief notes to recall what was agreed on.

## After:

- Send a meeting summary – ideally by email (in writing!)



# Managing Cognitive Changes at Work

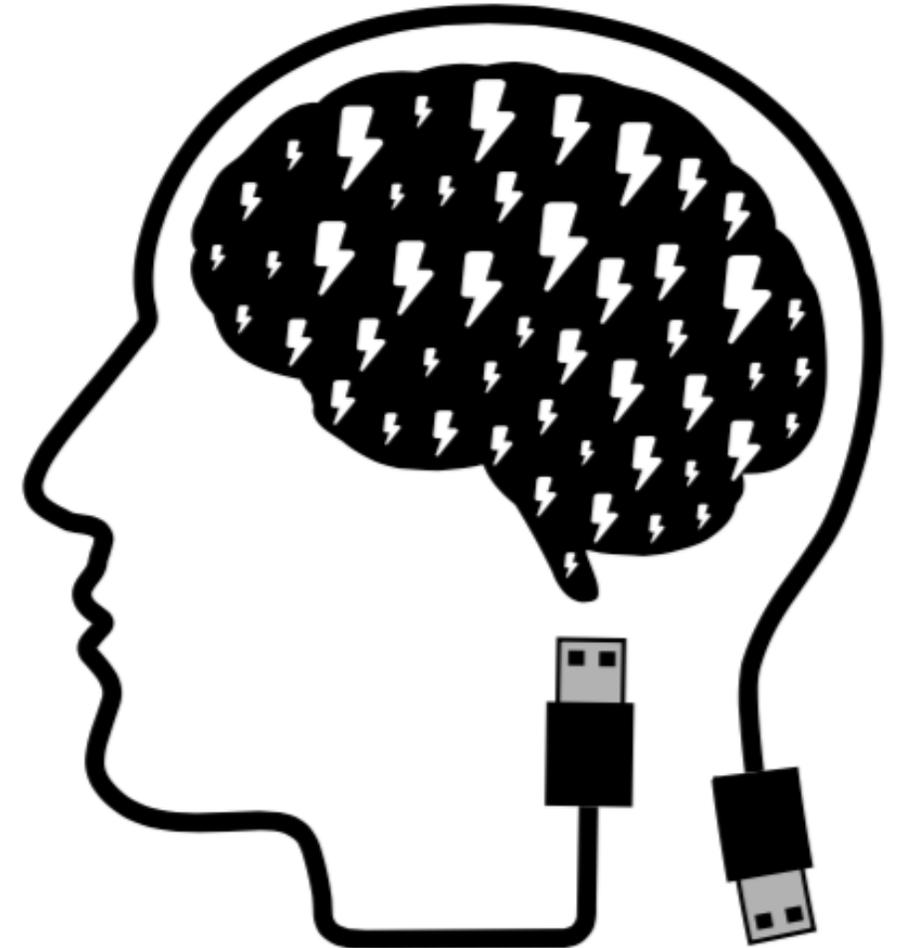
# Managing Cognitive Changes at Work

Brain fog ++ common

- Is this being further compounded by fatigue or anxiety?

Common challenges associated with work:

- Remembering colleagues' names
- Concentrating for long periods of time
- Remembering tasks to do



# Strategies to recall colleagues' names

**Online:** Zoom meeting? Ask attendees to update names on screen.

**Repetition:** When you meet someone for the first time and they introduce themselves to you, repeat their name  
e.g. 'Hi I'm Anne', 'Ah Anne, it's nice to meet you'.

**Association:** When you learn someone's name, try to think of something/someone that you associate with that name  
e.g. 'Hi, I'm John', 'Hi John, it's nice to meet you. I'll remember that now - I've two cousins called John!'

**First letter cues:** A-Z

**Ask a colleague:** Or ask the person themselves!

# Strategies to recall work tasks

**Notebook:** Keep a notebook and take bullet point notes

**Diary/Calendar:** Keep a diary/calendar and take notes of any upcoming meetings. Meeting gets cancelled? Strike it off your diary there and then.

**Set Alarms** - Some email providers e.g. Outlook offer reminders of meetings 15 minutes prior. Or use your phone.

**Dictaphone:** Keep on hand to record quick bullet point notes.

**Consistency:** Where able, keeping meetings/events on at a consistent time e.g. the first Monday of every month at 4pm.



