

Mental Health: It's Part of Our Lives at Work

This fact sheet is designed to help people in the workplace who have a mental illness.

If you are employed and have a mental illness, you are not alone. According to the Wall Street Journal,¹ one in five people in a typical U.S. office is likely to experience a mental illness each year. The onset of many mental health disorders comes between the ages of 25 and 40, when people are highly active in the workforce.²

Work and Recovery

Experts increasingly acknowledge that work is a key factor in supporting mental wellness and warding off the symptoms of mental illness.³ In a study of professionals (lawyers, engineers, physicians, managers and others) with severe and persistent mental illnesses, it was reported that work provided a distraction from the symptoms of their illnesses and contributed to better mental health.⁴

Work is also an important path to recovery from a mental illness. Contrary to some of the myths associated with mental illnesses, people can and do recover from even the most serious mental illnesses. In fact, the treatment success rate for each mental illness (separately, and including schizophrenia) is higher than it is for heart disease alone.⁵

Over the last decade, the role of employment in fostering or hindering mental health has been increasingly acknowledged, and many employers are actively promoting mental health in the workplace. According to a report by the International Labor Organization, in the United States an estimated 40 percent to 60 percent of workplaces with more than 50 employees provide some kind of mental health program, including stress management programs.⁶ Employers who promote mental health by eliminating or cutting down on sources of stress through such methods as improving physical working conditions; creating more flexible working arrangements, such as job sharing, job rotation and flexible hours; and allowing employees more input into corporate planning and decision-making, can expect to reap benefits in reduced absences and increased productivity.⁷

Disclosure

Whether or not to reveal to your employer that you have a mental illness is a very personal decision. The decision to disclose that you have a mental illness is complicated by the stereotypes and stigma that are still associated with mental illnesses because of misinformation and lack of information.

There are some potential risks and benefits of disclosure. *If* you decide to reveal the fact that you have a psychiatric diagnosis (possibly because you need an accommodation), here are tips that may relieve your anxiety and accomplish your goal of educating your employer:

- **Provide the facts.** Many national mental health advocacy organizations (such as the National Mental Health Association and National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI]) and their local chapters provide fact sheets and information on specific illnesses, illustrating that recovery is truly possible no matter what diagnosis you have.
- **Demonstrate your success in the workplace.** A mental illness, like a physical illness, is just a part of who you are. Remind your employer of the reasons why you were hired in the first place—and why you are still a valuable employee.
- **Provide some suggestions and/or solutions.** If your mental illness has the potential to affect your job performance, provide an explanation to ease your employer's concerns. You might say, "I tend to get anxious when there's a lot of noise or when there are people hanging around my desk, but I find that a short walk gets me re-focused." Let your employer know if you will need an accommodation. Most accommodations requested can be beneficial to you and your employer by enhancing your productivity. (Note: According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, which applies to many public employers and to private employers with more than 15 employees, accommodations must be provided, but only if the accommodation does not present an undue burden on the employer, such as excessive financial and administrative responsibility.)
- **Leave the door open for discussion.** If your employer has questions about your illness or other information you have shared, make it clear that you may be willing to provide more information. By law, your employer must respect your right to confidentiality.

Many have suggested that it may be best for an employee to wait to disclose until he or she must formally request an accommodation from his or her employer. It may also be possible to request an accommodation without characterizing it as disability-related. Employees should familiarize themselves with their employers' policies and especially with past practices regarding maternity leave, disability leave, sabbaticals, leave without pay, medical leave, leave for purposes of military service, jury duty, etc. It is very helpful if an employee can make a connection between the accommodation he or she is requesting and an accommodation made for another employee.

Seeking Assistance

Recognizing, and seeking assistance for, a mental health problem within the context of work can be daunting. Well-known entrepreneur and philanthropist J.B. Fuqua once expressed his fear that if people knew of his mental illness it might adversely affect his business or personal relationships. Other prominent business leaders, such as CNN's former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Tom Johnson, have voiced the same concern.

While the decision to disclose your illness is your decision, don't let it hold you back from locating the resources to overcome it. You may be able to find assistance through

your company's health plan or Employee Assistance Plan. If your company has neither, contact your local mental health association or your local United Way.

Resources

For more information about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), contact:

- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission www.eeoc.gov
- Job Accommodation Network <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/links/adalinks.htm>
- Department of Justice <http://www.usdoj.gov>
- Free teleconference training on this topic is available through the SAMHSA Resource Center to Address Discrimination and Stigma (ADS Center): <http://www.stopstigma.samhsa.gov/archtel.htm>.

This fact sheet is intended only as a very brief introduction to this complex subject. Articles, fact sheets, resource organizations, and other materials on this topic are available at Web site http://stopstigma.samhsa.gov/topics_materials/employment.htm.

For more information about how to address discrimination and stigma, contact the SAMHSA Resource Center to Address Discrimination and Stigma (ADS Center) <http://stopstigma.samhsa.gov>, e-mail stopstigma@samhsa.hhs.gov or call 800-540-0320, a program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services.

¹ Mental Illness: A Rising Workplace Cost—One Form, Depression, Takes \$70 Billion Toll Annually; Bank One Intervenes Early. Tanouye, E. *Wall Street Journal* (6/13/01).

² National Mental Health Association, 2003.

³ Re-employment: The Road Back to Mental Health. The Center for Reintegration, (n/d). Online. Internet. Available <http://www.reintegration.com>.

⁴ Van Dongen, C.J. Quality Of Life And Self Esteem In Working And Non Working Persons With Mental Illness. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 1996, Dec; 32(6): 535-48

⁵ National Institutes of Mental Health, 2002.

⁶ "Mental Health in the Workplace," International Labor Organization, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/disability/papers/execsumcontents.htm>

⁷ "Mental Health in the Workplace: Tackling the effects of stress," Mental Health Foundation, UK (1999, 2000), <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/page.cfm?pagecode=PBBFMW#08>

⁸ Mental Health Works. Online. Internet. Available at <http://www.mentalhealthworks.ca/employees/faq/question3.asp>.

⁹ Fuqua is founder of Fuqua Industries, a multi-million-dollar Atlanta-based conglomerate with diverse holdings.