

## Disclosure and Accommodations in the Workplace

This call is being recorded.

Gretchen Grappone:

Welcome everyone, I'm Gretchen Grappone and I work in the training division here at the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University. We're going to spend the next hour answering your questions about the topic of disclosure and accommodations in the workplace. Please post your questions in the chat box and we will answer as many as possible during the hour. We do ask that you please keep yourselves on mute. The contents of the webinar were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research, which is a center within the Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services. The contents of this webinar do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL or HHS and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. The territory on which Boston university stands is that of the Wampanoag and Massachusetts people. We offer this land acknowledgement as a way of inviting truth into our conversation over the next hour. Our speaker today, Melanie Whetzel joined the JAN staff as a consultant on the cognitive neurological team in 2008. She has a 14 year history of teaching and advocating for students with disabilities in the public school system. As a member of the cognitive neurological team, she specializes in learning disabilities, mental impairments, developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and brain injuries. She presents nationally on topics ranging from mental health impairments to conduct and performance issues, learning disabilities, ADHD, brain injuries, and more. She's a certified brain injury specialist and completed a graduate certification in career planning and placement for youth in transition. And now I'm going to pass it over to Melanie. And she's going to talk a little bit about JAN and then we'll go right into your questions. So take it away.

Melanie Whetzel:

Okay. Thank you. So JAN stands for the job accommodation at work. We generally refer to ourselves as JAN. It's a lot easier to say. Our website is [askjan.org](http://askjan.org). We have a huge website, easy to maneuver, and lots of information. We have an A to Z of disabilities. You'll see in the menu on the front page, the homepage, that's probably the easiest best resource that you will find. You can find information there by disability, by limitation. So if you don't know, if it's not an anxiety disorder, it's not depression, you just want accommodation ideas for memory or concentration, then you can go there and look those things up. JAN is a free, confidential consulting service. When you call, you'll get a PA. Right now, it's not really working that way. I probably shouldn't have started out that way; right now we're all working from home still. We've gotten a news phone system. It's

not really up to working exactly the way it used to work in our office. So you can call and leave a message and someone will get back to you; our process is to get back in touch with people within 24 hours. And we've been able to do that clear through the pandemic. If you want immediate attention and an answer, you can get on our chat. There's a red box on our home page that says, live chat, click on that. And you're right in there. You can get answers to your questions that way. We have a JAN on demand, which is like a form that you can answer questions to and send it as an email and then we send you an email back. That's really good because the more information you give us, if you answer specific questions, the more information that we can give back to you. And when we say confidential, we do have a database we keep information in. You can call us anonymous, you can contact us as unknown, or you can contact us with your name. It goes no further than our database. And that way, if you call back repeatedly, we can find that information, we can look at what we sent you, we can look at what we talked about and so we can keep that kind of as a running record. We are a nationwide service. Again, it's free: call once, call 10 times it's free. And we're all specialists in different areas, so when you call or contact us, your inquiry or question will be sent to the right team. We have a motor team, we have the cognitive neurological team, we have a sensory team, and then we have a self-employment team. So your question will be sent to the team that it applies to. And then as consultants, we have specialties as well. So your question goes to the specialists on that team so that you get the best answer that you can get. If you have accommodation questions, if you have ADA questions, we're not a legal service, we cannot provide legal information, we're a project through the U.S. Department of Labor through the Office of Disability Employment Policy, but we're not a legal service, but we can provide you with information. And if we don't have the information, we can refer you to someone who can help you. So that's JAN in a nutshell.

Gretchen Grappone:

Excellent. Thank you. Just want to remind people, if you have questions, please post them in the chat box. Our first question, Melanie, can you talk about anxiety and how that plays into the return to work for people who've been working from home and are now required to go back into the workplace?

