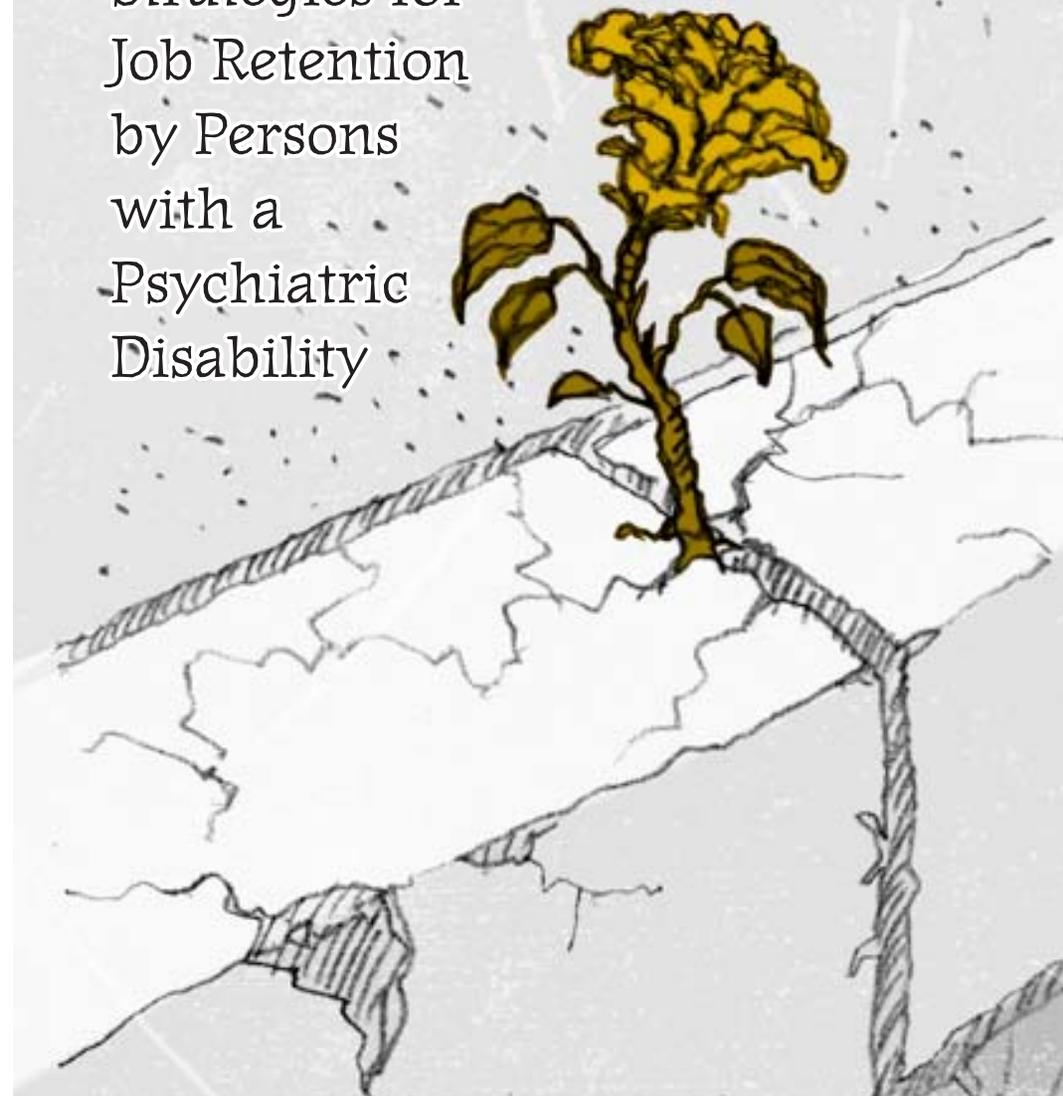


Hangin' In There:

Strategies for
Job Retention
by Persons
with a
Psychiatric
Disability



CANADIAN MENTAL
HEALTH ASSOCIATION

ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE

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Mental Health Services Work Group

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FOREWARD

Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is written primarily for people with psychiatric disabilities and it reflects their personal view points on the subject of job retention. It is extremely important that persons with psychiatric disabilities speak to the issues that affect them. If there is no opportunity for this, how will we learn to redress the very real problems in dealing with mental health/illness issues in the workplace?

Also included in the booklet is a section where employers give their views about employing someone with a psychiatric disability. We thought that this would be helpful to both the employee and the employer.

Finally, the information in this booklet can be shared with anyone who would like to learn more about employment and psychiatric disabilities.

Why a booklet on job retention?

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) recognized the need for this booklet during the course of the Routes to Work program, a project funded by the Opportunities Fund of Social Development Canada to promote mainstream employment for people with psychiatric disabilities.

