

Returning to Work After a Concussion

Supporting Recovery Through an Occupational Therapy Lens

Background

Concussions affect hundreds of thousands of Canadians each year. While most people recover within four weeks, a significant portion continue to experience persistent physical, cognitive and psychosocial symptoms, which can make return to work (RTW) challenging. Successful RTW is a key recovery milestone, but the process can be complex and shaped by interrelated biopsychosocial factors.

About the Study

A scoping review of 20 studies was completed exploring factors that help or hinder RTW after a concussion. Included studies examined the perspective of individuals with concussion, as well as workplace, healthcare and funding system practices. Findings were grouped narratively into four themes.

Key Themes and Findings

Theme	Facilitators	Barriers
Person Impacted by Concussion	Personal agency, self-advocacy, social support, and setting work-life boundaries.	Lack of knowledge about concussion, poor psychosocial adjustment, and limited family support.
Healthcare System	Interdisciplinary rehabilitation, tailored vocational programs, professional guidance, and iterative RTW planning involving regular monitoring and adjustment.	Delayed access to services, misdiagnosis, poor follow-up, and limited mental health supports.
Funder/Insurance System	None were specifically reported in the studies.	Administrative hurdles, poor continuity of care, and adversarial relationships with insurers.
Workplace	Social support, as well as formal or informal accommodations (such as modified duties or flexible hours).	Lack of understanding about concussion, stigma, discrimination, poorly matched accommodations, and physically demanding jobs.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice

Occupational therapists can play a key role in helping people RTW after a concussion by:

- Empowering clients to actively participate in RTW decisions and advocating for their needs.
- Supporting the development of coping strategies for symptoms like fatigue, concentration, and stress.
- Planning, implementing, and continuously adapting workplace accommodations to match clients' evolving abilities.
- Ensuring timely, coordinated and tailored rehabilitation with particular emphasis on access to mental health supports as appropriate.
- Educating families, employers, and insurers about concussion recovery and RTW.

Reference: Shahzad M, Lo J, Yuen B, Duncan A, Reed N, Nowrouzi-Kia B. Supportive Elements and Challenges to Return to Work Following a Concussion: A Scoping Review. *J Head Trauma Rehabil.* 2025 Apr 22. doi: 10.1097/HTR.0000000000001064. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 40266682.