

What to know about disclosing mental illness at work

December 5 2014, by Sarah Von Schrader



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Deciding to disclose information about a non-obvious disability at work is complicated and potentially risky, no matter what you do for a living. For people with a mental health issue, like bipolar disorder or PTSD where stereotypes and bias are prevalent, the risk can be even greater.

This has become an important topic as employers try to reach voluntary affirmative action goals around disability employment. Federal contractors are required to try to achieve a [workforce](#) that is about [7% people with disabilities](#) (these include conditions like major depression and [bipolar disorder](#)). As a result, employers are considering how to handle disability disclosure like never before.

Affirmative action goals aside, there is a business case to be made for disclosure. Workers with depression, for example, cost employers an estimated [US\\$44 billion per year](#) due to absence and reduced on-the-job productivity. Letting employees come forward about their condition to find better work arrangements and support makes financial sense.

Disclosure and risk

Along with other researchers, I examined disclosure in a study of 600 people with disabilities, half of whom had mental or emotional health conditions. We [learned](#) about the perceived risks and actual consequences of disclosure as well as about what may facilitate the decision to disclose and the role employers play.

We found that the concerns of those with mental health issues were not so different from those with other disabilities. People with all types of disabilities feared being fired, of losing out on future opportunities, and of possible ridicule or harassment by coworkers or managers. One respondent said, "I do not want to be viewed as a disabled person and then as an employee ... I want to ensure that I am viewed as a valued employee who happens to have a disability."

Why disclose?

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) a person must

disclose their disability in order to get support or what's formally known as an accommodation. For an individual with mental illness, this could be time, place or schedule flexibility, a service animal or another easy-to-implement, low-cost or free accommodation. They can help an employee to be more productive and engaged at work and are the biggest reasons people decide to disclose a non-visible disability in the workplace.

The dialogue between employees and their employers about accommodation should be ongoing because what works best may change over time. A flexible, creative and interactive dialogue during the accommodation process can make it more successful.

In fact, respondents rated having a supportive relationship with their supervisor as the second most important factor in deciding to disclose a [mental illness](#). From other research, we know that individuals are much more likely to [disclose](#) a disability to a supervisor than to someone from human resources or on equal employment opportunity survey.

But supervisors need support and education to confront biases. Training on disability awareness, the ADA, and accommodation can help prepare supervisors for the disclosure conversation. Knowledge of disability-related resources both within the organization and in the community can build supervisor confidence.

Respect and trust

Despite fears of limited opportunities or harassment, the vast majority people in our survey had neutral or even positive experiences with their disclosure. We found that those who reported positive disclosure experiences often said things like: "My boss respected me and understood the difficulties I have" and that "[disclosure] depends on the responsiveness of co-workers, supervisors, and general work environment."

Respondents indicated that visible employer commitment to disability was important in their decision to disclose. Seeing other employees with disabilities succeed, seeing their employer actively recruit people with disabilities, or seeing disability included in a company diversity statement made the decision to disclose easier. However, company policies are not enough.

As one person said, "I would be wary of disclosing until I saw how the employer actually treated employees with mental health issues, not just their stated policy. There would have to be trust in my supervisors and colleagues."

What and when to disclose

A colleague compared disability disclosure to peeling an onion: there may be lots of layers to disclosure. What is shared with a coworker may be different from what is shared with human resources. Someone may choose to disclose only one of multiple disabilities to an employer – perhaps only the disability where a workplace accommodation would help. There is also the decision of when to disclose.

In our survey, people said they felt disclosure could be safer later in the employment process. This might mean waiting until after they are hired or have had a chance to prove their value. But it can be stressful to put off this conversation, as one respondents said "it is certainly less stressful to have it out in the open than to be concerned about having to hide it and not wanting anyone to find out".

Disclosure can also have a positive impact for others with similar disabilities. One person said, "I am not ashamed of my disability, and I would hope that my disclosure would help someone else with a disability in seeking employment."

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