Melanie Whetzel:

Sure. That's one of our major topics of questions. You know, a lot of people have anxiety. A lot of people have been able to manage their anxiety and maybe not even disclose that to an employer until the pandemic hit. And that maybe caused enough disruption in our lives that people who were able to manage their symptoms by themselves, maybe are not able to now. And working from home was beneficial to a lot of people, you know, for lots of reasons, you can control your environment. You know, I mean, to a degree you can

control your environment, the noise, the light, the people, you know, it may limit your social interaction at work, which for people with anxiety, can be really helpful. And so once employers are calling people to go back to work, one of the things we've tried to really emphasize is that it's not a one size fits all. Different people need different things when they go back to work and accommodations should always be provided on a case by case basis. You know, three people can have anxiety disorder, but they need different things in the workplace and depending on their job and what that workplace environment is like, it can vary greatly. We have questions like the employee says to their employer or their supervisor, "I'm really stressed about coming back because of the pandemic. I have anxiety disorder, I'd like to talk about that," and the employer says, "well, you know, we've taken every precaution we can so it's safe for you to come back." Well for that employee it may not be as safe as they would like it to be, or maybe they need to know exactly what the employer's done to provide those assurances of safety. And so the employer really needs to have that interactive process, that dialogue with the employee to find out what it is that you need to make you feel safe. Here's what we've done. Here's how we can assure you that you're safe. Tell us your concerns. You know, it's something that you need beyond that and they may be able to work that out. Some employees are still going to be able to work from home as an accommodation, just because everybody's called back to the office, doesn't mean that an employer can't accommodate someone with a disability, and allow them to work from home or continue to work from home. Now, one of the things that we discovered over this time was, you know, people were sent home quickly in a hurry without a lot of preparation, and maybe they weren't able to do all the essential functions of their job. And that was okay for a limited time, but now the employer may need them to get back to work so they can do some of those essential functions. Under the ADA employers don't have to remove essential functions. They can, but they're not required to. And some of them did for this period where people were at home because they couldn't do certain things, but just because they excused those for a short time, doesn't mean that they're excused permanently. And so that's an issue to talk about. Maybe the person can go back into work one day, a week or two half days a week or something like that. And, and that's a negotiation, they can talk to the employer. They can, if they know what those tasks are and the employer can figure how often they need to be there. You know, if they're essential functions, the person probably does need to be doing those because the employer doesn't have to remove those, but marginal functions, maybe could be moved around and switched between employees and maybe traded off so that, you know, I can do these things from home and somebody else can do some of my things while they're in the office.

Gretchen Grappone:

Great. And then this is kind of a nice segway to the first question in the chat box. Is there a standard process for requesting accommodations or does it vary from workplace to workplace?

Melanie Whetzel:

Well, under the ADA, there's no set way. The ADA just requires that you disclose your disability, ask for an accommodation, and if the employer requires medical documentation that you provide that medical documentation. There are no official forms. You don't have to use official language. You don't have to say I have a disability and I need an accommodation. You certainly can. And we recommend that you put that in writing. If your employer has forms, it's good to find out from HR. If there are specific forms that you need to fill out, if there are medical forms that your doctor needs to fill out, if not, you can start with a letter. We have a sample letter on our webpage, it's just simple and we would suggest saying "I need an accommodation due to, you know, anxiety disorder. That's a good way to start, but it can be very simple. You can say it verbally to an employer, but we would say that you would want to follow that up in writing, just so that you have the documentation that you did disclose, you did ask for an accommodation at that time, it can be as simple as saying "Hey, I'm having difficulty getting to work on time because of some medication I take. Can I talk to you about that?" And that triggers to the employer or puts them on alert that, Hey, somebody's asking for something related to a medical condition. If you just say, "Hey, I'm having trouble getting to work on time." The employer might think, okay, well, are you staying out too late, what, what's the deal? But if you relate it to medication or medical condition, then that alerts them that it is or could be an ADA issue. And so that would be the best thing to do. You know, federal employers have their own paperwork. Most state governments have their own paperwork and a lot of other private employers do as well. But if not, you can start out with a letter and just explain that. The medical documentation, you do have to provide that if the employer requires that some employers will say, well, you know, if it's something quick and easy, we don't, we don't get medical information. We just provide that to all employees. But if it's something that's more costly or more involved, they might want to get that medical information. So be prepared to provide that. In California, they can't ask for your diagnosis. A lot of people don't want to give a mental health diagnosis out unless they absolutely have to. And so we'll say, okay, well, you could start a little bit more vague. You can say that you have a mental health impairment or your doctor can say that. Really, what's more important than the diagnosis when you're providing medical information are the difficulties that you have the limitations. If you have concentration issues, if you have memory problems, that's really more important to the employer than just knowing that somebody has depression, because that can mean a lot of things. And so the more specific it is with the limitations you have, or the difficulties you're having on the job, you know, I have difficulty writing reports every

month and getting them done on time because I have difficulty remembering how to do those- a template with a checklist would be really helpful for me. That would be more helpful for the employer to help them understand what's needed.

