



# Do I Tell My Boss?: Disclosing My Mental Health Condition at Work

## What Should I Say About My Mental Health Condition at Work?

Every young adult with a mental health condition will face the decision of whether or not to tell others about, or “disclose” their condition at work. Typically the reason for disclosure is to ask for an accommodation in order to perform better at your present job. An accommodation is modifying a job, the job site, or the way things are done in order to enable a qualified individual with a disability to have an equal opportunity for employment.<sup>1</sup> The following information can provide some guidance in helping you make an informed decision.



Some Reasons to Disclose Having a Mental Health Condition on the Job:	Some Reasons Not to Disclose Having a Mental Health Condition on the Job:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To obtain protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Required in order to request job accommodations<sup>2</sup></li> <li>• To serve as a role model and educate others</li> <li>• Reduces stigma</li> <li>• Relieves the stress some may feel about “hiding” a disability</li> <li>• Makes employers better able to respond to sudden symptoms or hospitalizations</li> <li>• Disclosure to a supervisor is kept confidential by law</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is no need for accommodations</li> <li>• Hiring or promotion chances may be negatively affected due to stigma</li> <li>• To protect your privacy</li> <li>• Fear of:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Negative employer or coworker reactions to you or your work</li> <li>- People not respecting your privacy and confidentiality (others in community/ workplace will be told)</li> <li>- Being held to a different standard, i.e., less will be expected of you</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## If I Want to Disclose, How Should I Do It?

- Let your employer know you have a medical disability. Steer clear of medical terms and a specific diagnosis. Instead provide examples of how your disability affects you i.e., “I have a medical condition that affects my concentration.”
- You will need to provide information about the existence and extent of your disability or diagnosis, how your condition may limit your functioning in the job, and the accommodations that address these barriers. YOU DO NOT need to disclose your entire medical record, progress notes or tests, etc.
- Focus on your abilities, not disabilities.
- Prepare and practice what you will say ahead of time.
- List your strengths and qualifications related to this job. You can also give examples of how your experiences with a disability will positively affect your work performance.
- Share what issues you may face in the workplace due to your diagnosis and try to word it in a positive way. For example, “My disability requires me to take frequent breaks in order for me to stay productive.”

- You should engage in an “informal interactive process” with your employer and provide a specific list or a written statement that summarizes the disability and accommodations that would help you at this job.<sup>2</sup>
- Inform your employer of an action plan that works best for your safety if you become unwell at work.
- Some employers may have policies and processes in place for disclosure, which may be helpful to look over and potentially use.

### If I Want to Disclose, When Should I Do It?

There is no exact point in time that is best to disclose, however, each has its advantages and disadvantages. You have the right to disclose at any time during your employment. You also have the right not to disclose. The Americans with Disabilities Act(ADA)<sup>1</sup> states that employers cannot ask questions that will likely reveal the existence of a disability before making a job offer.

SOME TIMES YOU CAN DISCLOSE	PROS OF DISCLOSURE AT THAT POINT IN TIME	CONS OF DISCLOSURE AT THAT POINT IN TIME
<b>In a cover letter/ resume/ job application</b>	Shows honesty, gives the opportunity to prepare a written statement including your abilities	Employer may have pre-conceived opinions on disabilities and may not offer you an interview
<b>Before an Interview</b>	You can discuss the accommodations that you may need during an interview <sup>2</sup>	May affect the interview process and how you are viewed due to stigma
<b>During the interview</b>	Opportunity to discuss strengths and how disability will positively affect employment  Can interact with people and flexibly respond to questions/concerns	May affect the interview process and how you are viewed due to stigma
<b>Once hired</b>	Avoids possibility of discrimination during the hiring process. Secure accommodations and coverage under the ADA <sup>1</sup>	May affect how your job duties and assignments are handled due to stigma
<b>During Employment</b>	You may find that you will need accommodations once you’ve been at the job for a while  You may want to wait until you form a relationship with your boss, prove your abilities and feel confident with your job. Disclosing enables you to have a conversation with your boss. Hopefully you are perceived as a valued worker and they will be motivated to make adjustments in order to keep you.	May affect co-workers responses to you  May affect how your performance is evaluated by the employer  May affect promotional opportunities
<b>After Performance Difficulties Arise</b>	If you become sick or hospitalized you may need to request time off, so you will need to inform your workplace.	Your employer may feel betrayed, wonder why you waited so long, and look at it as an excuse for bad performance.