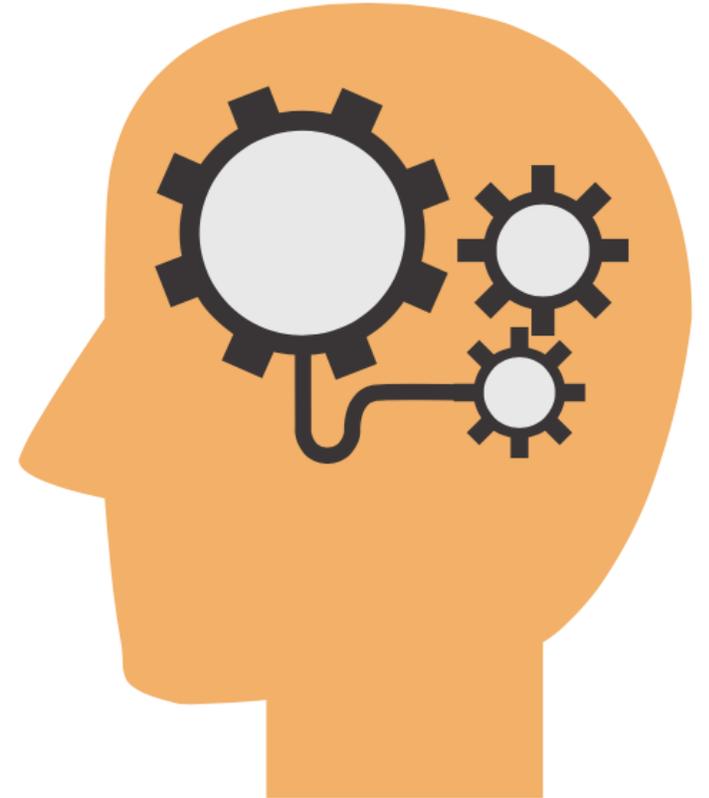
# Strategies to enhance concentration at work

**Reduce background noise:** Try noise cancelling headphones, earplugs, move to a quieter workspace if able.

**Reduce visual distractions** e.g. partitions, windows

**Pomodoro technique:** 25 minutes focused work, 5 minute break.

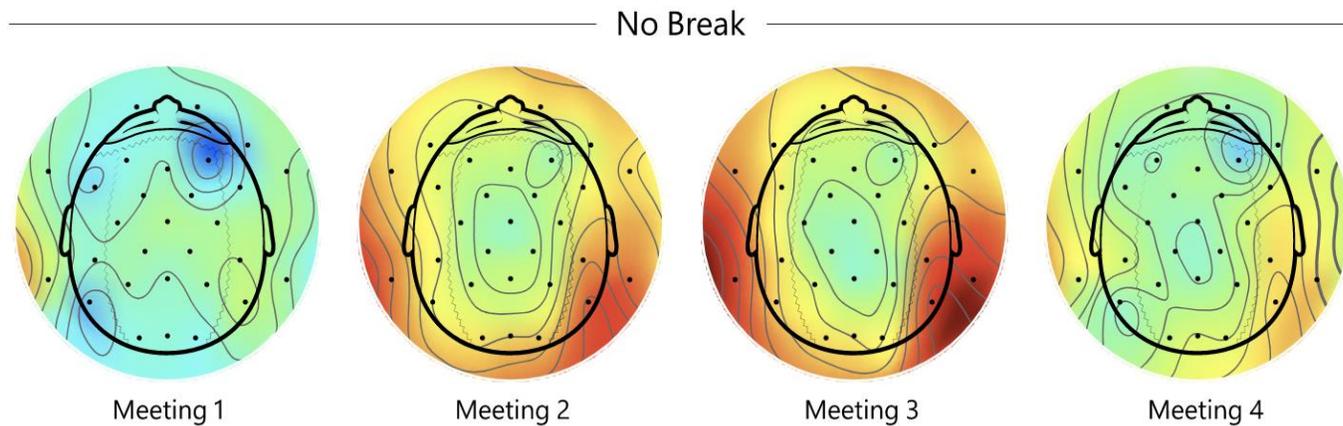
Remember mental fatigue? If you've been spending ++ time on a cognitively heavy task, take a break.



