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# Navigating Disclosure: What employees need to know

Sometimes a health problem can make it harder to get the job done. This could be a sprained ankle, bad back, or chronic migraines. It could also be a mental illness like depression or an anxiety disorder. In Canada, telling your employer about any kind of health condition that affects your ability to work is called **disclosure**.

When a mental health problem or illness is getting in the way of you doing your job, it can be difficult to decide if disclosing it to your employer is the best option. Many employees have questions or fears: **What do I say? What if they think I can't do my work? Will people treat me differently? What if I lose my job?**





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Disclosing a mental illness to your employer is a personal decision. It can be complex and should be made with care. Here are a few things you should know if you're experiencing symptoms of a mental illness at work and are deciding whether or not to tell your employer:



### 1. There are potential risk and benefits to disclosing a mental illness at work.

If you do, you and your employer may figure out strategies that help you stay at work and be successful. Disclosing may help other people in your workplace understand any changes or difficulties that they've noticed and give them an opportunity to support you. On the other hand, disclosing can lead to stigma or discrimination. Unfortunately, being open about a mental illness can affect a person's position at a workplace or their ability to find a new job. There are laws to prevent this kind of discrimination, but it can still happen. Workplaces have different attitudes and cultures, so everyone will have a different experience.



### 2. You have the right to reasonable accommodations.

By law, workplaces must try to look at reasonable accommodations for anyone who experiences a disability, including a mental illness. This could mean changing the way you do certain tasks, adapting your work environment, or providing flexibility in your work day and hours. To find the right type of accommodations, cooperation between employee and employer is essential.



### 3. Your employer doesn't need to know everything.

To help plan for accommodation, your employer may need to understand the specific limitations you are experiencing because of your illness. This doesn't mean they need to know the specifics of a diagnosis or any medical care you're receiving. They need to understand how your illness impacts your ability to function at work. In the case of mental illnesses, this could mean things like changes in memory, ability to concentrate, or difficulty working in the early mornings. This type of information is usually requested from a health care provider.





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If you decide that disclosing a mental illness is the right choice for your situation, here are a few practical tips to help the process go smoothly:



### **Talk about specific tasks or skills that are difficult.**

Keep the conversation focused on the challenges you're having at work rather than on the illness itself. Talk about the specific tasks that are difficult and why. For example, "I'm having difficulty following along in meetings because my concentration is not as good as usual."



### **Come prepared with ideas for accommodation.**

Take some time to think about what type of changes to your work would be most beneficial for you and help you to accomplish the essential tasks of your job. Then present these to your employer. If you come prepared with ideas you can have a solution-focused conversation.



### **Think about how you might talk to your colleagues about it.**

If you start doing your work differently, people may notice. Have a pro-active discussion with your manager or supervisor about any details you'd like them to be able to share with your colleagues (if any) about the reasons for the accommodation you're receiving. And think about what you might say if you're asked. Remember, you're in control of what gets shared and what doesn't.

**Think about who you want to disclose your illness to. For some people their manager or supervisor is a natural place to start. But for others it may be better to talk to someone in charge of human resources at their company. If you are unionized, you may also want to talk with your union representative.**

**Practice. As with any important conversation or presentation at work, it can be helpful to practice beforehand. Run through the conversation on your own, write it down, or talk to a trusted friend or family member.**



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If you decide that you would rather not disclose a mental illness to your employer, you can still take active steps to continue being successful at work.



**Consider letting colleagues know that you could use their support.**

Without getting into the specifics, let your team know that you need a little extra help. If they know you're going through a tough time, they may be more willing to lend a hand.



**Use your organization's EAP or psychological benefits to get help.**

Don't assume things will get better on their own. Make good use of the benefits you have to access counselling or other support services. Remember, if you have one, your Employee Assistance Program is completely confidential!



**Reach out to friends, family, or other people in your support network.**

When people experience mental illness they often isolate themselves. Your close relationships are an incredible source of support. Staying connected is good for your mental health, and people you trust can help you problem-solve situations at work that you find challenging.

**NOTE: The information contained in these pages is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for legal advice. Individuals should contact the appropriate legal resources for specific legal advice regarding their situation.**

- 1 Menten, J. (2018). Navigating mental health issues in the workplace: A short guide to disclosure and accommodation. *Visions*, 13(4), 5-7. Retrieved from: <http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/sites/default/files/visions-workplace-disclosure-and-accommodations-vol13.pdf>
- 2 Howatt, B. & MacInnis, J. (April 26, 2017). How to tell your employer about your mental health issue. Retrieved from: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/how-to-tell-your-employer-about-a-mental-health-issue/article34821304/>
- 3 Howatt, B. & VanBuskirk, K. (April 12, 2017). How a workplace accommodation works. Retrieved from: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/workplace-award/how-a-workplace-accommodation-works/article34686608/>