Gretchen Grappone:

The next question is, what if you don't know what accommodation you may need? Is there a way to see a checklist to think about them?

Melanie Whetzel:

Okay. That's a really good question. And that's where JAN comes in. We have publications on our website for anxiety, for depression, for PTSD, for bipolar, for learning disabilities for shoulder impairments. I mean, they're over 200 publications there and they have common accommodation ideas and there's a lot of them and they're listed by concentration, by memory, by, and by different limitations. So you can go in and look at those. I would suggest not turning in that whole thing. Some people said, you know, I turned in your whole publication as a combination of ideas and my employer flipped out and I'm like, well, yeah, cause there could, there could be like 42 things on there. Nobody's probably going to need all of those. And so we would say, get on our website and look at those. And maybe at first limit it to three to five, maybe of the things that you need the most. Look at what is going to be the biggest impact on your job. It's a continuing process, you can ask for accommodations next week, next month. It's not like you have to ask for everything right now and that's your only chance. And so I think it's better not to overwhelm the employer with a hundred different things, but have that conversation. Here are some things I think would be helpful and it is a negotiation and it's an interactive process and the employers should be looking to help the employee as well. A supervisor may be involved. Now, the supervisor doesn't have to know the medical information. They may have to know while she's having problems with memory so that they can help provide accommodation ideas. But, you know, they know the job, they know what the employee's performance is and they can be really helpful too in providing accommodation ideas. Sometimes a mentor can be helpful. Somebody who knows that job, has had that job, that can help, you know, show some little tips or some ways I do this that makes me more efficient, which can be helpful to somebody.

Gretchen Grappone:

Great. And someone did ask for the JAN website and contact info. So I did put that link in the chat box for people who need it. And yeah, we'll also include that, if for some reason you can't access the chat, we sent out an evaluation after the webinars. So we'll also include the JAN contact info in that email as well. So if you can't get it during this

hour, you'll get it from me a little bit later. All right. So, next question. Are there sample scripts available online to help people practice on how to request accommodations?

Melanie Whetzel:

Well I would say there aren't really scripts, but we do have videos. We do have a toolbox, a JAN toolbox. It looks like a toolbox you'd find in your garage that has different drawers and you can click on those drawers and you can see all types of different videos. There are some videos about disclosure. There are some videos on interviewing and requesting accommodations and they'll show the wrong way and then they'll correct that. Like they'll show the next video on what would have been a better way to do that for both the employee and the employer. And there are some that show a person working with a vocational rehabilitation professional. And so those can be really helpful to actually see somebody talking and hear what they're saying. And you can call JAN and ask about that. We can walk you through that. We have on our agency of disabilities in that menu and you click on the A to Z tab and it'll come up with a disability with limitations and topic. And if you look under topic, there's a topic of disclosure and we have a new module that talks about disclosure that has some of those videos in it and that can be really helpful.

Gretchen Grappone:

Great. Next question. For clarification, when interviewing for a new job, you don't have to disclose your disability at the beginning, is that correct?

