



AGCAS

The Association of Graduate
Careers Advisory Services

Explaining your mental health condition to others

AGCAS Disability Task Group

Mental health conditions include common disorders such as anxiety and depression and, in limited cases, severe mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Mental health conditions may emerge suddenly, as a result of a specific event or incident, or gradually over a period of time when the condition may worsen or improve.

If your mental health condition affects your ability to carry out day-to-day activities then you are covered by the Equality Act 2010. The Act also covers people who have had a disability in the past. The Act does not provide a list of conditions that are covered, but instead considers the effects of a condition on a person.

Deciding whether to disclose your mental health condition is a personal choice. If you do decide to disclose you may want to bear the following in mind:

- **You are not alone:** According to the charity Mind, approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year. In England, 1 in 6 people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety and depression) in any given week.
- **Be prepared to provide information:** Don't assume the employer will understand your condition, without further information from you: Be prepared to describe your condition simply and briefly, and how it affects you. If your condition changes over time, let the employer know what affects the severity of your symptoms, either positively or negatively.
- **Share what's relevant:** It is important to avoid jargon and to share information about your mental health condition that is relevant. You may find it helpful to practise saying what you are going to share so that you feel confident discussing it.
- **Focus on your strengths:** Don't assume that an employer will view you in a negative way. As a result of your mental health condition you have probably developed resilience, greater empathy, and the ability to meet challenges and cope with change. These are invaluable skills in the workplace. Focus on what you CAN do rather than what you struggle with, and provide examples of how your condition has not limited your achievements, academic or work performance.
- **Assert your needs:** Be open and tell potential employers what adjustments you may need in order to fulfil the role requirements.

Mental health conditions affect people in different ways and during different stages of their lives. During the recruitment process and in the workplace there are some simple adjustments that would be helpful. You may wish to think about the following.

Recruitment Process

- Consider contacting HR prior to the interview or assessment centre. Some people find it helpful if the person interviewing them knows about their mental health condition. You may wish to explain that you may need a bit longer in the interview to gather your thoughts and to get nerves under control.
- At an assessment centre some individuals find it helpful if someone (a member of the HR team or a recent graduate trainee) takes on a pastoral role checking in with you about how you are doing.

- Do be aware of timing with regards to scheduling interviews. For example, if the medication you are taking makes it difficult for you to get up in the morning, or if you take longer to feel alert, then ask for a later start.

Examples of adjustments as part of the recruitment process include:

- Extra time during interview and aptitude testing to help with anxiety and nerves.
- If you are taking anti-depressants you may feel sluggish in the morning therefore you may wish to request an interview later in the day.
- You may request frequent breaks during an assessment centre.

Starting Work

- If you need any adjustments prior to starting work such as flexible hours, you may wish to discuss these in advance with HR and ensure these are in place before your first day at work.
- Settling into a new role takes time, and along the way you may feel anxious and stressed. Some individuals find it helpful to have regular meetings with their supervisor or to have a mentor at work to talk to about their feelings.

Examples of adjustments when starting work include:

- Agreeing flexible start and end times or an assigned parking space to alleviate the stress of a busy commute or the effects of taking medication.
- You may wish to discuss regular or occasional working from home, especially if you are going through a particularly anxious time.
- Explore the possibility of having a work-based mentor to help you settle in.
- To mitigate any sensory difficulties in the work environment such as noise, heat or light, can the employer make adjustments such as using desk partitions in an open-plan office, telephones that light up rather than ring, noise-cancelling headphones, or desk low-lights?

Whilst in work

- Be aware of any triggers that are affecting your mental health and be proactive in talking to your line manager before things get worse.
- Try and keep work and personal life separate. Little things such as not checking your emails at home can help hugely.
- Take care of yourself - this means taking regular breaks, eating well and exercising.
- Don't over commit and take too much on. If your workload is getting on top of you then do talk to your line manager and ask for help with prioritisation.
- Talk to someone, be it your doctor, line manager, a colleague or someone in HR. Sharing how you're feeling will ensure appropriate support is put in place to enable you to do your job.
- If you are comfortable with disclosing your condition it may help you and others if you provided colleagues with some information or advice about how your condition affects you and what may make it better or worse.

Examples of adjustments whilst in work include:

- You may wish to request specialist equipment to enable you to work from home or access to software which may help you schedule and plan your work.
- Reviewing workload and requesting re-allocation of task, especially if you are feeling unwell.
- Blocking noise by requesting headsets, access to natural day light by sitting next to a window or mitigating anxiety by asking for a dedicated parking space.

- If you are comfortable with disclosing your condition it may help you and others if you provided colleagues with some information or advice about how your condition affects you and what kind of things make it better or worse.

Useful Resources

- [Doc Ready](#) – an app that helps you plan how you disclose your mental health difficulties to a doctor.
- [Sam-App](#) – an app designed to help you manage your anxiety.
- [TargetJobs Diversity](#) – useful advice on disclosure and finding disability friendly employers.
- [Mindful Employers](#)- list of employers who have signed up to The Charter for Employers who are Positive about Mental Health.
- [Mind](#) – have excellent resources such as information about the different types of mental health conditions, and tips on how to ensure positive mental health in the workplace.

With acknowledgements to the following:

Websites -

<https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/> - Mental Health at Work

<https://www.mind.org.uk/> - Mind

<https://www.rethink.org/> - Rethink Mental Illness

Publications -

Rethink Mental Illness, (2017), *What's reasonable at work?* 2nd ed. Rethink Mental Illness