#### Footnotes

1. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, § 2, 104 Stat. 328 (1991); ADA Amendments Act of 2008, PUB. L. No. 110-325 (2008) found at: <http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/adaaa.cfm>

2. Job Accommodation Network Accommodation and Compliance Series: <http://askjan.org/media/downloads/accommodationrequestletter.pdf>

## What Employers Can & Cannot Ask During a Job Interview About Your Mental Health Condition:

In the table below, we have posed some questions that are allowed and not allowed during a job interview, including ways to answer appropriately and in a professional manner.

EMPLOYERS CANNOT ASK	EMPLOYERS CAN ASK	SUGGESTED EXAMPLES OF ANSWERS
Do you have any physical or mental impairment that would keep you from performing the job you seek?  What physical or mental impairments do you have that would affect your job performance?	Are you able to perform the essential function of the job you are seeking, with or without accommodations?	If you are able to perform the essential functions with accommodations, you can simply answer “I am confident that I will be able to handle the requirements of this position”. You are not required to give details about what specific accommodations you would need or why you may need them until after you are hired.
How many days were you sick during your last job?	Can you meet our attendance requirements? How many days were you absent from your last job?	Indicate that you are able to meet the attendance requirements of the job. If you are disclosing, you can speak about schedule accommodations that may be needed for hospital or therapy visits.
What medications are you currently taking?	Are you currently using illegal drugs?	Reply no to illegal drug use and that your medications are private information.
Questions to a third party (service providers/friends/state agency) that they could not directly ask the applicant.	Questions to a third party (service providers/friends/state agency) that they are legally allowed to ask the applicant directly.	Tell them you can supply medical information if you are disclosing; if not, that is private information.
The employer is prohibited from asking disability-related questions or requiring a medical examination before making the individual an offer.	After the employer extends an offer for the position, he may ask the individual disability-related questions or require a medical examination as long as he does so for all entering employees in the same job category	A question about your disability that is asked before a job offer is illegal and you can politely state that these questions do not affect your ability to perform the job.

### References:

*The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission:* <http://www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/preemp.html>

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. *The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Youth with Disabilities:* <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/411-on-disability-disclosure>

National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. *Cyber Disclosure For Youth with Disabilities:* <http://www.ncwd-youth.info/cyber-disclosure>

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## To Whom Do I Disclose?

You are only required to share disability information with the person/s in the workplace who is involved with approving or providing accommodations. You can choose whether or not to tell other people at the workplace. An employment specialist or counselor may be able to help you determine who that might be. Some examples of types of disclosure include:

- **Full Disclosure:** Being open with everyone at work (bosses and coworkers) about your mental health condition, including details and your diagnosis. Note: not all coworkers will understand, and some may resent accommodations.
- **Targeted Disclosure:** Telling specific people such as:
  - Your immediate boss /supervisor if they will be the one providing accommodations and support.
  - A higher level manager such as your immediate supervisor/boss's manager.
  - The human resources manager who can help you with legal rights, health insurance, medical leave, etc.
  - A job coach or transition youth advocate who may represent you if you are uncomfortable/unable to disclose yourself.
  - Your co-workers who may be able to provide informal supports. Note: The ADA requires your employer to keep all information about your disability confidential. Keep in mind when disclosing disability-related information to co-workers, that they are not held to the same standard.
- **Inadvertent Disclosure:** Others find out about your condition without you telling anybody.

