

PROs & CONs OF TELLING AN EMPLOYER ABOUT YOUR HEALTH ISSUE.

There are advantages and disadvantages of telling an employer (or potential employer) that you have an illness or disability that is not immediately obvious (e.g. chronic back pain, or a mental illness).

A lot depends on the attitude and understanding of the employer.

People have different opinions and ideas about disclosure. Here are two comments from people who have 'been there'.

Some people prefer to be up-front about their health issues:

"Yes, I disclosed on application and at interview. I was asked if it would affect my work, and I said 'No, I am on medication to stabilise me'. This was not a problem. "

Cromax, 35, Customer Service, Fast Food Industry

"I allude to it in my CV and also brought it up in my interview and it would be no different if I was applying for a non-mental health related position. While it's hard to be honest about having been affected by mental illness, sometimes it's easier to be upfront about it because you can arrange reasonable accommodation and your employer is likely to be more understanding should problems arise. It also means that when you do find a job, you know that you have got it in a completely transparent way and that you don't have to fear people 'finding out'."

Sione, Health Sector Manager

Other people never disclose, or have experienced discrimination when they disclosed their illness:

"I got along well with the interviewer on the phone. During the start of the interview everything was fine. As soon as I mentioned I was on medication I could tell by their reaction that I was not going to get the job"

from Respect Costs Nothing, Mental Health Foundation (2004)

Have the courage to get on with it – just do it... Go for it – right now!

Here are some of the things you might want to think about before deciding whether or not to tell your employer or potential employer about your health issue.

Advantages of disclosure:

- Can gain extra support and respect in the workplace
- Employer obliged to make reasonable accommodation
- Education about disability/illness is possible for employer and other staff
- Honesty from the start
- Reduces stress of secrecy and fear of being found out
- Makes it easier to plan with the employer how to cope with periods of un-wellness
- Access to funding/subsidies
- Feelings of acceptance and belonging
- Solidarity with others similarly affected

Disadvantages of disclosure:

- Potential for stigma and discrimination
- Risk of not getting interview/job
- May limit opportunities and promotions
- May be perceived as less competent, undervalued
- May feel vulnerable, embarrassed, different, isolated
- Employer may blame any negative situation on your illness
- Possible scape-goating or bullying
- Possible double standards – you may come under closer scrutiny than other employees or have to work harder to gain the same respect

There are also advantages and disadvantages to NOT telling:

Advantages of NON-disclosure

- More job opportunities
- No discrimination
- Personal rights/choice/privacy

Disadvantages of NON-disclosure

- You can't get subsidies, support or 'reasonable accommodation'
- Angry employer (and possible job loss) if found out later
- Potential for being "outed" and anxiety and stress that goes with it

HOW & WHEN TO DISCLOSE

Normally it is up to you when (if ever) to disclose, and you can decide whether you tell your employer yourself, or ask your employment consultant (if you have one) to talk to your employer.

Find out as much as you can about the employer to get a sense of how accepting they might be. Are they an EEO (Equal Employment Opportunities) employer? Do they have other employees with disabilities?

Go with your gut feeling – some people feel safe to mention their health issue right at the start, others feel more comfortable after they have proved themselves in the job and the employer has gotten to know them as a person. Some people only disclose if they become unwell.

If and when you do decide to disclose, be positive, honest and specific. Tell your employer how your health problem affects your work (if at all) and what you need to do to avoid or solve any potential problems.

Keep the conversation short, and don't go into lengthy detail about your diagnosis or history – instead talk about how the health issue manifests in your work-life, and how you manage it.

For example:

I have recovered from a back injury but I now know how to prevent a re-occurrence. I am very careful of how I bend, lift or turn. I cannot imagine myself being a risk to myself or your company.

Our THOUGHTS affect our FEELINGS...

Our FEELINGS affect our ATTITUDES...

Our ATTITUDES affect our ACTIONS...

Our ACTIONS affect our OUTCOMES...