



## **One of my employees has a mental health problem. How can I explain the situation to other employees?**

- Privacy comes first
- Ask your employee how they want to handle questions
- Scenario: What should you say?
- Accommodations aren't "special treatment"

The co-workers of an employee with a mental illness may come to you with their concerns—maybe they're nervous about working with someone they suspect or know has a mental illness. Or they may approach you during the return to work of an employee who has been on disability leave for a mental illness, complaining that accommodations for that employee are special treatment. This is often the case if the employee returning to work is given preferential hours, or is offered a private or preferential workspace.

### **Privacy comes first**

First, remember your obligation to respect the privacy of your employees—a mental health problem is a medical problem, so you aren't free to discuss it with other employees, just as you wouldn't discuss confidential medical information. Ideally, your organization has a policy respecting the privacy of employees. In any case, there are constructive ways to answer other employees' concerns.

If you hear other employees discussing the details of the individual's illness you need to talk to the other employees and let them know it is inappropriate. If these conversations reveal discriminatory attitudes or could be seen to constitute harassment, appropriate disciplinary measures should be taken.

### **Ask your employee how they want to handle questions**

Society still harbors stereotypes about people with mental illnesses, and those misconceptions and fears make their way into workplaces. Although the stigma around mental illness can take the form of well-meaning misunderstandings, it often results in discrimination and harassment. In a social environment like a workplace, it's especially important to defuse and discourage stigma. Remember, the employee with the problem will face the same questions you're facing, and they'll have to suffer the misunderstandings and resentments of other workers.

So ask the employee with the mental health problem how they're handling questions about their problem and accommodations. Some will be very open about recovering from an illness, or taking time each week to see a

psychiatrist, or trying to manage stress. Some will want to keep that information confidential, and it's their right to do so. It's crucial that you encourage the employee to communicate with you about their needs and preferences. It will smooth the accommodation process for everyone.

### Scenario: What should you say?

Ellen has told you she has bipolar disorder, and needs to travel into the next town every Tuesday and Friday afternoon to meet with her psychotherapist. You've agreed that she'll work until 3 pm on those afternoons, and make up the time by taking short lunches and bringing work home. Two other employees approach you about "going home early;" they expect "equal treatment" and want short Friday afternoons in particular.

Again, make sure you and Ellen have agreed on what she wants to tell co-workers. If you have a flex-time policy that permits flexible scheduling for workers so long as they work a certain number of hours each week, be sure to mention that policy.

- If Ellen is not willing to discuss her condition, you might say:
  - Ellen has appointments during office hours each week that she can't schedule for evenings or weekends, so we've set up a work schedule that lets her make up the time.
  - I want everyone in the organization to work as productively as possible, and if that means that we need to reorganize your work schedule in accordance with our policies, we can talk about that.
- If Ellen is willing to discuss her condition, you might say:
  - Ellen has a common condition called bipolar disorder, and she gets treatment during office hours, but we've organized her schedule so she makes up the time.
  - She's very open to talking about bipolar disorder; you could ask her about it if you want to know more.
  - I want everyone to work as productively as possible, and if that means juggling your work schedule in accordance with our policies, we can talk about that.

If another employee is needed to fill in for Ellen—in a retail or reception job, for example—the accommodation would require you to juggle the schedules of other employees, which may interfere with their own jobs. In those cases, you should discuss scheduling and duties with the affected employees to determine how best to satisfy every employee's needs.

### Accommodations aren't "special treatment"

Accommodations are used only when someone has a functional limitation—the limitation of skills and abilities due to a disability—preventing them from performing essential duties of their job. Be open about the policy of accommodation at your workplace; accommodations—especially those for mental health problems—usually

are easy to implement, inexpensive (most cost less than \$500, and many have no cost at all), may be temporary (when someone is adjusting after their return to work, for example) and increase the productivity of your workers. Small adjustments can make a big difference in the mental health of your employees.

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