Melanie Whetzel:

That is correct. Generally speaking, you only have to disclose a disability when you need an accommodation, and if you don't need an accommodation in the interview process or in the application process, you know, maybe you need have to take a test and you need extended time on the test, or you need to take the test in a private area, then you might need to disclose for that. If you need to make sure that the building is, you can ask that question. But if the interview is going to be in a building with no elevator and it's going to be on the second floor, it's good to know ahead of time, if you're in a wheelchair, so you can make arrangements for that and then get there and not be able to get to the interview. Sometimes they just move it to another floor if that's possible, but it's good to make sure that the area is going to be accessible if you have any accommodation needs like that. But you're right, you don't have to disclose at the very beginning. In fact, you know, there's a lot of guidance that says, maybe don't disclose too early, because it could hurt your chances of getting a job. You know, we like to think that employers don't really look at that and consider it, but there's evidence that they do. And you know, if you don't have to give that information out at first, it's better not to, at least until you get an offer of employment. Once you get the offer of employment and you disclose it's going to be a lot

harder for an employer to just yank that offer away than to never offer you something in the first place. So we would say wait until as long as possible. Now what they'll ask in an interview, what they should ask is, are you able to do the essential functions of the position? And you can say yes, or they should say, can you do the essential functions of the position with or without accommodations? And that way you can say yes, and it includes, yes, I could do it with an accommodation. So they don't know that you have a disability. You know, it shouldn't be on a form where you have to list a disability, so that they don't know that at the beginning.

Gretchen Grappone:

Now, I think the research that I've seen, and correct me if I'm wrong, you're the expert. But the research I've seen specifically about asking for accommodations for people with mental illness or psychiatric disability says most people don't disclose at the beginning, but I think the majority eventually do disclose at some point once they find out who's, you know, the safe person to talk to at work. Is that your understanding as well?

Melanie Whetzel:

Well, I think generally, yes, there are people we find out that have had such a bad experience that they'd never disclosed. And they'll end up losing their jobs because they don't want to ask for an accommodation. Yes, that's true. And you know, people will call us and say, should I disclose or not? And we can't really tell you yes or no, or when to, we can give some, you know, negatives and positives, pluses, and minuses of how to do and when to do it. And one thing we would say is if you want to wait, you know, find out what the environment's like, see how other people are treated. Are there people getting accommodations? You know, is it an open and welcoming environment? Do you feel comfortable asking for an accommodation and disclosing your disability?

Gretchen Grappone:

Someone asked, how do you address having an invisible disability with your employer? A lot of times, well, you look fine, people say, because a disability isn't apparent.

Melanie Whetzel:

Right, and that's where the medical documentation comes in. And that's where employers really have to depend on the medical information. If the need for the accommodation is not obvious or the disabilities not obvious, then that's where the medical information can come in. And you're right. There's a lot of people with different disabilities that you can't tell by looking at them or you can't tell by working with them that they have that disability. And one question we get from employers is, you know, we've had this

employee that's worked for us for a while, they get the job done. Now they're telling us they have a disability and they need accommodation. Do we have to do that? Well, you have to consider it because maybe in order for them to get that job done, they're wearing themselves out. You know, they're working overtime, they're working at night at home to keep things going and they really can't continue to do that. Or maybe there are some shortcuts or some things that could be done to help them get that job done, because maybe it's causing a lot of extra anxiety and stress for them. So yes, that is something an employer would need to look at, but that's where the medical documentation comes in because you're right. You know, somebody comes in, has been in a car accident and maybe lost their hand. The employer can see that and understand. Yeah, we know that some things are going to need to change to help you, but with a lot of invisible disabilities, they don't see that. And they don't always understand what might be needed.

Gretchen Grappone:

One person asked, is disclosure different for government jobs? Or can it wait until we need an accommodation?

Melanie Whetzel:

No, it can wait. It can wait. It's the same for everyone. With government jobs, federal jobs, there is the schedule A hiring, which gets you a job quicker. You might be on probation a little bit longer, but it gets the process going a lot quicker. Schedule A, you have to show that you have a disability in order to participate in that. So the employer would know from the beginning and lots of federal employers will hire people with disabilities because they're wanting to include a certain percentage. But no, it doesn't matter. You should not have to disclose until you're ready to do that. No matter who you work for.

Gretchen Grappone:

And we have two questions that are similar or almost actually the same, is there such a thing as disclosing too late? And then the other person said, is there a timeline for disclosure?