## Think About “Cyber Disclosure” When Using Social Media Sites!

With sites like Facebook and Twitter becoming increasingly popular, you may find yourself sharing a lot of information about yourself, and disclosing your mental health condition online without realizing it. Here are some tips to avoid inadvertent cyber disclosure:

- Know what information about you is available for all to see online. Do a check by entering your name every few months into search engines (Google) to see what information comes up.
- Check the privacy settings on any site you may be a part of i.e., Facebook. You can make your profile private so only the friends you choose can see your page, photos, and specific information. Double check that you have made each part of your profile private.
- Realize that others, including employers, may see information you post that could relate to you having a mental health condition i.e., awards you received from mental health organizations or memberships in self advocacy groups, etc.
- During employment, review your rights and privacy laws when it comes to using work computers. You should assume that any work equipment is the employer's, not yours, and you have no privacy on that equipment. For example, some organizations have public e-mail that can be looked at by request of your employer.



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**Suggested Citation:** Costa, A. & Smith, L. M. (2012). *Do I Tell My Boss?: Disclosing My Mental Health Condition at Work*. The Word on Work. Tip Sheet #7. Worcester, MA: University of Massachusetts Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center (SPARC), Transitions Research and Training Center.

This publication can be made available in alternative formats upon request through [TransitionsRTC@umassmed.edu](mailto:TransitionsRTC@umassmed.edu)

The contents of this tip sheet were developed with funding from the US Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, and the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (NIDRR grant H133B090018). Additional funding provided by UMass Medical School's Commonwealth Medicine division. The content of this tip sheet does not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agencies and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

The Transitions RTC is part of the Systems & Psychosocial Advances Research Center (SPARC)  
A Massachusetts Department of Mental Health Research Center of Excellence



## Cyber Disclosure for Youth with Disabilities

### **Introduction**

This document is a supplement to *The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A Workbook for Youth with Disabilities* which helps youth learn about disability disclosure and what it means for them. Since the toolkit was written in 2005, there have been many advances in technology that have changed what youth need to know about disability disclosure.

Search sites like Google, social networking sites like Facebook, and micro-blogging sites like Twitter have added a new element to disclosure. Now it is possible to disclose your disability on the internet without even being aware of it. This can be as simple as a picture of you using a wheelchair, a comment on your friend's blog about disability, or your profile posted on a disability organization's website. The goal of this document is to provide you with suggestions about how to make an informed decision about your own disability disclosure and to manage your disclosure online.

### **Definitions**

- Disclosure: the process of intentionally releasing personal information about yourself for a specific purpose
- Social Networking Sites (SNS): web-based services that allow individuals to: (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a system; (2) build a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and (3) view their list of connections and those made by others within the system
- Accommodation: an adjustment to an environment, which makes it possible for youth with disabilities to participate equally

### **Why Disclose Purposefully?**

In high school you may have had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team to help you decide what accommodations and modifications you need to be successful in school. However, in the adult world the only way to get the accommodations you need is to ask for them yourself. As an adult, you are eligible for adult services and support based on your disability and your situation only if you disclose your disability.

As *The 411 on Disability Disclosure* mentions, the timing and planning of your disclosure can be very important to getting appropriate supports with the least amount of stigma and other negative consequences. Disclosing your disability to a future employer in a strategic way is vital. However, this may not be possible if there is information about you online that automatically reveals your disability.

Many employers and recruitment agencies use internet search engines and read SNS, websites, and blogs to learn more about job applicants. This is why it is important to be aware of the information about you that is available to the public on the internet.

## ACTIVITY #1: Reviewing your Digital Presence

Choose one or more search engines such as Google or Yahoo and type in your first and last name into the search box. Did you find pictures of yourself, your bio, something you said or something you once wrote? Do not limit your self-investigation to just one search engine as they all are slightly different. Also, do not forget to check the “images,” “news” and “newsgroup” directories that are available on some search engines.

Look through the results and think about the following questions:

- How many of the results are really you versus someone with a similar name?
- Do any of the results reveal your disability? If so, what specific details are mentioned?
- Do any of the results highlight activities with disability groups or organizations?
- How many pictures of you come up in the results?
- Do any of the pictures highlight your disability?

Reflect on the following questions:

- Did you know what information about you was available online prior to this search?
- If your disability is disclosed in any of the results, how do you feel about that?
- If your disability is disclosed, will the information you share with a potential employer change?

