



Canadian Mental
Health Association
Mental health for all

Navigating Disclosure, Accommodation and Related Conversations

Please note: the information in this resource sheet is not a substitute for medical or legal advice and is intended for educational purposes. Should you find yourself in a situation where you believe you are being treated unfairly regarding your disability or related accommodation, please seek appropriate professional assistance.

Sometimes a health problem can make it harder to do your job. This could be a sprained ankle, a bad back, or chronic migraines. It could also be a mental health challenge or a mental illness, including depression or anxiety. It's important to note that a mental illness is considered a disability if it impacts one's ability to complete everyday tasks. ^{1, 2, 3, 4}



A mental illness can sometimes be an **episodic disability**, meaning that the symptoms that make it difficult to complete your daily tasks ebb and flow over time.



When an employer creates conditions to assist you in managing your work and disability, this is called **accommodation**. You have a right to ask for and receive **reasonable accommodation**.



In Canada, telling your employer about any kind of health condition that affects your ability to work is called **disclosure**.



'**Reasonable**' means accommodation that is the most appropriate based on the circumstances but does not mean perfect accommodation. The accommodation may be limited if it constitutes undue hardship to the employer, such as extreme cost to implement, or potential safety issues for others in the workplace.





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Finding the right accommodation requires cooperation and communication between employee and employer, as well as reasonable supporting documentation from a medical professional. With episodic disabilities your needs may change over time and you may not always need the same level of accommodation. ^{2, 3, 4}

Whether to disclose a mental health challenge or a mental illness is an employee's choice. When a mental health challenge or a mental illness is getting in the way of doing your job, it can be difficult to decide if disclosing 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?

These are important questions and understandable fears when considering disclosing an illness, injury or disability. Whether or not to disclose a mental illness is your choice, but there are important considerations that can assist in your decision-making, as well as skills you can develop to help you communicate in tough conversations, including those around disclosure. ^{5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12}

Communication Tip - Active Listening: Good listening skills are an asset in many situations and can be particularly helpful while gathering information and during difficult conversations. Aim to focus on what others are saying instead of planning how you are going to respond. Ask follow-up questions when needed and be attentive to the answers. And remember that it's okay to slow down the conversation. You may need to pause to find the right words and that's okay. ^{7, 14}





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Considerations

Disclosing a mental illness to your employer is a personal decision that 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 to tell your employer:



There are benefits to disclosure.

Disclosure could lead to receiving needed accommodations that could assist you in your work, and in getting support and understanding in the workplace. Disclosure can also help some people to build trust with others and to feel like they are being their authentic selves at work. Unfortunately, stigma and discrimination are still prevalent, and if they are present in a workplace, they can negatively impact one's ability to work in their current role and workplace, and even impede their ability to find work elsewhere. Fortunately, human rights law protects employees who disclose a mental illness from experiencing negative consequences following their disclosure, and protects employees from harassment in the workplace. ^{1, 3, 5, 6, 8}



Take time to seek out guidance.

There are people outside the workplace who can help inform your decision. For example, if you are uneasy about disclosing a mental illness in your workplace, unsure of how much or how little information to provide or are unaware of types of accommodation that might help you, a health care professional, especially one who is familiar with your mental illness, may be able to provide you with additional information that can help you decide. If you are concerned about the legal side of disclosure or another aspect of your situation, it is a good idea to get legal advice. ^{8, 12}



You have rights and can set limits.

As mentioned, employees have a right to reasonable accommodation. Know that you do not need to provide all the details of your mental health challenges in order to receive accommodation or provide your employer with your diagnosis. In order to provide support, your employer only needs 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 morning. You can usually request this type of information from a health care provider. ^{1, 2, 3, 10}



Consider the resources available at your workplace.

You are likely aware of your company resources, even if you've never thought about them in depth. Take some time to actively assess available information and think about how it could influence the disclosure and accommodation process. You might look out for the following that could assist: ^{1, 5, 9, 11, 12}

- Does your workplace have an accommodation policy in place?
- Is there any information readily available to employees about seeking support or accommodation?
- What training on mental health in the workplace has been provided?
- Are there union representatives or anyone else within the organization you can talk to about accommodation either in general terms or in strict confidence?
- Are there other people who speak openly about their own mental illness/mental health at work who you could talk to? Do supervisors or employees ever speak candidly about their own mental health?





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You may choose not to disclose...

If you choose not to disclose there are active steps you can take to ensure continued success at work.

- Your workplace may have confidential benefits and supports like access to psychological counselling, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or other support services. Make good use of them.
- Connect with free or affordable services in your area. Not everyone has an EAP or extended health benefits at work, which may make getting professional support seem daunting or even impossible, financially or otherwise. Many community mental health organizations offer free support services, and the expansion of virtual services may allow you to connect with affordable providers country-wide. An excellent place to begin is [CMHA's How To Get Help](#) where you can review the kind of help that's available for mental health challenges. Your local Canadian Mental Health Association is another place to start. [Find your local CMHA](#) for services or help finding them. Reach out to friends, family, or other people in your support network. When people experience a mental illness they often isolate. Staying connected is good for your mental health, and people you trust can help you problem-solve situations at work.
- Consider letting trusted colleagues know you can use their support. You don't need to get specific to ask for help. If your co-workers know you're going through a tough time, they may be willing to lend a hand. You can also ask for additional support from your supervisor without either requesting formal accommodations or being specific about why you need support. This practice is sometimes called **partial disclosure**. It is a way to "test the waters" of disclosure in a workplace by sharing some information about a disability to asking for support without disclosing. It is worth noting that the effectiveness of partial disclosure hasn't been proven, although it is a common theme in research and practice about disability and disclosure. ^{8, 11}



Communication Tip - Communicating Clearly: There are great techniques you can use to communicate clearly. These include: knowing what you want to get across; practicing it before the conversation; avoiding rehearsing the conversations in your head while the other person is talking; and following up with questions or clarifying statements. Whether you are preparing to discuss your needs for support, to disclose or to seek accommodation, plan the conversation in advance and come prepared with suggestions for potential accommodations. ^{7, 13}



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If you decide to disclose...

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:



Plan out what you'd like to say and who you would like to tell.

Think about who you want to disclose to. Some people start with their manager or supervisor. Others may choose to talk to someone in Human Resources. If you are unionized, you may also want to talk with your union representative. If possible, set up a time to meet with the person you are planning to speak to. Plan out the general points you'd like to cover during this discussion. Many people find it helpful to write them down. ^{6, 9, 10}



Come prepared with ideas for accommodation.

Take some time to think about what type of changes would work for you and help you to accomplish the essential tasks of your job. Then present these to your employer or Human Resources. If you come prepared with ideas, you can have a solution-focused conversation. ^{3, 10}



Be proactive

Accommodation can help you balance your work and your disability, but getting there can involve some growing pains. For example, once your new accommodation starts, colleagues might notice that you are doing your work differently. Be upfront with your supervisor about what – and if – you would like them to share with others in the workplace. Or, if you're unsure what you want shared, consider having a discussion with your supervisor about what others may need to know. ^{1, 3, 10, 12}



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 rehearse with a trusted friend or family member. ^{7, 13}

Communication Tip - Ongoing Communication: The conversation around disclosure is often ongoing rather than a one-time thing, especially where accommodation is concerned. Depending on what works for both, you and the person managing your accommodation (supervisor/HR) may decide to schedule a regular check-in. Or, if you are comfortable doing so, let them know that you will follow-up as necessary, such as when the accommodation isn't working for you. There are many ways to encourage ongoing communication; you and your supervisor can find ways that work for you both. ^{3, 7, 12, 13}



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