

Steps to Employment: A Workbook for People Who Have Experienced Mental Health Problems

Chapter 7: Disclosure of Your Disability

At some point in your interaction with an employer, either before or after a selection process, or once you have begun work, you may find it necessary to reveal some information about your mental health problem. Perhaps you have regular medical appointments that conflict with your work schedule. Maybe you find that full time work leads to an unacceptable level of anxiety, and you want to ask for part time work. Or, it could be that after a few hours at a new job, you discover that the physical setting for your work has distractions that interfere with your concentration, opening up the possibility for increased stress, perhaps to the point of your work performance suffering.

No matter what the reason is for you to consider disclosure, you should be aware of the possible consequences, both in terms of outcome of a job search as well as your own job satisfaction once employed. The two basic rules for you to follow when considering disclosure are:

1. Disclosure of a disability should only be done if it supports your objective:

In a job search, the objective is to get hired.

While in a job, the objective is to ensure the work can be managed without undue stress.

2. Assess the potential reaction of an employer to your disclosure, and plan your disclosure for the appropriate time.

If you feel the reaction will be positive, you should disclose as soon as possible. Find a way to disclose during the selection process, so this factor can be taken into account before a hiring decision is made.

If you feel the reaction might be negative, choose your timing for disclosure very carefully.

Disclosure of Your Disability

Employers who might react positively to your disclosure include those with active employment equity policies, where a disability will give you an edge over other candidates with similar qualifications as yours. Organizations providing services and programs to people who have experienced mental health problems, or who have other disabilities, may also actively recruit those with similar life experiences. While you are job searching, your research may give you clues to

the potential reaction of an employer. Once employed, you can assess the potential reaction to disclosure through a review of personnel policies or other internal documentation.

When you think there may be a negative reaction to your disclosure, review the following considerations, which will vary according to the stage of your relationship with the employer.

Disclosure prior to or during an interview

Remember that the main purpose of an application form, a resume and a cover letter is to get an interview. With this in mind, there are two possible reasons for considering disclosure prior to an interview:

1. Your mental health problem comes with a visible disability or is potentially detectable in a face-to-face meeting. This could be for a variety of reasons. It could be a side effect of medication. 'Or, it could be that when under stress, you have difficulties expressing yourself clearly and calmly. This can happen even if you are well prepared and have practised or rehearsed your answers to potential interview questions.'

If either of these situations apply to you, you might choose to disclose prior to actually meeting a potential employer in an interview. You could also consider having a support person explain your disability to a potential employer on your behalf. If you are thinking of this approach, speak to those in your personal support network. Let them help you make your decision on how to proceed with disclosure.

2. You know for sure that your mental health problem will mean you are unable to fulfill, all the tasks that are part of the job or that you require some accommodation (see end of chapter for an explanation of accommodation) **in order to do so.**

If you do not know for sure, before the interview is not the time to disclose. But, make sure you find out enough about the job functions during the interview, so that you can assess your own need for accommodation. You will need this information in order to assess a job offer.

If you choose to disclose prior to an interview, consider doing it through a telephone call to the person who will interview you. Don't give the message to a receptionist and expect that person to pass it on in a manner that matches your style or level of detail. Don't expect an employer to meet with you in person prior to an interview, as this is likely not to be an option.

When you are speaking directly to the employer, start by saying you don't expect they like to be surprised, so you wanted to talk prior to meeting about something

that might affect their assessment of your ability to do the job. At the same time, explain that you believe you are the right person for the job, especially if certain accommodations were provided. Give concrete examples of an accommodation that would allow you to fulfill the requirements of the job, such as flexible work hours or a split shift. If you believe that accommodations are not required, say so.

If you find out during an interview that the job would require accommodation in order for you to fulfill the requirements, you may choose to disclose during the interview in order to determine whether or not the accommodation you need is possible. For example, you may be told during the interview that the job requires working within a small but very busy space, where there is lots of activity unrelated to the job to be performed. If you know that such distractions will prevent you from concentrating on your work, leading to delays in getting work done, along with a level of anxiety that you would find difficult, you might ask during the interview if a more secluded work space can be made available. If, during the interview, you are unsure of the accommodation you would need, concentrate on getting enough information about the job and leave the issue of disclosure until you have identified what is needed in order for you to do the work.