It became clear over the past five years of the project that maintaining employment could be equally or even more challenging than obtaining employment. Yet we know that many people are keeping their jobs, and carrying them out successfully. The Mental Health Services Work Group, a group that steers many of the programs at CMHA National, determined that this booklet would be the best way to share this knowledge. In compiling this booklet we asked the people themselves, the experts about what works in their own lives, hoping that ideas and tips that have worked for people could be of interest and help to other consumers who are seeking employment or are already employed.

We know that there are many materials out there that deal with employment for people with mental illness, especially in relation to finding and getting a job. But those who work in this field say that getting a job is just the first step; just as important and challenging is keeping the job. This booklet is meant to fill that gap by providing examples of successful experiences in job retention, from both the employee and the employer perspectives. It is not a set of recipes for job retention, but rather provides anecdotes from real people for whom job retention has become a reality.

In addition, employers are realizing that they cannot afford to overlook mental illness/mental health in the workplace. It is one of the three leading causes of disability and the number one cause for disability claims. There is a large, hidden segment of the workforce that has mental illness. In fact, the World Health Organization predicts that depression will become the second greatest cause of premature death and disability worldwide by the year 2020. This booklet offers some successful strategies employers use to help their employees with mental illness to keep their jobs.

How was the information collected?

People with psychiatric disabilities, and employers, were interviewed from various locations across Canada over the course of two months.

The text of the booklet is scattered with direct quotes from the employees and employers. For these quotes, while most people were comfortable using their own names, we have chosen to keep confidentiality.

A word about language

Among people with psychiatric disabilities the most common terms used to identify this population are consumers, survivors, users, ex-patients and persons with psychiatric disabilities. You will notice throughout the booklet that these terms are used interchangeably.

INTRODUCTION

(from the Author)

To say that employment for people with psychiatric disabilities is important is a complete understatement. We know this because of the countless papers, handbooks and guides that have been written on the subject and from what people with psychiatric disabilities themselves have been saying for years. When asked what is needed to improve their lives, people with serious mental health problems often rank employment along with housing at the top of their list.

Conservative estimates place unemployment rates among people with psychiatric disabilities at 80 per cent. Due to the rise in workplace anxiety and depression, this number can be expected to increase over time.

Employers are still hesitant to hire people with psychiatric disabilities because of misconceptions about this population. The CMHA's Routes to Work project is breaking down those barriers. The project, funded by the Opportunities Fund of Social Development Canada, includes eight employment sites in CMHA branches and regions across Canada. The sites use an individualized approach whereby each person is supported in the job search with strategies geared to their own individual experiences, strengths, and needs.

The project addresses the very real gap of supporting the person before and during employment, and it addresses the need of on-going support to the employer.

This booklet, as one output of the Routes to Work project, looks at the issue of employment sustainability from the perspectives of employees and employers in the field. It describes some of the ways people with psychiatric disabilities are succeeding on the job and provides first-hand accounts of how people with psychiatric disabilities are breaking down barriers of stigma and positively participating in life again – a life that includes employment.

This booklet will outline practical strategies for keeping a job. You may be surprised that the strategies are not rocket science but considerations that every human being needs to be a participating part of society.

I have had the privilege of meeting countless fellow consumers throughout the country and beyond, and the bottom line for most of us is that, to quote a great saying, in order to succeed in life we need “a home, a job and a friend.” Indeed, these are basic requirements that anyone needs to succeed in life.

As an added feature, the booklet includes comments from the employers who went beyond the stigma and misconceptions held by society about people with psychiatric disabilities and were open to employing someone who needed a chance.

Enjoy the read, and please pass this along to anyone you think may be open to understanding the challenges that consumers face. Prepare to be inspired.

SECTION ONE

RECOVERY FROM MENTAL ILLNESS

We felt that beginning this booklet with a review of the concept of

“The concept of recovery is rooted in the simple yet profound realization that people who have been diagnosed with mental illness are human beings. Recovery is an attitude, a stance, and a way of approaching the day’s challenges.”

**Patricia Deegan, a
Journey of the Heart**

recovery from mental illness was a great place to start. What most people in society don’t realize is that recovery from mental illness is possible. Research has shown that people can recover from even the most severe types of mental illnesses. Recovery does not necessarily mean that the symptoms are gone forever, but it does mean that people are able to get on with their life, and not be controlled or defined by the illness. Recovery from mental illness is increasingly becoming an expectation and a goal for many people.

Recovery is about people and how they overcome the impacts of mental illness. Recovery is not an end state, and there is no checklist or scale that can be used to determine if it is permanently in place. The only judge can be the person with a disability on an on-going basis, day by day. Recovery needs to be achieved not once but over and over again.

Getting and keeping employment is a necessary part of recovery. For anyone, long-term poverty and unemployment produces feelings of self-doubt and shame. On the other hand, being employed fosters a sense of well-being, a sense that you are in the game of life. Employment is vital to anyone’s mental health.