Melanie Whetzel:

Yeah. We would say that when you realize that you're having performance or conduct issues that are related to your disability, that might be a good time to disclose. If your employer comes to you and says, you know, we've noticed you can't get your work done, you're not getting the reports written on time, or, you know, you can't be, whatever it is, you can't be doing that. And you know, that's related to your disability, that's probably a

good time to disclose because you can wait too long. Some people will wait until the very last minute when the employers are ready to terminate them. And they'll say, wait a minute, I've got a disability. And employers say, well, it is too late because we've talked to you about this three, four times at your opportunity to tell us that was, was back then. So if you're on any kind of a performance plan, a performance improvement plan, or they start talking about anything like that, that's a good time to disclose, unless you just really don't want to. But if you wait too long, the EEOC, which is the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, they're the enforcing agency of the ADA. And that's what most of the guidance that we provide is based on, they said that, you know, although there's no official time to disclose, you don't want to wait too late because it could be too late when your employer's at the last point. And so when you realize that your disability is causing issues with your performance or conduct, that's when you want to consider disclosing to your employer.

Gretchen Grappone:

Next question, can I bring my emotional support animal with me, even if I didn't need that before the pandemic?

Melanie Whetzel:

Okay. That's a good question. And here's what I'm going to say. First is you need to ask for that as an accommodation, same as you would if you're asking to telework or if you need specialized computer equipment or anything like that. There's a little confusion, the ADA Title One is employment and doesn't really talk much about service animals or emotional support animals at all. And so people get confused because I go to the grocery store and take my dog. I go to the movies and take my dog. I can do this and take my dog but to bring your dog to work is an accommodation. And you really should ask for that ahead of time and provide the documentation that yes, I have a mental health condition. Yes, I have a dog. Here's how the dog is going to help me the same as you would, if you're going to telework. Here's how telework would really help me get my job done. You do that same thing and ask for that as an accommodation, we would advise that and not just show up with a dog one morning and expect the employers to say, well hey, come on in, unless other people are allowed to bring their dogs or their pets to work. And that would be something different.

Gretchen Grappone:

If someone has both a physical and mental health disability would a request for a combination best be done separately or together. That's a great question.

Melanie Whetzel:

That is a good question. I would say you could do all that together. I would say, as long as it's clear what you need for what, you know, your physical needs, your mental health needs, just so the employer understands what the disability is, what the limitations are, why that's going to help you in your job. And if they overlap some, that would be okay too. I would say, just so it's as clear as possible to the employer, what it is you're asking for and why, is what would be most important.

Gretchen Grappone:

Can my employer put me on leave just because I cannot wear a mask and they are requiring all employees to wear one.

Melanie Whetzel:

Oh, golly. You know what we had in the beginning, like back in 2020 March, April, May. Oh my gosh. It seemed like every other question we had was about masks and it still is. Now they're coming back because people are returning to work. A lot more people are returning to work. Here's the issue. If you cannot wear a mask and a mask is required, then the employer needs to look at alternate accommodations. They can't just put you on leave as an accommodation if they haven't thoroughly investigated other alternate accommodations that would be effective so that you can work because leave is not as effective as an accommodation, as it might be one that would allow you to work, because it causes you to burn up your leave. Maybe you don't have paid leaves. You don't earn an income. So that's really not as effective as an accommodation that would allow you to work. And so the employer has to look at, so what are the different accommodations? What can we do? You know, can we put up some plexiglass walls or partitions? Can we put somebody, you know, I always say not to segregate them, but during a pandemic, it is kind of like segregation. Can you put them somewhere more to isolate them a little bit more where they're not as in contact with as many people or the public, you know, can they be reassigned to a position that they can do remotely? Can they telework? Can they work from home in their position? Can they work from home in another position? Even if you could work part-time and to have part-time leave would even be more effective than total leave. But if it comes down to it and there are no accommodations and you absolutely cannot wear a mask, then yes, the employer could put you on leave. And I've talked to employees, who've said, I want leave, I can't deal with this. You know, one employee was a respiratory therapist and said, I just, I can't do this. It's too stressful for me. I've been through too much with the pandemic. I just need to leave. I need a break. And the employer was trying to work out some different accommodations, but they were not going to be effective because the person just needed a break.