Disclosure following a job offer

Once you are offered a job, and you haven't made any disclosure, you might want to disclose in order to ease any anxiety you may have about your employer finding out from another source before you start work. If there are no accommodation considerations, you might give that information to the employer, letting them know that while your illness will have no effect on your ability to do the job, as a courtesy you wanted them to be aware of your experience with a mental health problem. Briefly describe the experience and your recovery, avoiding a long history. State again that you are certain there will be no affect on your job performance. Close the discussion with a review of how your skills and experience are a good fit with the requirements of the job. Try to find out how your employer feels about knowing. Be prepared to acknowledge concerns.

To make disclosure easier, you might want to practise with a friend, family member or someone in your support network. Your own comfort level with presenting the information will be a key factor in any disclosure.

Disclosure after starting work

Once you have started work, you might find that the work is affecting your mental health and that, with certain adjustments, the negative effects will be minimized. Some possible adjustments, known as "accommodation," are outlined below. These accommodation needs may require negotiation. In order to prepare

yourself for this discussion, or negotiation, consider other factors that might have an impact on how your disclosure is received.

Employers will always be concerned about the viability of their company or organization. They might respond to your disclosure with questions about how a certain accommodation will affect your productivity in your job. They will want to know how much an accommodation will cost, or if it means you won't be able to work for as many hours as they want you to. They will want to know if there are any union rules or contract provisions from a collective agreement that will affect their ability to make an accommodation.

Employers will also be concerned about fairness and equitable treatment of all workers. For example, think about how such an accommodation will be perceived by your co-workers. Will co-workers think that you are getting an additional benefit that is denied to them? Will they begin to treat you differently? Will there be other consequences, such as negative stereotyping or other stigma that lead to additional problems for you?

You might want to discuss your ideas and plans for disclosure with people who understand your history with mental illness prior to acting on your plans. You need to be prepared for all possible reactions to your disclosure, in order to ensure success with securing the accommodation you need. Also, be clear about how the accommodation you are proposing will be sufficient to meet your needs.

Choosing not to disclose

Unfortunately, negative stereotypes can lead to discrimination against people who have experienced mental health problems. One example from our focus groups was of a supervisor who was quite unsympathetic after someone disclosed to her, responding in a derogatory tone of voice, with:

“What are you going to do if you get sick again?”

You can expect that this supervisor might not be very willing to do much to make work easier for you to manage. Such reactions can be hurtful, even to the point of leading to additional anxiety for you. You might even find that people who know of your experience with a mental health problem use that knowledge against you whenever an opportunity arises. For example, if you are not performing as well in one area of your job as you are in other areas, this difference might be associated with your history rather than with a need for you to be given learning opportunities to raise your performance level in that area. For these and other reasons, some people choose not to disclose their mental illness.

You may be managing your mental health problem, perhaps with the help of medication, social support, or a combination of factors. If this is the case, and

you feel you do not need any accommodation, you may choose not to disclose before or after starting work. In this way, starting to work at a new job will be a normal process, no different for you than any other **new** worker. This option should prevent any stigma or discrimination on the part of the employer as well as co-workers.

If you are considering the choice of not disclosing, review the possible risks of this decision.

Ask yourself:

- Will co-workers or an employer know how to handle a crisis should one arise?
- Will I be able to handle the stress of not disclosing, such as the stress of knowing that I am keeping private something that has been, and continues to be, significant in my life?
- Will it be that much harder to ask for accommodation if I should need it later on, after I have been working for some time? Keep in mind the basic rules for disclosure from the beginning of this chapter:

1. Disclosure of a disability should only be done if it supports your objective of getting a job or performing well at your job.

2. Assess the potential reaction of an employer to your disclosure.

While looking for work, your goal is to get the interview and then the job offer. Don't lose sight of these goals in your consideration of "if, when and how" to disclose. Whatever your decision, **you will be the one to choose the route which is most comfortable to you.**