

ENTERING THE WORLD OF WORK: WHAT YOUTH WITH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ACCOMMODATIONS

Starting a job can be difficult for any young person. If you happen to have a hidden disability, such as a mental health impairment, a new workplace can be overwhelming. If you have ever felt this way, you are not alone. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for ages 15-44 is major depressive disorder (and this is only one type of mental health impairment). Along with questions about the job itself, you may have questions about when and how to disclose your disability. You may wonder if it is appropriate to ask for modifications in your new work setting. This fact sheet provides guidance to assist you with a successful transition into the workforce by answering questions regarding disclosure, accommodations and resources.

■ THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT AND YOUTH WITH MENTAL HEALTH IMPAIRMENTS

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990. It is a Federal civil rights law protecting people with disabilities from discrimination, including youth with mental health impairments. The law has different sections called "Titles." Each Title addresses discrimination in different settings. The section regarding discrimination against people with disabilities in the workplace is called Title I. This section prohibits discrimination in all aspects of employment, including recruitment, pre-employment screening, hiring, compensation, benefits, training, layoffs, termination, and promotions and requires that most employers provide reasonable accommodations for qualified job applicants and employees with known disabilities. A reasonable accommodation is any change in the work environment or in the way things are usually done which enables a person with a disability to perform the essential functions of the job.

The term "disability" is defined as:

- (1) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities
- (2) a record of a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, or
- (3) being regarded as having a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities

Sometimes it can be difficult to know whether Title I of the ADA applies to you. If you are a person with a mental health disability, Title I applies to you when you are "qualified" for a job. Being qualified means you have the required skill, experience, education, and other job-related requirements for the position. You are qualified if you can perform the important or essential job tasks of the position, even if you need a reasonable accommodation to do so. It is important to note that, if you are applying to work at a small business, the ADA only applies to employers with 15 or more workers.

■ WHAT IS A MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITY?

A mental health disability is a mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity. There is not one agreed upon definition of a mental health impairment. As you leave school and enter the work world, the terms used to describe your mental health impairment may change. If you have a mental health impairment, you may find your thinking, mood or behavior may be impacted by a psychological condition. Mental health impairments are real and not a sign of personal weakness.

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Some common mental health impairments are:

- Depression, which affects a person's mood, concentration, sleep, activity, appetite, social behavior and feelings
- Bipolar disorder (manic depression), which causes a person to experience extreme highs and lows
- Schizophrenia, which affects a person's ability to think clearly, manage emotions, make decisions and relate to others
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which occurs after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which causes intense recurring unwanted thoughts (obsessions) or rituals (compulsions)
- Panic Disorders, which cause unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms such as chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness or abdominal distress

■ COMMON ON-THE-JOB CONCERNS FOR YOUTH WITH MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITIES

As you start your new job, it is important to know that many youth with mental health disabilities share similar experiences. Common challenges include:

- maintaining regular attendance
- dealing with the change of starting a new job
- nervousness about interacting with others
- understanding how to manage time
- organizing information
- handling stress and emotions
- maintaining focus

This list does not include all experiences youth with mental health disabilities may face. Job tasks you find challenging because of your disability may be adjusted or modified through requesting accommodations from your employer. However, before you ask for an accommodation, you need to know a little bit about disclosing your disability.

■ DISCLOSING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DISABILITY

Disclosing your disability in an employment setting is ultimately a personal decision and can change depending upon the situation and the need for an accommodation.

You only need to disclose your disability if you want to ask for an accommodation to complete the application process or to do job-related tasks. Disclosure is necessary to receive a reasonable accommodation, because most employers are legally required to provide accommodations for a job applicant or worker with a known disability.

If you do not need an accommodation, disclosing your disability is completely your decision. You should do what you think is best. Always trust yourself regarding disclosure.

When and if you choose to tell your employer you have a disability, you should do it in a way that is comfortable for you. Asking people close to you for their opinions on how to disclose your disability may be helpful, but ultimately you should do what you feel is right. If you choose to disclose, focus your discussion on what you can do, not what you cannot do.

■ REQUESTING AN ACCOMMODATION

Many employers are aware of accommodations for people with physical disabilities, but may not know how to accommodate people with invisible disabilities. Unlike in high school, it is your responsibility to ask for an accommodation. You need to be aware of your individual needs and abilities and be able to communicate them to your employer.

People with disabilities can request an accommodation at any time during the application process or while employed. To request an accommodation, you have to inform your employer of the need for an adjustment or change at work for a reason related to your disability. There are no key words you must use in order to make the request, and neither the ADA nor the phrase "reasonable accommodation" has to be mentioned. Do not be afraid to ask your employer for a work-related accommodation if it will help you perform your job better.

■ SOME COMMON TYPES OF REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

Below are some common challenges and possible accommodations you might ask your employer to consider. If you decide to disclose your disability and ask your employer for an accommodation, it is a good idea to have already considered what type of accommodation you need to better perform your job. This list may help you think about possible solutions.

CHALLENGE

POSSIBLE ACCOMMODATIONS

Maintaining consistent attendance

- Flexible leave to attend counseling
- Making up time missed
- Schedule a later start time

Dealing with change

- Maintaining open lines of communication with supervisor
- Scheduling regular meetings with supervisor to discuss work-related issues

Interacting with others

- Providing a mentor, a team leader or a buddy to facilitate social and work-related interactions
- Participating in team activities

Managing time

- An electronic calendar marked with meetings and deadlines
- Use E-mail as a time management tool
- Daily or weekly performance goals
- A partner or a mentor to help with time management

CHALLENGE

Organizing information

POSSIBLE ACCOMMODATIONS, *con'd.*

- Assistance in prioritizing tasks
- A written to-do list, which can be reviewed on a regular basis
- Dividing large assignments into smaller tasks
- A personal data assistant or other electronic organizer

Handling stress and emotions

- Short breaks to walk around the block
- Praise and positive reinforcement
- Permission to call or instant message a support person

Maintaining concentration

- A quiet location
- Space enclosures
- Wearing a headset or ear sets and listening to music or “white noise”

■ CONCLUSION

Transitioning to work can be a challenge for youth with mental health impairments. Nonetheless, understanding your disability, disclosure options, and rights under the ADA can help make the transition a successful one.

■ RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

- **The Job Accommodation Network (JAN)** is a free consulting service from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy providing individualized workplace accommodation solutions, as well as information on the ADA and services related to employment for people with disabilities.
1-800-526-7234 (V) 1-877-781-9403 (TTY)
www.jan.wvu.edu
- **The 411 on Disability Disclosure** is a workbook developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability/Youth (NCWD-Y) to help young people with disabilities make an informed decision about disclosing their disability in employment, education, and social life situations. The workbook does not tell a young person what to do, but rather helps you come to your own decision. To download the workbook, visit:
www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&_Publications/411.html.

For information regarding what pre-employment questions may be asked on a job application or during an interview, please visit the U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Web site at www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/preemp.html.

