



THE TEMPLE UNIVERSITY COLLABORATIVE ON  
**COMMUNITY INCLUSION**  
of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities

## Section 12:

# Dealing with Disclosure, Discrimination and Harassment on the Job

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## ***Introduction***

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Many people know very little about mental health issues, and some wrongly believe that people with mental health diagnoses are incapable, unintelligent, strange, or dangerous. Some individuals in recovery find that one of their most difficult challenges in obtaining and keeping a job is combating the negative cultural messages that people with mental health conditions cannot or should not work.

While your employer and supervisor, and most of your coworkers may not care about your mental health status, you may encounter some who hold these destructive beliefs. A few people may tease or harass you, and you may also experience more subtle forms of discrimination.

It is important to carefully consider how you want to respond. Because people may be uninformed about mental health issues or fear individuals with mental health diagnoses, there is some risk in letting your boss, your supervisor, or your coworkers know about your situation.

This Section will help you recognize discrimination and harassment, and figure out what to do about it. It can also help you decide whether, when, and how to tell colleagues about your mental health issues.



## ***Disclosure at Work***

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There are many good reasons to “disclose” at your workplace and many good reasons not to. On the one hand, disclosing that you have a mental health condition exposes you to other people’s misconceptions and prejudices. On the other hand, if people know your situation it may help them understand you better. Unfortunately, there is no way to predict what will happen if you do or do not disclose, so think about this carefully and talk it over with family and friends. You might also seek advice from counselors, job coaches, or other individuals in recovery who are also working.



## ***Reasons you might choose NOT TO disclose:***

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- People may judge you based on misinformation and prejudice instead of seeing you as an individual.
- You may be discriminated against, even though it is against the law to do so. You may fear losing your job, being passed over for raises and promotions, or not being hired in the first place.
- You may worry that people will avoid you, gossip about you, or be afraid of you rather than being supportive.
- Your belief that mental health history is private and personal and you do not believe it is necessary to share it with others.
- You may feel that your mental health diagnosis is irrelevant to your work life if it doesn’t affect your work or work relationships.
- You think people might attribute your successes to your treatment and your difficulties to your mental health condition, rather than thinking of you as a whole person who has good and bad days, and areas of skill and vulnerability like anyone else.



### ***Reasons you might choose TO disclose:***

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- You might disclose in order to get the job accommodations you need. If you don't need an accommodation you don't need to disclose, but you can only make this decision once you know enough about the work setting, culture and tasks to determine that you need something other than what is already part of the workplace.
- The job is designated for someone with a mental health diagnosis, as is the case in positions such as peer support specialists. In these instances, disclosing will make you eligible for the job.
- You want someone at work to understand you better so that you can work more comfortably together.
- You want people to know that someone with a mental health diagnosis can do a good job and that you are an example of this. In this situation, you are not just making a personal statement but playing a public education role.
- It is uncomfortable for you to keep your mental health challenges to yourself. It can take a lot of energy and attention to make sure that nobody knows about your situation. Some people are more comfortable if they don't have to worry about keeping secrets.
- You feel that some aspects of your mental health diagnosis are central to who you are and you want to be authentically yourself at work.
- At your workplace, people share aspects of their personal lives with each other, and support each other in ways that go beyond the job. Where coworkers care about each other, disclosing can open the door to a new source of support. It can also be reassuring to know that your coworkers are aware of your needs and are looking out for you.



## ***When to disclose***

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Some people choose to disclose their mental health status during their job interview so that everything is up front from the beginning. Others wait until after they've been hired before they even consider disclosing. Some people prefer to wait until after they've been on the job for a while and have a chance to show their ability to do the work. Others might decide to tell their supervisor about their mental health issues when they start their job. Some people prefer to wait until their coworkers have had a chance to get to know them before they disclose their mental health issues. Others prefer to let their coworkers know right away, and use it as an opportunity to teach their coworkers about mental health issues. And some people choose never to disclose at work at all.

The only reason you must disclose is when you are formally requesting a job accommodation on the basis of a disability. Even though some employers say that they would rather know about an employee's disability sooner rather than later, you do not have to tell them until you request accommodations. (See Section 11 for more information on job accommodations.) Disclosing for any other reason depends on what is comfortable for you.



## ***What to tell people***

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First, think about why you are disclosing. Consider your audience: who are they and what do they already know about you? How much do they need to know? How much do you feel safe sharing with them? People may fear what they don't understand, and it can help if you are prepared to educate them. Encourage people to ask you questions if they are curious or unsure about anything. Many people have been given little or only inaccurate information about mental health issues, and may make assumptions that you should be prepared to address. If you are not comfortable answering questions, it can help to have educational materials about mental health handy.

You have choices about what to tell people. You might decide to tell someone only the little bit of information you think they need to know. You don't have to tell them your whole life story; that may be TMI (Too Much Information)!

Here are some examples of different ways you might disclose at work:

- Say you have a problem you need help with. Describe the immediate problem, and what you need.
- "I take medicine for a medical problem. The medicine makes me very thirsty. Would it be okay with you if I keep a water bottle with me?" (This would be addressed to your supervisor.)
- Tell them you have a mental health condition and describe the challenges and what you want them to understand.

- “I have problems with depression. Sometimes that means I might be sad or grouchy or not feel like talking. If that happens, please don’t take it personally.”
- You might choose to tell someone your diagnosis, define it for them, and describe the impact it has on your life at work. However, think carefully before you tell someone your diagnosis (unless your employer needs to know in order to grant you an accommodation); this may be an unnecessary level of detail.
- “I have an anxiety disorder. When I am anxious about completing a new task, I may have trouble focusing. I can manage this problem best if I can work in a quiet place and can get assignments and instructions in writing.”
- “I want you to know that I have bipolar disorder, which, when untreated, can cause mood swings; but I have it under control and I don’t expect to have any problems with my moods at work. It’s fine if you want to ask me questions; I’ve been dealing with this for a long time and can probably tell you whatever you need to know.”



