

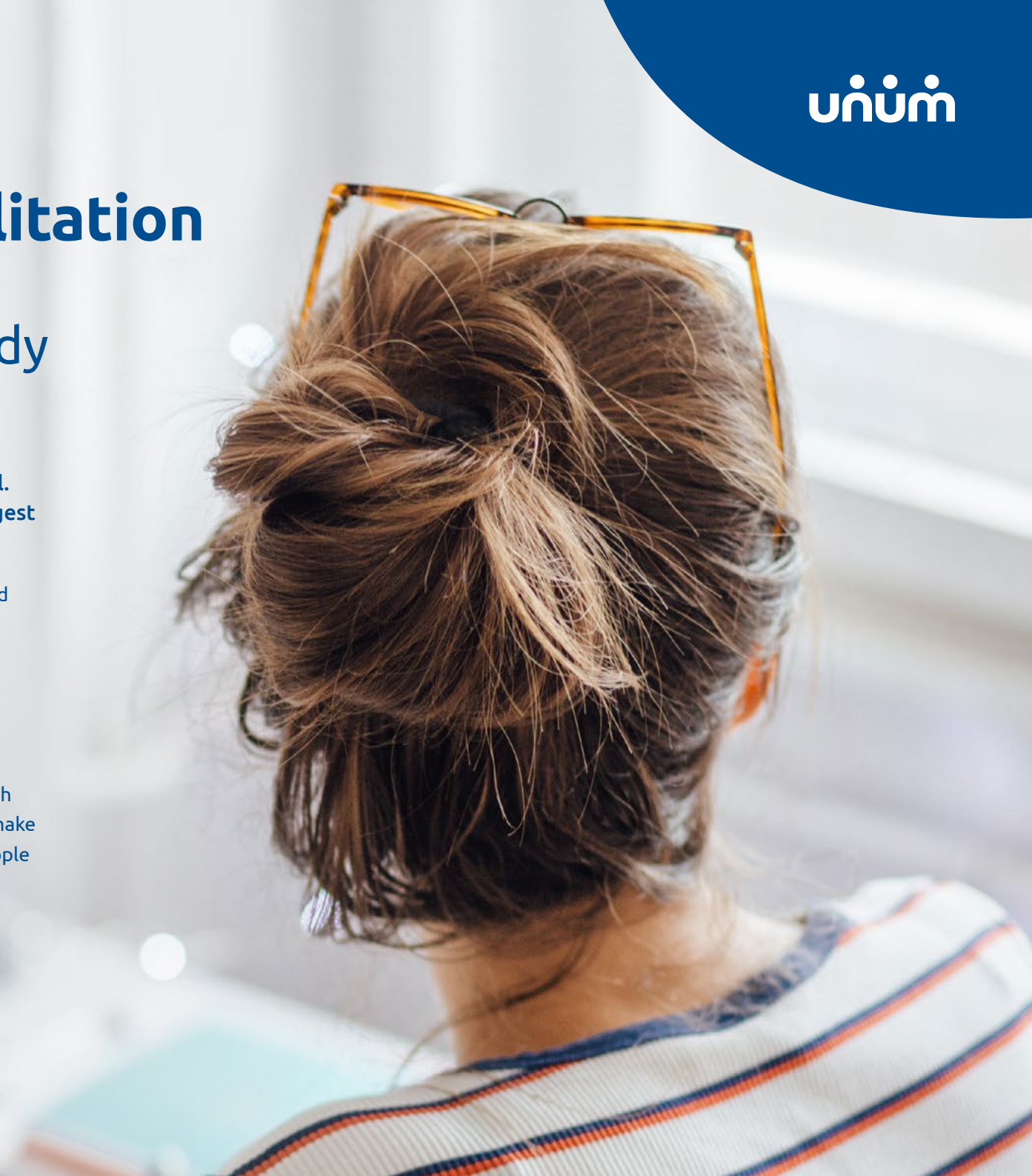
Vocational rehabilitation

Taking control of mental health case study

Mental ill-health can affect anyone at any time, and the reasons behind it can be numerous and individual. Together with stress and anxiety, it is one of the biggest causes of both short and long-term absence¹.

