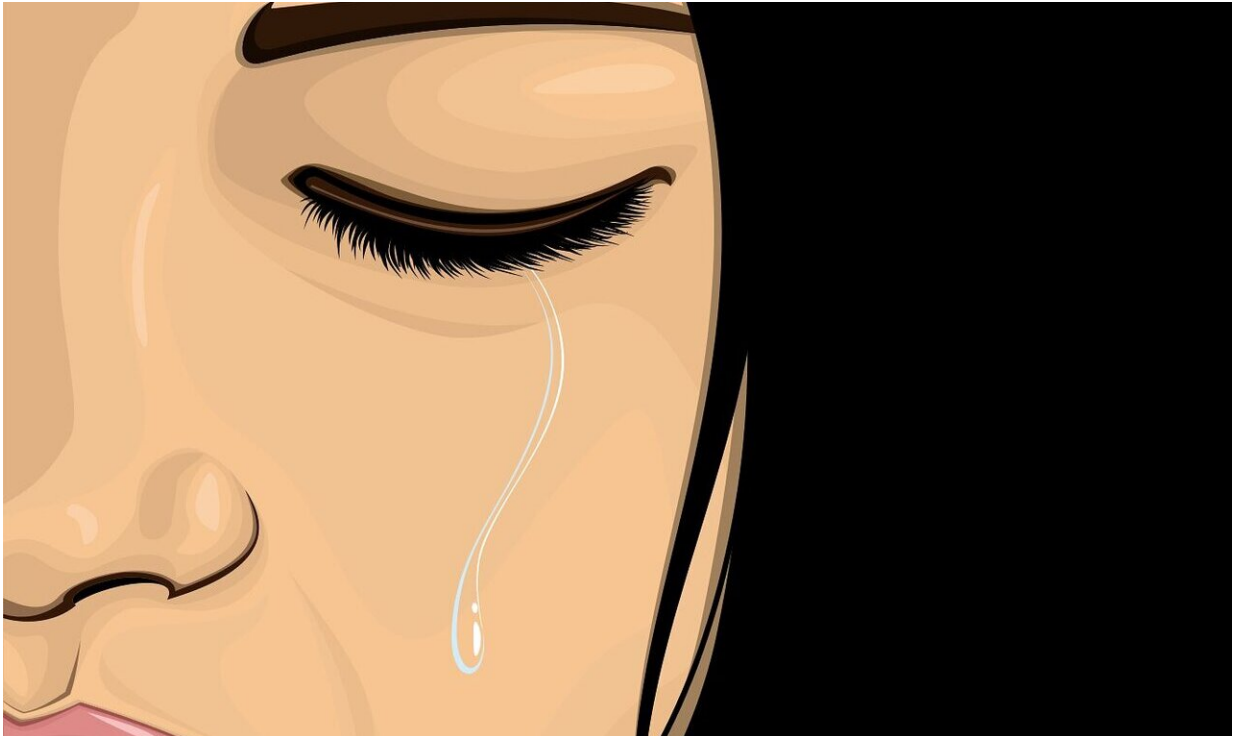


Depression isn't 'crying in the corner'

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Employees who experience depression are tasked with the decision to disclose their mental health to others at work.

For these employees, one West Virginia University researcher found that they utilize eight strategies on how to disclose (or conceal) this often-stigmatized [social identity](#).

Kayla Follmer, assistant professor of management in the John Chambers College of Business and Economics, recognized that [mental illness](#) can be a concealable identity, much like [religious affiliation](#), [sexual orientation](#) or having conditions such as HIV or diabetes: you can't always see it from the outside.

This led her to wonder how people manage this identity at work.

"Are people with [depression](#) disclosing their disorder at work?" Follmer asked. "Are they telling other people and how are they going about it?"

After a series of interviews with 30 employees ranging from a candy display builder to a pharmacy technician to an active-duty member of the Navy, Follmer discovered that individuals employed eight strategies when it comes to managing depression identity in the workplace.