Gretchen Grappone:

One thing that I wonder about, and I'm not sure if there's, there's a lot of data out there. Maybe there is a lot of data, but do you know about what percentage of the time accommodations are denied versus whatever the word is it's the opposite of denied? I can't think of it right now. Culminated, I guess. Yeah. The reason I'm asking is, I've done a lot of work with various VA medical centers and employment services for homeless veterans. And just anecdotally, it seems like the accommodations that are requested are actually pretty easy, you know, related to PTSD. And I just want to be able to move my desk so, you know, my back is close to the wall and I can see the door. And I just wonder how often, you know, accommodations are actually fairly easy, but people, you know, for whatever the stigma or whatever reason that they don't want to request them, you know, how often people end up leaving jobs if they had only just been able to have been accommodated, you know, it would have been easy and so much better, but I just didn't know if there was data out there around that.

Melanie Whetzel:

We do not have that data. No. I mean, I talked to a lot of different people who refused to ask for an accommodation because things went really bad the last time. And they end up quitting their jobs, even though they might have been able to be done. And you're right. A lot of accommodations are very simple. And we talked to a lot of employers too, who maybe really don't understand the process and how they can provide those accommodations. When I was talking about leave, I even wrote a publication about it because you talk to people and they'll say well, anybody who asked for an accommodation, we just put them on leave. And I'm like, why do you do that? Well, it's just our policy. Well, wait a minute. If they were doing their job before they asked for an accommodation, that means they're able to do the job unless something's wrong and they're not able to do the job right now. That does happen too. But leave is not effective as an accommodation. And sometimes, or they'll say, well, a person was hospitalized, let's say for depression and they're wanting to come back part-time and the employer says, well, we don't have part-time jobs. Okay. But the employee is asking to come back to their own job part-time. Well, that's a hardship. Okay. Well, let's talk about that. How is that a hardship, would it not be better for you to have somebody back working half time than having nobody working in that position? You know, who's doing that work well, nobody, well, you know, is it more of a hardship to have somebody work three days a week than no days a week? You know, I think in my own job, if I were there half days, instead of not at all, it would be, it would be a huge help, you know? And so it's really important for employers to understand, and really think through because I think sometimes they have new people that are appointed to positions that maybe don't really understand accommodations. Like some employers will have an ADA coordinator who has another job. And so it's not really something that they know about. And so they're trying to learn at the same time. And, and that's why we will say to employees, when

individuals call, if you could get your employer, we can't call your employer. They'll say, here's my employer's name and give them a call. Like, well, we can't do that. You know, the employer has to call us, we'll be happy to talk to them. You know, suggest that to your employer, suggest that you call together. That's a really good idea. If you, if you can get your employer to make a conference call with you, because that way you're both on the line, we can all talk about it. Everybody hears the same thing and employers can really kind of walk through things and maybe better understand what the employee's concerns are and, you know, what some of our ideas are. But now we do find a lot of times that it seems like employers will just deny accommodations and they don't give a really good reason. And the employees will say, well, it's not going to cause a hardship. And we don't really know that, but it seems sometimes that a lot of accommodations for mental health are not expensive. The leave may end up being expensive if somebody has to have off and they have to, you know, hire a temp or some part-time person or something like that. But, you know, flex in a schedule, providing checklists and maybe a flowchart, providing a mentor, things like that are not costly at all. And I think once employers really come to understand accommodations, they have a better idea of how simple some of those things may be. Like you said, moving a desk to where my back is sitting against the wall. This example comes up almost every time I talk. I talked to this guy who was fine, he was working great in a cubicle with that partition that was like five feet tall, maybe I'm not sure. But they decided they were going to do an open environment and so they made the partitions around the cubicles, like three and a half feet tall. And he said, you know, I was fine before, now all I see are heads going by all the time. I can't concentrate. And I can understand that the employer made changes and maybe didn't think about how that was going to affect people. But now that it does affect people, they need to look at that. Can we put taller ones back up for people? Can we move people to an area where they don't constantly see, you know, people's heads going by? And that, that could be probably a really simple accommodation to make for a person.

Gretchen Grappone:

Someone asked, do emotional support animals count as service animals? I've heard that they don't and therefore can't go into public spaces such as workplaces.