But despite its prevalence, there can still be a stigma around it. Both employers and employees can find it a difficult subject to bring into the open and both can be unsure how best to proceed. This can be doubly hard where an element of domestic abuse and controlling behaviour is a large contributory factor.

Vocational rehabilitation expertise can help smooth the path for a candid and caring conversation, help an employee to make a sympathetic and gradual return to work, and signpost people to appropriate support provided by experienced, external specialist sources.



The role

This 49-year-old woman looks after internal processing for a software and IT management company and has been with them for more than 18 years. Her demanding role involves investigating multiple projects of all sizes throughout the business to review and improve processes and efficiencies.

As part of this role, she meets with subject matter experts to gain a full understanding of their project, enabling her to analyse, problem-solve and create solutions within frequently tight deadlines. Confidence and the ability to be persuasive are key.



The absence

Diagnosed with depression, stress and anxiety following a number of bereavements and personal stressors, she became absent from work in November 2018. Her low mood also left her tearful on a daily basis with some suicidal thoughts.

Support at work or home can be helpful in any recovery. But in this particular case, she was anxious about returning to work in general, and returning to her previous role.

Even though she had moved on, her previous manager within the company knew her well enough to recognise that she was struggling. He took the difficult, but vital step to voice his concerns and ensure she received support. In early December, her employer asked Unum to help manage her concerns and ease her path back into work – scheduled tentatively for January 2019.

A week after receiving the referral, our Vocational Rehabilitation Consultant, Katy Hipsey, contacted her to discuss what support she might find most beneficial and, together with her employer, how she could make a successful and sustainable return to work.

Katy provided an independent, impartial sounding board for both employer and employee, with the single agenda of offering what support she could to all parties. As the mutual trust developed, the employee felt empowered enough to admit that she was concerned about her relationship with her partner. Though never implicitly mentioned, it became clear to Katy that there were elements of domestic abuse and controlling behaviour.

This had been a source of mental anguish for some time, and the bereavements the employee later suffered proved to be the final tipping point.



How our built-in support can help

Mental ill-health can be unique to the individual, so access to a wide range of support is key. In this particular case, Katy saw the value of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Unum funded sessions of 1-to-1 CBT to help the employee develop coping strategies, and change the way she thought and behaved.

Together with her employer, the employee and Katy developed a plan to help ease the path back to the workplace. This included a phased return to work, flexibility for home working, and reduced duties and hours with a gradual increase and introduction of responsibilities.

To support her working relationships, her concerns about returning to her original role following secondment and her anxiety about interacting with her colleagues were both discussed. She was particularly concerned about having to explain the reasons for her absence, so key phrases were developed to use in conversations.

An all-round approach also encouraged her to engage with her GP and use self-help books designed to help overall mental health and work-related duties.

The stressors at home were also monitored. Vivaly, Katy signposted the employee to women's aid support lines to help her tackle the difficult situation at home that had been ongoing for some time.

The plan was reviewed every fortnight between all three parties to discuss progress and to suggest any changes that might be needed.

The outcome

Following her full engagement with the plan and treatment, and with the support of both Unum and her employer, the employee made a successful return to work in 6 weeks. For consistency and to maintain the positive, supportive relationship, the business arranged for her to remain in her seconded role under her existing manager.

Importantly, she also felt confident enough to end the relationship with her partner, move house and live on her own, essentially taking back control of her life.

Throughout her time with Katy, she regularly fed back her thanks for the support she received from Unum and her own HR team. However, wanting to take her positive experience further, she took the initiative to deliver mental health awareness days to her colleagues, utilising the available resources, such as our Employee Awareness Programme and On Course workshops, as well as external expertise, such as MIND.

The employee's view

“ I honestly cannot fault the support I have had. Katy has helped me, guided me and supported me through the most difficult time I have ever been through. I also feel the therapy I have been given has been absolutely key to my recovery.

The therapist Unum facilitated has also provided the most amazing ways of helping me through this time. I get emotional even writing this, as I was in such a bad place, and this kind of help is so hard to get, especially at this level. I cannot thank you enough. **”**