

Should I tell the boss? Disclosing a psychiatric condition in the workplace

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UNTIL HER EARLY THIRTIES, SARA WAS SELF-EMPLOYED because her depression made it too overwhelming to sustain the pressures of an office job. But with the help of medication, she has been able to work well in a demanding job for two years. However recently, the workload has become so overwhelming - and the stress so high - that even with therapy, antidepressants and the support of her partner and friends - it has been challenging to meet all her deadlines and feel good about her accomplishments.

It is at this time that she struggled over whether to disclose to her boss her psychiatric condition. She hoped to get some accommodations in the workplace. For as Wendy Nailer, director of the Work Adjustment and Employment Support Services at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), recommends, an individual should really only disclose a psychiatric condition to an employer if there is something that an employee can gain. She stresses that it is an individual choice that each person must make, after carefully weighing both the advantages and disadvantages of telling.

Sandy Naiman, senior writer at the Toronto Sun, has never kept her mental illness a secret "because knowledge is power," she told an audience of psychiatric consumers and clinicians at a workplace and mental health conference in Toronto this fall. Naiman says that when you talk about your psychiatric condition in the workplace, and at the same time demonstrate that you can work effectively in this environment, then you reduce the stigma attached to having a mental illness. "The healthiest approach to mental illness is to talk about it."

But at the same time, Naiman admits that "in the workplace, we have a lot to learn about mental illness." She cites the example of a manager who took a year off work for clinical depression, and was then laid off three days after returning to work. He was told that his job was redundant.

However others do benefit from disclosing their mental illness at work, and are performing at least as well as their colleagues. A study out of Boston University's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation revealed that people with a serious mental illness (including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression) can thrive in well-paying and meaningful jobs.

Of the 500 professionals and managers with severe mental illnesses who were surveyed, 73 per cent had obtained full-time jobs - in such responsible positions as nurses, case managers, CEOs and lawyers. Interestingly, 86 per cent of the 500 had disclosed the nature of their psychiatric condition to their employers and the majority had done so with no regrets. Almost half said that there were benefits to disclosing: that they had garnered support from their boss and

colleagues, that they no longer had to hide their condition and that they felt better about themselves. Admitting to a psychiatric disability had also enabled them to get certain accommodations in the workplace: such as flexibility in the number of hours they worked, permanent changes to work schedule and the time when they worked; as well as additional supervision and feedback.

As project co-director Zlatka Russinova remarks, "Results of the study suggest that a flexible work schedule and workload are essential to success."

Judith Cook, director of mental health services research at the University of Illinois at Chicago, found similar results. In a survey of employers who had hired workers with a mental illness, the employers reported the workers to be as productive and have as high a quality of work as their colleagues. And in another survey, employers said that workers with a mental illness might need additional training or longer period of training. But they did not find accommodations made to these employees to be burdensome.

In Sara's case, she did disclose to her immediate supervisor, with some trepidation - fearing that her work performance would now be judged based on her psychiatric disability, and that the real problems in the workplace would be overshadowed by her disclosure. When she asked for accommodations to her schedule, she was told that this could only be considered on the grounds of stress/mental health-related problems, and would have to be documented. Initially, she thought that this meant the information would go into a personnel file. Later she discovered that it would be kept in a confidential occupational health file.

While this is standard practice in large organizations, an employee in a smaller organization without an occupational health department may still run the risk of having her disclosure revealed to human resources.

This raises the issue of how much disclosure is desirable and to whom. And are there real benefits from disclosing? For Sara, there was.

Because depression is an aspect of her identity. As she comments, "My struggles make me more driven than ever to prove myself. To beat it. And I want others to know who I am."

But, ironically, she tells *The Journal* using a pseudonym. There are limits to disclosures.

Suggestions on how to disclose:

- Choose the timing (e.g, after a positive evaluation or when securing a job, if accommodation is required).
- Focus on the positive aspects of your coping, rather than details of your situation.

Ballon, D. (2001). Should I tell the boss? Disclosing a psychiatric condition in the workplace. *Journal of Addiction & Mental Health*, 4(1), 13.

- Explain the impact of your mental health problem on "job performance," and what is required to accommodate it in the workplace.
- Describe your problem as having been resolved or treated.
- Don't give an official psychiatric diagnosis, particularly for the more stigmatized disabilities (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder): instead, refer to "having difficulties" or "having a disability and experiencing difficulties."

Sources:

Heather McKee, Higher Education Project, CMHA National Office;
Wendy Nailer and Diana Musson, Work Adjustment and Employment Support
Services, CAMH