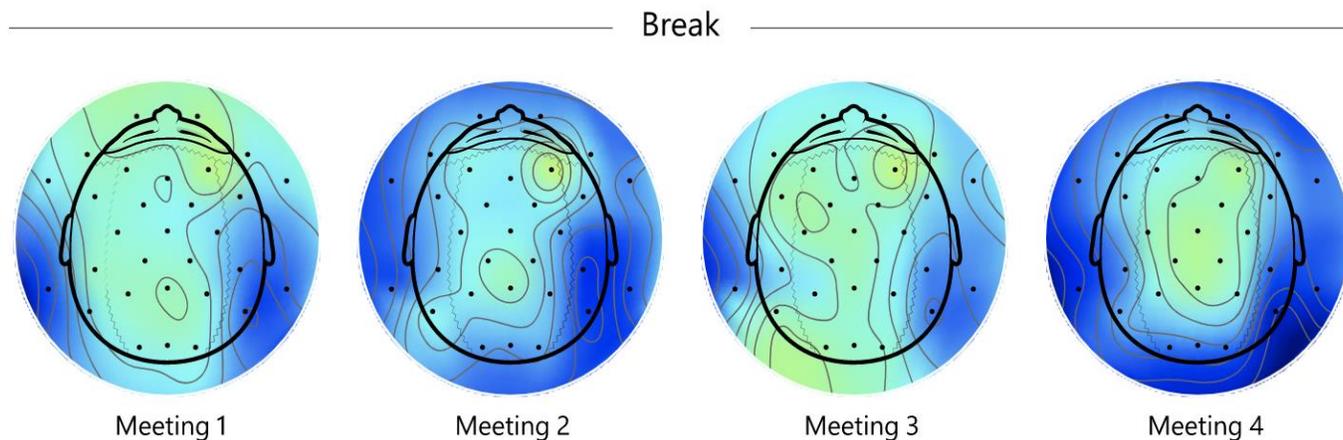
# Managing Cognitive Changes at Work

## Take breaks from the screen

4 x 30 minute online meetings back-to-back with **no** break



4 x 30 minute online meetings with **10** minutes meditation in between each meeting

