

Work Career Issues: Topic #1
Narrative after returning from a medical/disability leave of absence

1. For most people, explaining why they were gone for an extended period can be a source of significant anxiety, especially in a work setting.
2. People will always ask where you have been – out of concern (they really care), out of curiosity (people want to know), and occasionally, but rarely, for bad intent (gossip, feel better themselves, competitiveness). Assuming good intent is always a good strategy when responding to questions.
3. What can employers legally ask upon your return? What are you required to disclose?

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4. Options for handling.
Start with: Thank you for asking. I appreciate your concern. Then:
 - a. No disclosure: I was out for personal (or family) reasons that I prefer (or need) to keep private.
 - b. Full disclosure: I took some time off to care for my mental health, and I'm excited to be back.
 - c. Some disclosure: I needed to take time off to take care of some personal (or family) medical concerns. Fortunately, things are mostly resolved, but I prefer not to discuss the details.
 - d. Optional addition: I'm looking forward to..... (what you like, what you want to have more of, what you might like to be different).

The right answer for you will depend on your organization, your role, and your comfort.

Note: Assume that whatever you choose to disclose will be shared.

5. The same narrative may also be useful for speaking with family and friends. Remember however, that what you share with one person will usually be shared with others.
6. You may have significant leverage upon returning to work to make changes in your work environment and situation:
 - a. Employers usually want to see you back off of disability sustainably
 - b. Non-discrimination statutes and the potential for a lawsuit for discrimination usually mean that employers will be sensitive to good treatment.
 - c. You may (and should explore) reasonable accommodations for disability to help ensure that your return to work is smooth and sustainable.

7. Exercise:

- a. Take 5 minutes to write down your narrative bullet points.
- b. In pairs, practice using your narrative
 - i. First person: ask about what happened? Why were you gone?
 - ii. Second: share your narrative
 - iii. First person: ask questions? Are you OK, can you share more?
 - iv. Second person: practice holding to your narrative.
 - v. Note any challenges, feelings that emerge
 - vi. Switch roles