Workers' Comp

Person-First Support Drives Better Recovery and Return-to-Work Results

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3 MIN READ

Mental health isn't a side note in workers' comp anymore. More states now recognize mental-only claims, and physical injuries often come with psychosocial stressors that prolong recovery and increase costs. You might see:

- Simple claims are getting complicated
- Recovery timelines that don't make sense
- More time explaining decisions and chasing updates

To estimate recovery time and plan a safe return to work, you have to factor in physical, psychological, and social issues. Case management gives you a clinical partner who supports the injured employee and helps you manage that complexity. When psychosocial issues go unnoticed, a routine claim can quickly become stalled, high-touch and high-risk – meaning more calls, more emails, and more pressure on every decision.

How case managers identify and address barriers to recovery

Case managers understand that injured employees face physical, mental and social aspects to their recovery. Using tools like motivational interviewing, they quickly surface what's getting in the way of progress.

They are trained to:

- Offer a **holistic assessment** of physical, mental and social factors
- Spot **persistent fear** about return to work
- Surface **catastrophic thinking** about pain, symptoms or prognosis
- Identify signs of **stress, anxiety, isolation or loss of routine**
- Flag **family or financial strain** that may disrupt treatment adherence

Once barriers are identified, case managers use behavioral coaching and education to help the injured employee become an active participant in their recovery. When a psychological evaluation or therapy is needed, including mental-only claims, the case manager:

- Coordinates referrals to the appropriate specialist

- Works with the treating provider to set realistic treatment plans and timelines using nationally recognized guidelines
- Manages the clinical aspects of the claim, including return-to-work planning

For you, that means better documentation, fewer loose ends and a clearer story on the file.

A person-first approach to injury recovery

Successful recovery and return to work depends on physical, mental, and cognitive readiness — not job demands alone. Case managers bring that person-first lens by:

- Applying **cognitive-behavioral coaching** techniques to help the injured employee work through fear and doubt
- Providing **straightforward health education** so they understand their diagnosis, treatment, and impact on overall well-being
- Delivering **one-on-one support and advocacy** throughout the claim
- Identifying when **intervention from a mental health clinician is needed**
- Creating a **collaborative care plan** with realistic goals, action steps and roles for everyone involved
- Partnering with employers to **design transitional duty** when needed
- Reinforcing **treatment adherence and self-management skills** between appointments

This approach helps accelerate recovery, prevent complications, and support a safe, sustained return to work for the injured employee. And it helps you keep the claim on track.

Quick actions you can use today

- **Use motivational interviewing**
  - Ask open questions, listen for fear, confusion or hopelessness, and reflect back what you're hearing.
- **Show empathetic concern**
  - Acknowledge that recovery is hard. A few extra seconds of empathy can surface issues earlier.
- **Refer to case management at the first sign of delay**
  - Watch for disengagement, missed appointments, non-adherence to treatment or escalating stress at home or work.

Taking a person-first approach isn't a "nice to have" on complex claims. It's a disciplined way to protect outcomes and keep files moving. Case management is a key tool in your toolbox to do that with clarity and confidence.



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