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Disclosure**

There are both advantages and disadvantages to disclosing your disability on the internet.

#### ADVANTAGES

- Marketing yourself as a successful youth with a disability
- Advocating for disability issues through participation in online disability groups
- Empowering the community by discussing your disability in a way that mobilizes others
- Meeting other people with disabilities who can serve as an online support system or peer network
- Giving others, including potential employers, a clearer impression of you and your abilities (e.g. a website talking about your work as a volunteer coordinator or mentor highlights your community involvement and leadership)

#### DISADVANTAGES

- Having others know about a part of your identity that you may not be comfortable sharing publicly with strangers

- Having personal and sensitive information on the internet can be extremely difficult and embarrassing
- Having old or outdated information online could lead to misconceptions about your skills, knowledge and personal attributes
- Having people you meet online assume things about you because of your disability
- Having potential employers know you have a disability and not hiring you because of their discomfort with or ignorance about people with disabilities

### **Disclosure by Others**

The ultimate goal of this guide is for you to make an informed choice about disclosing your disability. This decision may change based on the particular person, situation, setting, and need for accommodations. However, with regard to the internet, there are times when your disability may be inadvertently disclosed by others.

Let us look at some examples in which your disability may be disclosed by others through the internet:

- You may belong or have belonged to a disability organization. It is possible that they may have posted information about you or a picture of you on their website.
- You may have had an employer post your bio on its website that mentions your connection to a disability group. If you have a non-apparent disability, having your name associated with a disability related organization may suggest to a future employer that you have a disability.
- You may have friends who post pictures of you on a personal website or SNS. If you have a visible disability, some pictures might inform any future employer about your disability.

For example, Juan participated in a panel of youth with disabilities at his university, where he discussed the challenges of living with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The transcript from the panel, including Juan's name, was posted in the university's website. There was also a reporter from the university's newspaper who attended the panel and wrote an article about the event including Juan's first and last name. The university's newspaper posts volumes of the paper on the university's website and archives them online for up to 10 years. Now, and for 10 more years, when a future employer searches Juan's full name they may find both the article and the transcript from this event where he openly discusses his disability. This could impact Juan's chances of getting a job for which he is qualified, if the employer reads about him and is not comfortable hiring people with disabilities.

In another example, Sharmaine recently graduated from a community college as a certified nurse's assistant. She is currently looking for jobs in local hospitals. About a month ago, she participated in a local wheelchair race and won third place. The local paper covered the race and posted a story on its website. Any future employer can search the internet using Sharmaine's name and pull up the story of her winning third place in a wheelchair race. Along with the positive attention Sharmaine gained from placing third

in the race, she also unintentionally disclosed her disability. This information could put hesitation in the minds of potential employers.

### **Accidental Self-Disclosure**

Sometimes information that you believed private may be publicly available on the internet. It is important to remember that the internet is a public domain, and that many pieces of information that are believed to be private on sites like Facebook or Twitter can be accessed by doing a an internet search. For example, a Facebook profile picture often comes up in a Google image search with a person's full name. Most information posted on social networking sites is archived. It is important to remember most information posted on the internet never disappears so be cautious of what you post.

In addition to what you may say on the internet that could disclose your disability, where you participate on the internet can also accidentally disclose your disability. There are many disability related blogs that people with disabilities have started to connect with and empower the disability community. Though these can be an important tool, it is important to understand that participation in a disability blog can disclose your disability publicly. Most information shared in a blog can be accessed by anyone including potential employers. This can also include commenting on public forums and discussion groups on specific disability-related topics.

### **Controlling your Digital Presence**

There are many potential circumstances for disclosure on the internet that can be controlled. One option is for you to use a screen name or pseudonym to hide your identity. Also you can be careful about revealing any personally identifying information. However, this is not perfect and your real name may be discoverable. Another option is to use privacy settings to control who has access to your personal information when using SNS.

Most SNS like Facebook and MySpace have privacy settings that can be adjusted based on the amount of information the user is comfortable sharing. Privacy settings can be used to limit access of a particular user or group or limit access to particular information. These settings allow you to be very deliberate about who has access to which parts of your profile.

