

Accommodating Mental Illness In The Workplace

(NAPSA)—For people with mental illness, getting and keeping a job can present some unique challenges. Unlike physical disabilities that can be seen and recognized, employers may not realize that a person is experiencing mental health issues or may not understand behaviors as stemming from an illness. They may also not know they have to provide workplace accommodations to help mentally ill people who require adjustments to remain employed and productive.

Not every person experiencing mental illness will have difficulty at work, but some will. “Hidden” disabilities such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, traumatic brain injury, and intellectual and learning disabilities (e.g., attention deficit disorder and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder) can affect a person’s ability to perform a job.

Also, shifts in mental health can trigger and recede without warning. When someone experiences a mental health issue, it can be difficult to focus, process, think clearly, remember details, organize thoughts and tasks, and stop and start activities.

For these individuals, Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) requires employers to make “reasonable accommodations” to help people with mental health disorders do their jobs. The ADAAA does not list medical conditions that are disabilities, but rather gives a general definition of disability. A doctor may be required to validate the need for accommodation.

“Employers don’t always know what a person is living with,” says Beth Loy, Ph.D., who is a principal consultant with the Department of Labor’s Job Accommodation Network (JAN). “There may be limitations due to medication, or a flexible schedule might be needed for a person to go to therapy appointments.”

The JAN is a comprehensive



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Accommodating people with mental illness at work can be good for them, good for the company and good for the economy as a whole.

resource for people who want to understand their rights regarding disabilities and possible accommodations. Individuals can access information on JAN’s website or reach out to it directly with questions.

What Accommodations Look Like

Because every person is unique and may have different needs, there are many options for mental health accommodations. “Sometimes, small adjustments to how the work is organized, or the workday schedule, or headphones that help block out distracting noise can make a big difference,” explains Carlton Speight, a public health adviser with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) Center for Mental Health Services. “Also, for a person who may be easily triggered or anxious, a service dog can help with grounding.”

Melanie Whetzel, MA, CBIS, the lead consultant on the Cognitive/Neurological Team at JAN, says, “Most of the mental impairment questions we receive relate to service animals, flexible schedules, and flexibility to leave the workstation if someone feels panicked and needs to get grounded. We also frequently get questions about private space to take breaks and ways to abate noise that can build anxiety or be triggering.”

Most accommodations in the workplace can be established with little or no cost. They just require some flexibility and creativity, and can often be put in place quickly,

if the need arises. Such accommodations may include:

- **Creating a supportive environment.** It is critical for individuals with mental health conditions to work with colleagues and leadership who provide positive reinforcement and allow for open communication.

- **Removing or mitigating workplace stressors.** Working in an office or workspace that is quiet, provides space enclosures or a private office may be more comfortable and manageable.

- **Adjusting the approach to supervising.** It could be as simple as scheduling daily one-on-one meetings to see how things are going. Check-ins may also help people manage problems before they become stressful and overwhelming.

- **Offering flexible schedules.** Flexible arrival and departure times as well as permitting the work to take place in other locations also allow individuals to perform duties where and when they can be most productive. Flexible or extended breaks may also help them manage stress or attend health care appointments.

With the ADAAA regulations in place, requesting an accommodation is designed to be a simple and straightforward process for employees. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission also offers some guidance on accommodation procedures.

When an accommodation is needed, it is often helpful for the employee to discuss the request with the employer to determine what will work and how that can be achieved.

“I think it is critical for employers to understand that workplace accommodations create substantial benefits for the organization,” says Matthew Aumen, a program analyst in SAMHSA’s Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. “Accommodations remove barriers, which allows employees to maximize their potential and performance. That’s something every employer wants.”