

If, When, And How To Disclose To An Employer That You Have A Mental Health Disability

Chris is 18 years old and is planning to begin applying for summer jobs. He was recently diagnosed with a mental health disability.

Should he tell the businesses where he applies that he has this condition?

Some basics about the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) and disclosure

- ▶ The ADA protects the rights of people with disabilities in employment settings.
- ▶ If you are a person who has been diagnosed with a mental health condition, you will be covered under the ADA when you apply for a job and when you go to work.
- ▶ Under the ADA it is illegal for a business to ask job applicants if they have a disability.
- ▶ It is your decision whether or not you disclose that you have a disability to a potential employer.
- ▶ If you do disclose during the interview it is against the law (ADA) for an employer to not offer you the job if you are the most qualified applicant.
- ▶ If you decide not to disclose during the interview, but do so after you are offered the job in order to obtain accommodations, it is against the law for an employer to withdraw the job offer.
- ▶ Businesses must provide “reasonable” accommodations to employees with disabilities.

Jan is 28 years old and wishes to begin applying for jobs. Because of her mental health issues, she has not been able to work for many years.

Should she tell the businesses where she applies that she has this condition?

Questions to ask yourself to guide you in deciding if and when to disclose, and how to talk about your mental health disabilities

- 1 Are you more than about 22-25 years of age with a large gap in your employment history which can't be explained by having spent most of your time since high school in college or a vocational training program?
 YES NO
- 2 If you are hired by the business, will you probably need accommodations?
 YES NO
- 3 Will your mental health challenges likely be apparent during a job interview?
 YES NO
- 4 Does the employer probably already know that you have a mental health challenge because you live in a very small town where most people know each other well or because a staff person from an agency that serves people with mental health disabilities has assisted you to obtain the interview with the business?
 YES NO



Depending On How You Answered The Questions, Here Are Some Things To Think About Regarding Whether Or Not You Will Disclose And When

If you answer **NO to All Four of the questions:**

You probably *should not disclose* your disability during the interview. By not disclosing during the interview you can avoid the possibility that you will not be hired because you have a disability. Many employers have positive attitudes about hiring people with disabilities, but there are still some who doubt the ability of people with disabilities to work, particularly people with mental health conditions. If you are truly the most qualified applicant for a job, the ADA requires that the employer offer it to you. However, being the most qualified among many applicants is hard to prove, particularly for the types of jobs that youth and young adults typically apply for.

If you answer **YES to question #1** because you have a large gap in your work history, but **NO to the other questions:**

You *may decide to not disclose* during an interview. However, you should be prepared to explain your work history gap in such a way that you don't disclose your disability. If you have been in school, your resume will show this. If you haven't been in school and you're in your mid- to late-20's, you might say something like, "I have had some personal issues I needed to deal with. I have taken care of them, and I am now ready to go to work." Legally, employers should not ask you to explain the personal issues.

If you answer **YES to question #2** because you may need accommodations in order to be successful in the job, but **NO to the other questions:**

It probably *is best to not disclose*, again, in order to avoid the possibility of not being offered the job because you have a disability. On the other hand, by indicating during an interview that you may need accommodations because you have a disability, you will find out how the employer reacts to this information. Your work should help promote your recovery and one key to this occurring is to work for a supportive employer.

If you answer **YES to question #3** because your mental health issues may be apparent during an interview:

You *may consider disclosing*. Of course, you will not want to go to an interview if you are having significant symptoms related to your mental health challenges. On the other hand, even when feeling well some people may have side-effects from their medications. For example, a medication side effect that is not uncommon is shaky hands. However, many job applicants who do not experience a disability or take medications have shaky hands caused by nervousness during interviews. If you think that whatever symptom or symptoms you have will be very obvious during a job interview, the interviewer may wonder about the cause. If you don't offer an explanation the employer will have to guess the cause and may guess wrong (for example, you are taking illegal drugs) and may not offer you the job for this reason. By disclosing in a positive way, and telling the interviewer that you are ready, able, and eager to do the job, many employers will respect your honesty and be willing to give you a chance at the job. You may decide to disclose that you have a "health" issue; you may decide to be more specific by saying that you have a "mental health" issue, or you may disclose the specific disability that you experience. Which way you go will depend on the symptoms that you have and how apparent they will be in an interview. For example, a person who because of experiencing Tourette Syndrome may blurt out inappropriate words or sounds during an interview, probably will want to disclose his or her disability fairly early on in the interview, if not before the interview.

If you answer **YES to question #4** because lots of people in your small town may know you and that you experience disability or because a staff person at a program where you receive mental health services has spoken with the employer about giving you an interview:

Your disability *has already been disclosed*. You will need to think about how you will talk about it in the interview. It is best to not avoid discussing it, but to do so in a straightforward and positive way.

There is no right or wrong answer to the question of whether or not to disclose a mental health disability, and if so, when. You will need to decide what the right answer is for you.

What To Say When Disclosing A Mental Health Disability And Asking For Accommodations

As suggested previously, for most people, it probably is best to not disclose during an interview, but to do so, if accommodations will be needed, *after* the job has been offered.

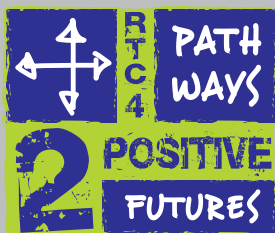
If you do decide to disclose your disability, think carefully about what you want to say, and of course when you will say it. Only share information that is relevant to the job setting and job. For example, you shouldn't share information about the history of your mental health challenges, such as when you were first diagnosed and how many times you have been hospitalized; this information is not relevant. The focus of the information should be on the accommodations that you will need because of specific challenges caused by the disability, rather than on the disability itself.

The box on the right provides one example of what someone might say to let an employer know that she or he will need accommodations because of a mental health condition. The explanation is upbeat and positive, and tells the employer that the person will need specific, but simple accommodations and that the person knows and uses his or her own coping strategies.

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I have a mental health condition which I am able to manage very well with some simple strategies, such as taking short breaks of about 10 minutes every 90 minutes or so, which is an accommodation that I would ask for. It also helps me if I have a place to work with plenty of light. I have a small light box that I can bring with me to work and set up at my desk. I am very motivated and committed to working and being a productive member of your team, and I am confident that I can do a great job.

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