If you have a visible disability, you can use privacy settings to limit access to pictures that disclose your disability. If you are a member or fan of disability groups on Facebook you can limit the visibility of your group participation or choose not to become a member or fan of those specific groups.

Privacy setting capabilities are constantly changing. The potential for privacy keeps improving as technology develops. It is important that you remain informed about how to monitor access to their disclosure information and continue to be the primary decision-maker of how to strategically disclose your disability. Since each social networking site has different privacy capabilities, it is also essential to review the privacy settings on your

account before posting disclosing information so you know who will have access to that information.

If you blog, participate in online discussions and forums, or micro-blog on platforms like Twitter, it is important be very careful about what you say. Because of the short length of these posts, it is easy to say something that is misinterpreted and offends others. When discussing highly sensitive and emotionally charged issues like disability it is even easier to cause misinterpretation and distress.

It is also important to never post anything on the internet while angry. Most comments written when angry reveal information you may later regret sharing. Anger makes people impulsive, which is dangerous. Even if you later delete the comment, the angry post may never disappear.

You may be completely comfortable with having your disability disclosed on the internet. But, if you are uncomfortable with your information or picture being posted online then, to control your internet presence, you can ask the organization or friend to remove the information. In some cases it may be possible that the information about you online cannot be removed, and you will have to rethink the way you choose to disclose your disability with future employers.

#### ACTIVITY #2: Controlling your Online Presence

- Employers may use SNS to seek out additional information about you. If you have a Facebook, MySpace, or other SNS account, go on that site and spend 15-30 minutes exploring and adjusting the privacy settings. When you think you have arranged all the privacy settings to protect the information you would like to remain private, log out. Read over the new version of your profile. Are you comfortable with the amount of information that a potential employers can see?
- Review some of your online comments on blogs, SNS, or micro-blogging systems such as Twitter. Are there any comments that you want to remove because they reveal information you had not intended to share? Could any post you wrote be easily misinterpreted? Are there any comments that you may want to delete after considering what impression it gives of you?

#### **Enhancing your Online Presence**

While participation in a disability blog, discussion forum, or SNS can be an empowering experience, it is important to be aware of the public nature of these sites. Your posts can be like writing an editorial in any major newspaper where everyone in the world can read your opinion. The internet is even easier to access now than some newspapers. If you participate actively on the internet, providing identifiable information, you need to be comfortable with your mother, cousin, teacher, little sister, grandmother, mentor, or potential employer reading that information.

If you are comfortable having your disability disclosed on the internet, active participation in online communities is an opportunity to market yourself as a youth with a disability. A well written, engaging blog post or twitter comment can help bring you together with other youth around a shared characteristic, like disability. The internet offers the chance to be an agent of change, allowing you to connect to other people regardless of location and time.

As an example, Maris has a disability and volunteers at a local disability organization doing internet searches on disability legislation. Maris has a personal blog where she writes about what she has learned about disability laws and how she has worked to change a law for to help youth with disabilities, like her. For a future employer, Maris' blog may disclose that she has a disability, but it also shows that she understands policy, is enthusiastic about her work, and is a good communicator. Maris was able to use her internet activities to promote herself.

Creating a blog or simple website can give you the opportunity to gain control over the results that show up when someone searches on your name. If it displays your resume, articles, press mentions, or awards, it can highlight your experiences and successes for potential employers – just like Maris.

### ACTIVITY #3: Enhancing Your Online Presence

- Make a list of the specific information, attributes, events, photos, resume, or news articles that you would like to highlight.
- Make a list of potential opportunities to include this information in various online activities that you participate.
- Consider if you want to put this plan into action and actively work to enhance your online presence.

### **KEY LESSONS**

You have to be aware of everything you say and do on the internet. There are some general guidelines for internet activity that are important for all online users including youth with disabilities to keep in mind.

### Review your Digital Presence

- Know what information about you is available on the internet. Check various search engines every few months.
- Be aware of what you say and do on the internet to make sure it does not unintentionally disclose you disability.