### ***Whom to tell***

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Whom you choose to tell depends on why you are disclosing and whom you trust. If you are disclosing to get job accommodations, you only have to tell the person responsible for arranging your accommodations. Whether it is someone from the Human Resources office or your supervisor, the person is required to keep what you tell them completely confidential. Section 11 provides more information about this.

Other than that, whom you tell is up to you. In a supportive work situation, disclosing can help your coworkers know what sort of support you need. In a less supportive environment, it may make more sense to keep your personal business to yourself, do your job and seek support elsewhere. Sometimes, in an unsupportive situation, you might find one person you trust who can be an ally, but remember that when you tell someone they just might tell someone else.)



### ***What to expect once you have disclosed***

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Your employer or coworkers may respond with support and assistance. More and more people understand mental health conditions because of their own experiences or those of family members, and most research finds that the longer people work together, the more understanding and supportive they become.

However, employers or co-workers may react negatively. There is still prejudice and suspicion out there; and you may want to make sure you have someone at work, at home, or in a counseling relationship who can help you grapple with some of the fears and resentments that may be expressed toward you at work.





## ***Discrimination***

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Whether or not you choose to disclose on the job, you may experience discrimination related to your mental health issues. Discrimination on the job is when you are being treated differently than other employees for reasons that aren't directly related to the work you do.

There are many different kinds of discrimination. Obvious examples include being passed over for a promotion or raise that you are qualified for, being denied training or benefits that other employees get, being required to follow different rules than other employees, or being fired for reasons unrelated to your performance. Discrimination can also include being over-protected, being given different tasks, being "talked down to," being given "special treatment" when you haven't requested any, or being supported more than you need to be.

Remember, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates that any discrimination in the workplace is illegal. You might have to remind people at work that you have the right to be judged on your abilities. As long as you are doing your job, there is no reason for you to be treated differently from other employees, unless you ask for a job accommodation.

- If you believe that you are experiencing discrimination from Your supervisor at work, it can help to confront the situation directly. Express your concerns to your supervisor calmly and directly: you could say *"I'm concerned that your awareness of my mental health history has had an impact on your evaluation of my work."*

- If you are worried about being passed over for a raise or promotion due to your mental health challenges, you might raise the issue yourself: you could say *"You may have concerns based on my mental health history, but I believe my performance shows clearly that I am able to do the job well."*

- If you are receiving unwanted "special treatment" or favors because of your mental health issues, even if you think your employer is just trying to help, you can let your supervisor know: you could say *"I appreciate your willingness to let me flex my schedule, but I don't need that right now. I'd prefer to work a regular schedule. If I find that I need that sort of accommodation in the future I'll let you know."*

- When people are uninformed or misinformed, they might discriminate against you without even realizing it. In this situation, try to educate that person and clear up the misunderstandings: you could say *"I know you are trying to be helpful, but I think you may be underestimating what I can do. If you aren't sure how much I can handle, please ask me."*

Some people knowingly engage in discriminatory behavior. In these instances, find out your employer's policies for dealing with grievances and what advocacy organizations are available in your area to help you assert your rights.



## Harassment

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You may have coworkers who harass you for being different. If you find yourself being ridiculed, teased, or used as a scapegoat, or if someone is routinely doing something deliberately to make you feel uncomfortable, then you are being harassed. Find out your employer's policies for dealing with harassment on the job. Talk with your supervisor about what is happening and ask for help to solve the problem. If your supervisor is harassing you, talk with that person's supervisor or boss. Harassment is extremely upsetting and disruptive to one's ability to work. No one should have to tolerate harassment at work for any reason.

It can be hard to know how to respond to harassment. Many people are afraid to confront those who are insulting or harassing them. It is especially hard to do it in the heat of the moment. Role-playing with a friend can help you practice how to respond to harassment.

Here are some examples of situations and responses:

- If someone is making jokes that you find insensitive or insulting, you can tell that person how you feel: you could say *"I don't think that's funny. Everyone has emotional problems sometimes, and it's very difficult to deal with. It's nothing to make fun of. It hurts and offends me when you say that."*
- If you are being teased or ridiculed by coworkers, you can tell them to stop: you could say *"I don't appreciate the way you're talking to me. Please leave me alone and let me get my work done. That hurts me. Cut it out."*

- If they won't stop, seek help from a supervisor: you could say *"My co-workers are teasing me and calling me names. When they do that I get upset and it's a lot harder for me to do my work. I need your help in getting them to stop."*
- Sometimes, people might ask questions that are insulting or intended to provoke you. You don't have to answer them: you could say *"I'd really rather not talk about it. I think you just asked me that to upset me. I'm not going to answer that question."*

There are many ways to deal with harassment and discrimination. Think about whether you've encountered harassment and discrimination before and how you handled it. What worked? What did not? Draw from your experience to come up with a strategy that you think will work. Discuss it with some other people who can help you figure things out, and who can support you if you're feeling frustrated, angry, scared, or sad.



### ***Using the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)***

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If you are experiencing harassment or discrimination at your workplace, discuss it with your employer. If your employer is not supportive, you may need to remind them that your rights as an employee are protected by the ADA, and that it is their responsibility to uphold that law. If your employer doesn't respond to this, you might have a job coach, advocate or lawyer