Mental Health

Disclosure and Mental Health

Most people understand that you shouldn't talk about your mental health status on Facebook if you don't want the world to know about it. But just how do you decide when and whether to tell someone that you are currently struggling—or have struggled in the past—with a psychological disorder? There's no easy answer to this question. Here are some important things to consider:

Do Tell Someone

It's hard enough to live with a psychological disorder; doing so in secret and in silence magnifies the pain 100-fold. If you don't have a trusted friend or family member, start by talking with your mental health care provider. You can also find and build support online in our anonymous community forums devoted to people living with mental illness.

Need to Know

Is there a good reason for someone to know? If the person plays a primary and intimate role in your life, then the odds are that you'll probably want to tell him or her eventually—especially if your illness is on the severe end of the spectrum. You should also let your primary care provider know, which is even more important if you begin taking medication.

Be cautious about telling people at work, but understand that your employers can't choose to accommodate your needs if they don't know there's an issue. Knowing your employment rights is a good place to start before discussing your situation with your work colleagues. Scroll down to learn about your rights and what you should consider before talking to your employer.

And in regards to romance, you aren't obligated to disclose your mental health history on a first date, but you should consider what you might tell that person if things get more serious. This is as much for your own benefit as your potential partner's. Another option is to visit safer dating sites where people might be more open, in a confidential way, with prospective partners.

Don't Assume

If you want someone to keep the news a secret, you should explicitly say so. Even then, people will sometimes break your confidence. This is not a reason to be paranoid, but it does mean that you should approach disclosure with the knowledge that a secret essentially stops being a secret as soon as you tell someone about it.

Trust is Key

Trust is more than just knowing that someone can keep a secret—it also gets at how much you trust a person to react in a supportive fashion. While some people might surprise you with how loving and understanding they can be, others, on occasion, might let you down. It's a good idea to start by telling only the people you feel sure will react to the news in a positive way.

Set Boundaries

Be clear with people about when you want their advice and when you just want them to listen. Also, you should realize that when you tell people you struggle with something like depression or an anxiety disorder, they'll probably tell you their opinions (informed and otherwise) about medication and therapy.

Stand Strong Against Stigma

While you should never put your well-being at risk, know that you're more likely to change societal attitudes when you put a familiar face on a controversial issue—especially when it's your face. Letting people outside your inner circle know you are dealing with or have dealt with psychological problems can change the way people perceive those of us living with mental health issues. In turn, this can make seeking care and support easier for other people facing mental health issues.

What to Tell Your Employer

Long gone are the days when you could be committed to a mental institution on the say-so of your spouse or your employer. That's a good thing. But you still have to be careful about who you tell, and when, about your psychological disorders. On the one hand, your illness can worsen if you don't reach out for help and tell your closest friends and family. On the other hand, anything you say can legally be used against you, and some of what you disclose might jeopardize your ability to attain and keep health insurance, employment and, in the cases of separation or divorce, the custody of your children.

In terms of work, few things are more frightening than the inability to find a job—or losing the one that you have. Not only does being jobless threaten your ability to survive financially, but it also informs how you think about yourself—and how others view you. Unemployment can lead to feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem. And, understandably, job insecurity and the financial woes it brings can be particularly intense for people already suffering from a mental illness.

Federal law says an employer can't discriminate against you simply because of your history of mental illness, but you should still proceed with caution. You might want to consult with employment law experts before telling an employer or asking for accommodation.

Family law varies a great deal from state to state, but mental illness is one of the top reasons that parents lose custody of their children. The duration and severity of the illness, combined with other factors, should be taken into account by the court, as well as whether or not there will be another adult present in the house who does not have a mental illness.

Companies that sell health insurance, disability insurance and life insurance can refuse to offer

you a policy and can charge much higher rates if you have a history of mental illness. In some cases, they can even exclude coverage for your illness in your policy. Though the recently enacted health care reform law will ultimately change these practices in regards to health insurance, the law will have no effect on disability and life insurance policies.

None of these factors should keep you from seeking help if you are ill—the risks to your well-being and your ability to live a full and happy life are too high—but they do mean you should work with your mental health care provider and possibly reach out to other experts to help you navigate how and when to disclose your illness to others.

Distress Versus Disability

How do you know when you are legally disabled by mental illness? The answer to this question can mean the difference between getting disability benefits, or not. Your doctor will have to make this determination, but your disability company or the state disability administrators won't just take your doctor's word for it. You'll have to meet certain criteria. In short, these include:

- Restriction of your daily activities, like showering or getting groceries, to the point that you cannot work.
- Reduction in social functioning to the point where you have difficulty interacting with others in order to do your job.
- Impairment in your ability to concentrate and stick with a task to such a degree that you would not be able to complete work assignments.
- Repeated episodes in which your symptoms flare up to a degree that deteriorates your ability to function.

Mental Health on the Job

When it comes to mental health and your job it's important to know your rights. A federal law known as the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) provides protection from employment discrimination for people with mental and physical illnesses. In general, the ADA says your employer is not allowed to discriminate against you based on your psychological history or any other medical disability. The ADA applies to employees and prospective employees of businesses with at least 15 people on the payroll. The law doesn't say that a company has to hire you or keep you on no matter the degree of your disability, but it does say that you can't be denied a job or be fired simply because of your mental health history—unless it has a direct bearing on your job responsibilities. Some basic information about your rights includes:

- You do not have to disclose your mental health status on your job application or in an interview.
- Your prospective employer can ask that you complete a medical examination once a job offer

has been made, but before you've actually been hired. However, the employer must have the same policy for all applicants.

- If you are denied the job as a result of your medical exam, the employer must state why the results diminish your ability to do the job you've applied for.
- If you have a job and inform your employer of a legitimate disability, the company must do what it can—within reason—to accommodate your disability.

Last Reviewed: February 28, 2019

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