- Check the privacy settings on any online discussion group or SNS to ensure that you are not disclosing information that you would like to keep private.

### Control your Digital Presence

- Do not post anything on the internet that you would not want published in a newspaper and remember that such information or pictures may never disappear.
- Depending on the kind of information, article, or site on the internet, if you find something you do not like, you can request that your information or image be removed.
- Avoid attacking other individuals or entities. Your commentary can impact your career far into the future.
- Be thoughtful and accurate in your posts, and be respectful of how other individuals may be affected.

### Enhance your Digital Presence (Optional)

- Create a website that highlights you as a professional, including your resume, achievements and other positive attributes that you want a prospective employer to discover.
- If you have a personal profile on a SNS, consider creating a “professional” profile that is public and reflects information that you are comfortable sharing.
- Seek out forums, discussion groups and opportunities online where your posts and comments illustrate your expertise in a specific subject to a prospective employer.

### **Take Action**

Now it is your turn to decide when and how to disclose your disability online. When, how, and if you disclose is completely your decision. It is important to think about whether your image on the internet is how you would want a potential employer to view you.

## ADA Trainer Network Module: Talking to Employers about Disability

### Handout--Checklist Making Choices, Getting Ready

Employees with disabilities have rights and choices about disclosing or discussing a disability either during a hiring situation or after employed.

Use this checklist to prepare for a disability-related conversation with an employer or potential employer by thinking through the legal, practical and human aspects of this conversation.

You can work through this checklist alone, or with others who know about your situation and employment goals such as a disability service professional.

If you have questions about any of the items on this checklist, contact :

- Your regional ADA Center at 800 949 4132

**For each of the items on the following list, give yourself a score:**

1 = I can do this

2 = I think I can do this, but may need support

3 = I need more preparation before I can do this



## Before the conversation, do I...

- Understand my choices, rights and responsibilities around disclosing my disability in this situation.
- Understand that I am not alone in this situation. (The number of people with disabilities in the workplace might surprise you! There are probably other people with disability working where you working or would like to work).
- Know how much information I would/would not like to share during this conversation. (You are only obligated to tell an employer that you have a disability when you request an accommodation to participate in the hiring process or to perform the essential functions of your job. Even in these instances, you do not need to share every detail of your condition.)
- Understand how my disability might impact the main functions of my job or the job I'm applying for
- Know how to explain a gap in my work history, if one exist s.
- Know how to talk about my disability in a way that is clear, concise, unapologetic, and connected to my work tasks.
- Have an idea about what concerns/questions the employer might have about my disability and thought through possible responses.
- Have suggestions about possible reasonable accommodation(s) I might need to perform the essential functions of my job.
- Know about how much each of these accommodation(s) might cost and what supports/resources might be available.
- Knowhow I can keep the conversation focused on my desire to do the best job I can .
- Have someone I trust who I can practice this conversation with



## ***During the conversation, I will...***

- Focus on a clear and specific discussion of the accommodations/modifications I need instead of on a vague, general discussion of my disability.
- Talk about how my disability may give me a valuable and unique perspective. (Having a disability might give you a unique perspective, make you a flexible, adaptable problem-solver, or make you more empathetic to others.)
- Cooperate with legitimate requests to provide medical information that will help the employer make decisions about hiring or accommodations.
- Gently but firmly challenge myths or misperceptions about my disability if they are brought up during the conversation.
- Be open to addressing the employer's legitimate questions/concerns about how I would do the essential job functions with my disability. (If you have an obvious disability or disclose a non-obvious disability that an employer legitimately thinks would affect your ability to do the job, you may be asked to describe or demonstrate how you would do essential job tasks.
- Emphasize what I *can* do.
- If needed, discuss who else (if anyone) will be told about my disability. Stress to the employer that even if a co-worker needs to be told you will do things differently, you do not want the employer to tell others about your disability.
- If needed, touch upon how to manage any "fallout" from any accommodation/modification I will be using among co-workers, customers or others in the workplace.
- Leave the conversation with a concrete plan of next steps to make sure the accommodation/modification is effective in helping me do the essential functions of my job.