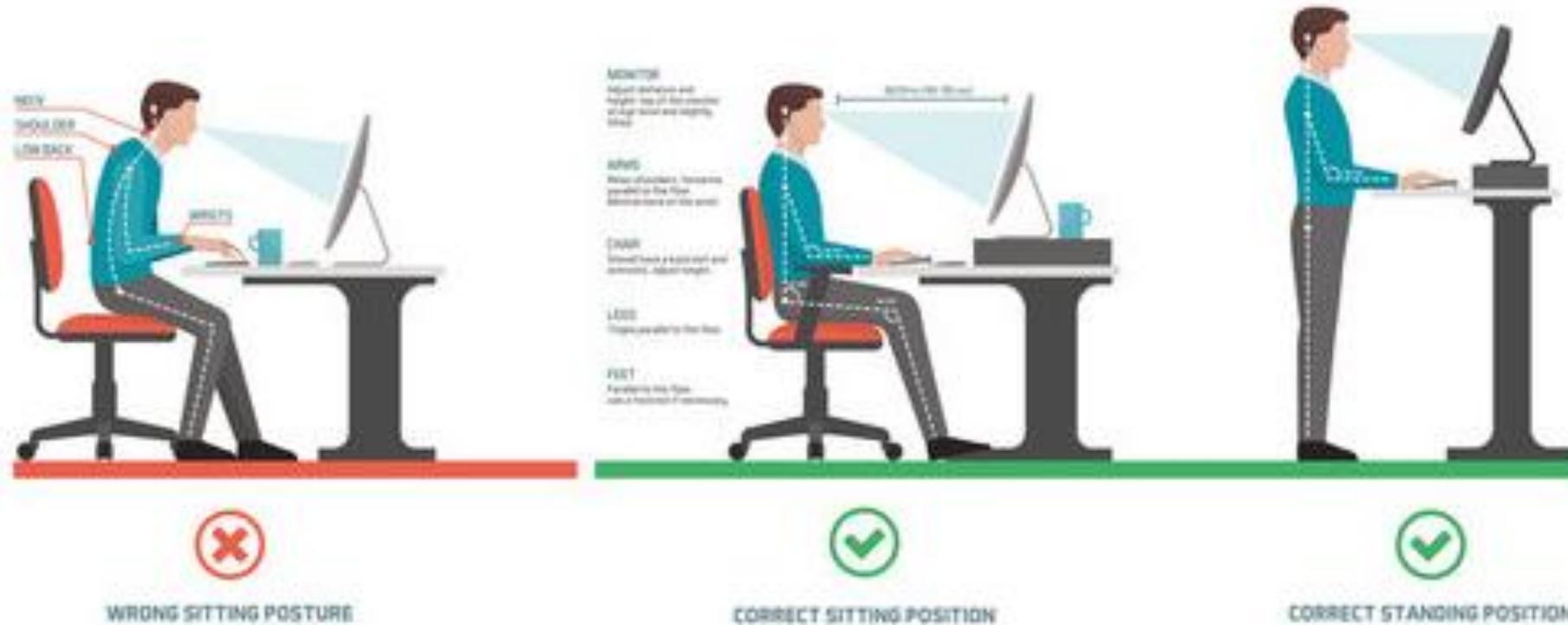


# Ergonomics

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*Ergonomics*: The study of people in their working environment.  
Some principles of Ergonomics:

## (1) Work in a neutral position maintaining proper posture



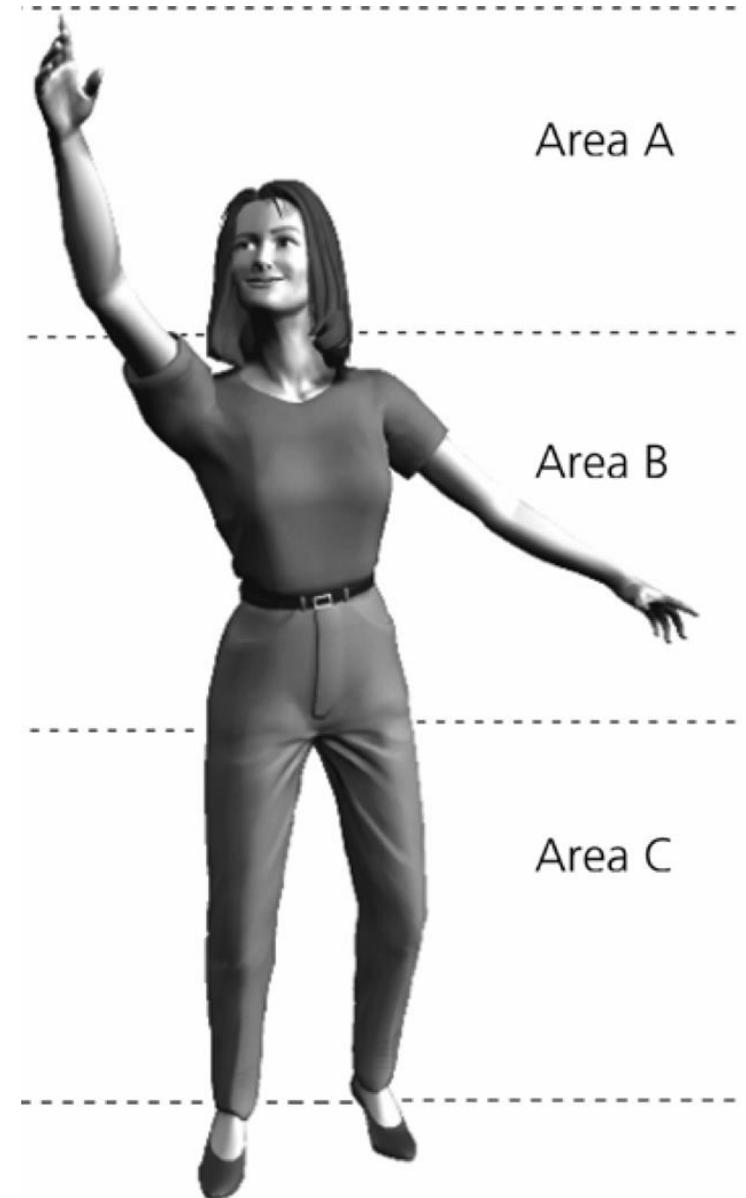
# Ergonomics

## (2a) Keep everything in reach: In Standing

**Area A:** Try to store lightweight items that are used less often in work in Area A.

**Area B:** Store commonly used items. If possible, store heavy objects in Area B and slide towards you when required.

**Area C:** If no room in Area B, store heavier objects in Area C as it is safer to lift these from this area than from up high. If particularly heavy, ask a colleague to help.