Melanie Whetzel:

They don't count as service animals. Here's the problem. There's really no guidance on emotional support animals at all, except in public places. So what we say is, if you have an emotional support animal that is really helpful to you and can help you on the job, talk to your employer about that. Employers need to consider that as they would any accommodation. And that the thing they really need to understand is how is that animal going to help you on the job? Just like if you were asking for a certain type of chair, they

need to know how that's going to help you do your job better. How's this dog going to help you? You know, another thing they need to know is, is it properly trained? You don't have to have documentation that it was formally trained, if you do, that's great, but some people train their own dogs. But the employer can't require that you have documentation of training, but they can require that the dog be properly trained for the environment. And so they can say, what we recommend is looking at a trial accommodation. If it's worked out that, yeah, we think this'll work depending on what the job is, bring the dog in for a trial and let's see how the dog behaves. Let's see if it is trained for the workplace, because sometimes people say their dogs are trained and they're not. They come in and they create havoc and the employer does not have to have that kind of disruption in the workplace. And a trained animal is not going to bark. It's not going to growl. It's not going to jump up on people. It's not going to sniff around. You know, it's not going to do those things that a dog would normally do. And that's what employers are looking for. They don't want that disruption in the workplace. And they could find out in a couple of days, maybe in a half a day, whether that dog's really trained, you know, for the worker, not a lot of people bring dogs in and they sit on their lap and they sit right at their feet. They don't make a sound. You know, and the employers find that the employee is better able to do their job with the presence of the animal there and that the presence of the animal does not create any kind of a disturbance or hardship or anything. So what we would say is, yes, you can ask for an accommodation to bring your dog in and if your employer is like, well, we're not really sure, say, let me bring it in on a trial basis and show you how effective that could be for me, because I think I can do this and this and this better in my job and I'll show you how you won't even know that my dog is here. Nobody will hear, and they won't make a peep. Now I do use a frequent example of a person who had a dog. The dog was trained to growl if people came up behind him because he had been assaulted from behind. And so the dog growled if somebody came up behind him. Well, one of the coworkers came up behind him, heard the dog growl, and reported it to the employer. Employer said, you have to take the dog home, but they didn't understand the purpose of the dog. And so it's good to talk about those kinds of things with the employer. Here's the only time the dog is going to make a noise is if somebody comes up behind me and that's not aggression, it's not an untrained dog, it's just what the dog has been trained to do for my protection. And I feel better knowing that so that I can work better, having the dog help me do those things. So that's what would be important to explain to the employer.

Gretchen Grappone:

What advice do you have for individuals who work in small organizations that would be unable to financially cover the cost of accommodations, such as Cart or ASL for multiple meetings over the course of the day?

Melanie Whetzel:

Well that would be good to call JAN and talk to somebody like in that instance, in the sensory department, there may be different accommodations that might be able to work successfully that wouldn't be as expensive. There are agencies that can help with the cost. Each state has its own AT project and they help provide financing, they can provide equipment that you can use so there may be something else that might be effective that you could try out to see if it would work. It might be less costly.

Gretchen Grappone:

And is AT assistive technology?

Melanie Whetzel:

Yes. I'm sorry. Assistive technology.

Gretchen Grappone:

All right. Any other questions from anyone throw them in the chat because we've asked all the ones that have been written so far.

Melanie Whetzel:

I think talking about disclosure is one of the hardest things for people with mental health conditions to think about, because, especially if they've had a bad experience in the past, you know, there's a lot of stigma that goes with mental health conditions. There's a lot of misinformation out there. And so people don't want to give that information out. And sometimes they wait until the absolute last minute, when, if they had done it earlier, it would have saved a lot of stress for them. They could have gotten help on their job a lot earlier. You know, when you think about it, they say one in four to one in five people has a mental health diagnosis or at one time is going to have a mental health condition. That's a lot of people, that's one person in a family. I mean, you know, in our workplace we have like 28 people that could be, you know, four or five people there. And so when you think about how common that is, there really should not be that stigma anymore. And now, because most people would know somebody or have a family member and would have a better understanding of that if someone were to disclose and now with COVID, you know, everybody's got stress. And, and I don't mean that like people who have mental health conditions are going to have really exacerbated stress with a lot of the things that happened during the pandemic, but we've all been affected by stress. So we think if I'm this stressed, that somebody with an anxiety disorder could be a lot more stressed than me, and we need to look at that and help somebody. And like I said, a lot of the accommodations are not that costly, they're not, they don't create much of a hardship. It's