- **Concealing:** Employees simply hid their depression from others at work. This entailed actively hiding both information and behaviors.
- **Fabricating:** This is a non-disclosure method where a person shares [false information](#) to hide their depression. For example, one participant lied to their supervisor about psychiatric appointments. Instead, they told the boss they had to see a doctor for migraine issues.
- **Masking:** Another non-disclosure method, masking includes putting on a façade or fake persona, like smiling when you don't feel like it.
- **Signaling:** Considered a semi-disclosure method, signaling means alluding to one's depression, in either passive or active ways. With this strategy, individuals did not openly disclose but did provide hints about their stigmatized identity. Respondents felt their natural dispositions were enough for colleagues to catch on that they might be depressed. Others said they openly

vocalized life's challenges, such as divorce or loss, to their colleagues.

- **Limited Disclosure:** With this limited disclosure strategy, participants told others at work about some aspects of their depression but did not disclose full information. For instance, one might disclose struggles with mental illness but not mention taking prescription medication or hospitalizations.
- **Selective Disclosure:** This strategy occurs when individuals tell only certain individuals at work—not everyone—about their depression.
- **Transparency:** This full-disclosure method happens when a person is generally open about their depression and tell everyone about it.
- **Advocacy:** Those who are advocates take it a step further. Not only did they fully disclose their [mental health](#) but they advocated for awareness for others.

Follmer's findings are published in *Group & Organization Management*.

"What's novel about this study is that we were able to show support for a continuum of disclosure," Follmer said. "We have this continuum, which had been theorized, but now it's supported empirically. In other words, people do not simply disclose or conceal, but rather there are gradations of these decisions."

Follmer said those who fall on the non-disclosure end of the continuum are fearful of the stigmatization of mental illness and facing unjust consequences such as being fired or mistreated at work.

For people who semi-disclose information, Follmer believes those employees are dipping their toe in the water to test how others may react to their disclosure.

On the far end of the continuum is full disclosure, in which participants are open about their depression diagnosis.

"It's not necessarily telling every single person you meet, rather it's a general openness that if it comes up, you'll talk about it," Follmer explained. "You're willing to share your experiences and you don't feel afraid or ashamed."

In this study, participants were least likely to use full disclosure strategies, suggesting that many employees are still afraid to fully embrace their mental illness at work.

Follmer also observed the outcomes of her participants' decisions. Individuals may have switched strategies over time based on the reactions of their peers and supervisors.

"If they changed jobs, maybe before they were very open but not now because of a bad experience," she said. "Perhaps they weren't open before but now they have a supportive climate. So we see this change across jobs and also within jobs. For instance, there were some individuals who disclosed to their boss and their boss was not receptive or supportive at all. Now they don't talk about it anymore."

Overall, these results show that employees choose to manage their depression in unique ways, and there isn't one best approach. According to Follmer, organizations can benefit by providing an inclusive climate in which employees may choose to manage their identity however they see best.

For Follmer, her research matters in the business world.

"In organizational research, we don't focus on people with disabilities," she said. "We have stereotypes of the ideal worker. They're always going

to be very productive and very healthy and we're going to work them to the bone. But there's a gap here. On one hand, there's the notion of epidemic levels of mental illness and suicide. None of that is reflected in organizational research. I feel it's an injustice that millions of people each year are experiencing mental illness and we aren't doing a good job bringing their experiences to light."

"We're managing human beings and sometimes we would do better to just simply check in and say, 'How are you doing? What can I do to support you? If you need anything I'm here,' rather than saying your performance is not good. We should take a more humanistic approach first to manage the individual rather than always just focusing on their work output."

More information: Kayla B. Follmer et al, Navigating Depression at Work: Identity Management Strategies Along the Disclosure Continuum, *Group & Organization Management* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/10596011211002010](https://doi.org/10.1177/10596011211002010)

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