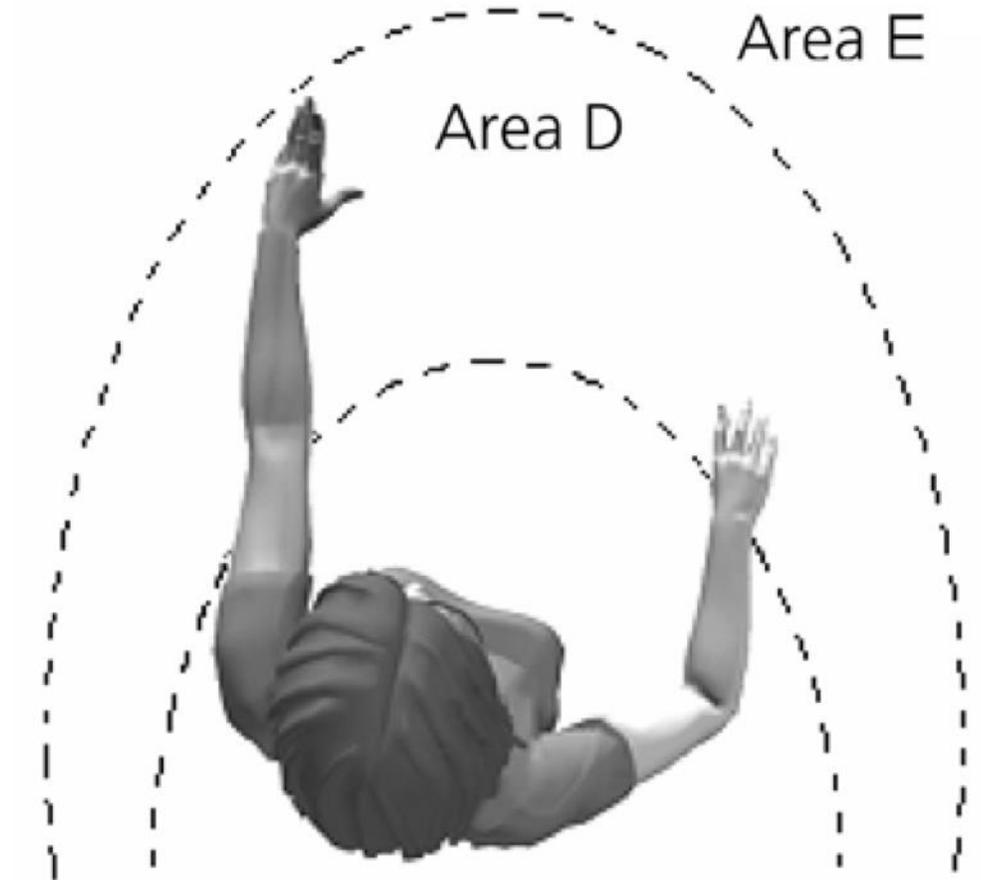


# Ergonomics

## (2a) Keep everything in reach: In Sitting

**Area D:** Keep items that you use most frequently in work in this space.

**Area E:** Keep items less regularly used in this space. This reduces necessity to bend and reach.



# Assessing Readiness to Return to Work

# Assessing Readiness to Return to Work

## Job Simulation

- Schedule a 'work day'
- Reflect on the type of tasks you do in a typical work day – plan your work day based on these.
- Add your commute into the day!



# Set a Goal

**Pick *one* thing to do this week that will help your return to work:**

Some examples:

- Email your employer to touch base or text a colleague.
- Request a Partial Capacity Benefit form
- Make a list of what you think you might struggle with at work and consider are there any reasonable accommodations that could help?
- Send your employer a meeting agenda
- Book in a 'Work Day' to assess your readiness
- Try *one* strategy to reduce mental fatigue e.g. guided meditation



Thank You  
Any Questions?