just that it might be an effort to go through that interactive process to find out exactly what that person needs and how that's going to work. And maybe what they think will work doesn't and you might need to tweak that or look at different accommodations. And when I said it's like a process, you know, you don't have to disclose everything all at once. And if you have multiple conditions, you don't have to disclose all of that. If you can get the accommodations you need by disclosing that you have anxiety, or that you have depression, you don't have to disclose if you have two, three or more diagnoses, you don't have to do that. You just have to disclose enough information that explains why you need the accommodation.

Gretchen Grappone:

One of the things that in my own work, one of my specialties is helping agencies, hospitals, that sort of thing, specifically address structural stigma. So, you know, what you're talking about, not waiting until the employee has to come to you, but actually a couple of the cool things that agencies have done is to implement in their orientation meetings, so with every new employee, the CEO comes in and says, we understand that, you know, we're not only serving people in mental illness, but that some of our staff, you know, as you said, one in five, one in four will struggle with it. So please don't ever hesitate to, you know, ask for help. So they're not waiting, they're naming it from, you know, orientation on. And then also, you know, in their HR handbooks, they'll also have a blurb about don't ever hesitate, you know, if you have substance use disorder or, you know, mental health issue to ask for help. So they're making those specific structural changes and the statements right up front so all employees know if you have the perceived stigma of, oh, maybe I'll get fired or people will not be kind to me if I disclose my psychiatric disability, they actually are getting support all the way through from orientation to disclose if they need to.

Melanie Whetzel:

Right. And, you know, a lot of employers too, send out notices that used to be with a paycheck. I don't know that anybody actually gets a paycheck anymore, but if they send it out through like e-news and just blurbs or whatever they send out to employees that talk about, you know, if it's mental health awareness month, different autism awareness months, do things like that and talk about issues so that people feel like, okay, they're going to understand this because they're talking about it. And I think the more that they do talk about that, you know, stress, if they have an EAP program, which is an employee assistance program, stress what services the EAP can provide to people and how that can be helpful so that people know that they have a resource to go to when they need help.

Gretchen Grappone:

One person is asking what if your employer says your accommodations would be too expensive. Being blind, the computer programs I need may be seen as too expensive.

Melanie Whetzel:

Well, if it's really a hardship for the employer, then they can look at alternate accommodations. And so that's where JAN can come in to help as well, because maybe there are some different things that could be helpful. And I don't know, I'm in the cognitive neurological team, not the sensory team, but the employer can't just say, no, it's too expensive we can't do it. What they would say is we don't think we can provide this for you at this time. Let's talk about, is there something else we can provide? How do we help you if we can't provide this for you? So that process should continue and look if there are alternate accommodations, if there are other ways to get that assistive technology, or if your state project can help with that.

Gretchen Grappone:

Okay. Well, it looks like we do not have any more questions. And so just to remind people, I will be sending out a survey about feedback about this webinar.

Melody Reifer:

I'm sorry I just wanted to mention that we do have someone who has raised their hand and just put it down. He came late and would like to know what the topic is.

Gretchen Grappone:

Yeah. So, we actually did record it. So, you can check out our website. We're going to be posting what you missed, but we're talking about the topic of accommodations and disclosure in the workplace. And so yes, I will be sending out a survey and I'll also include my specific email address, it comes from eventbrite but I'll add my email address so if anyone has any questions or trouble accessing the video of this, just shoot me an email and I'll help you out. I would love to thank Melanie Whetzel for her expertise today, taking the time to join us and a big thank you to Melody Reifer for tech help today. And we will see you all next time in a couple of months. I think we're going to try to do our next topic on supported employment programs because we got some questions about that recently. And so look for that in the next couple of months and thank you all for joining us. Take care.