Of course, work is also a major contributor to serious stress and therefore can be a threat to recovery. Like all people, consumers must strive to maintain balance in their lives. People who have psychiatric disabilities may need to make striking that balance a priority. You cannot maintain mental health long-term if you concentrate all your energies on work or on any other single area of life for that matter. We need to have healthy experiences with the

full range of resources available to us: family (whatever that means to you), friends, recreation, spiritual connections, love and intimate relationships, as well as work. Balance is the key to recovery.

SECTION TWO

THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING A JOB

What being employed means to someone with a psychiatric disability

There wasn't any hesitation when interviewees were asked this question. Being employed means the same thing as it does to those without a disability. The only difference here is that it may mean even more to someone who has been hampered with a psychiatric disability because they have had to work harder to get employment, and to keep it. Most consumers do not take being employed for granted. Steady employment is a gift. It is something real and tangible.

"Being employed means the world to me. I can plan for the future."

Like anyone, people with psychiatric disabilities may want to have a place of their own to live. They may choose to live by themselves or with others. Too many consumers have lived, or are living, in sub-standard living conditions, or with others in group home settings.

"I feel somehow less than human when I am not working."

Those interviewed for this booklet want to be gainfully employed so that they can have choices. These choices may include being able to sign a lease, or buy a house or a car.

"I can pay my own way. I have my own condo, and I can pay for my own medication."

Julie Flatt's Story: One Consumer's Account

This booklet is not meant to be about me. However, I felt that because other consumers were so forthcoming with their input, perhaps I should have the courage to add my two cents worth. As a person who has a psychiatric disability, I know what a challenge it can be to keep a job. A lot of different factors have to come into play for this to happen. Personally, I have to have "all my ducks in a row" before I can successfully maintain employment.

"I am a contributing member of society. I feel good about myself. I am not dependent on others and I feel in control of my life."

I can't stress enough the importance of having people you can trust in your life. For me this includes a psychiatrist, a behavioural therapist, my prayer group, and close friends and family that I can turn to should I need to. I also attend a self-help group periodically if I am having a particularly stressful time.

It may also be helpful to know that I may not use the entire support system all of the time. There have been times in my life when a self-help group and family support have been enough.

The other factor that has helped me to maintain employment is being able to disclose my history of mental illness. Granted, I have been working in the mental health system for sixteen years and, of course, this makes disclosure much easier. However, when I was working outside the mental health system in the past, I also disclosed to people I trusted. I guess I have had to get past the shame of having a mental illness. We have nothing to be ashamed of. We have an illness/disorder/disease, whatever we choose to call it, and that is not of our making.

I also think that it is a bit easier now to disclose because mental illness is no longer the taboo that it used to be. Now, it is much more likely that each of us knows, or knows and loves, someone with a mental illness. It could be a partner, grandparent, parent, sibling, friend, colleague or an acquaintance.

It even seems that more recently mental health issues are covered sympathetically in the media. In the past the media have reported

stories that involve mental health related problems for shock value. Nowadays the media are portraying a more positive picture of mental health and mental illness.

Personally, I feel that the more people who know about me, the less chance I have of relapsing. Really that's all it's about, isn't it? Our effort really has to be with preventing ourselves from falling into the same old behaviours that have been destructive to our lives in the past.

I know that I still have to struggle with self-esteem issues on a daily basis, even after twenty-five years in the workforce. Just recently, a member of my support network had to remind me of my positive qualities. Giving myself positive reinforcement is something that seems to take a back seat to on-the-job stresses. And on-the-job stress can contribute to illness.

Just lately I have been feeling particularly insecure with my work, and had I not had the option of discussing this with my boss, things could have turned out very negatively. It's very easy for me to tell myself that I am not good enough or that someone could do my job better. Because I made my supervisor aware of the way I was feeling, she was able to offer me support and accommodation.

What I want most in life is to be able to support myself both emotionally and financially. My wishes are no different from those I interviewed.

Being employed and able to provide for yourself lends a certain dignity that you can't get any other way.

Illness may have interrupted our lives - perhaps it was once, or, for some, many times - but we still want what everybody wants: to be self-sufficient.

Many of us are ruled by fear, but we don't have to be. We can step out on faith, as millions of others do each day, and pursue that which we are entitled to.

Why sustainability is an issue

Episodic Nature of Mental Illness

Some people may experience one episode of mental illness and never experience problems again. Nevertheless, the generally episodic nature of some people's mental health problems can make maintaining a job a challenge at times.

Pressure to get back to work too quickly

Oftentimes people with a psychiatric disability force themselves to go back to work before being ready. One of the main reasons for this is financial pressures. If forced to get back to work too soon, their mental health can suffer and it can become difficult to keep the job.

Lack of Support

For some people who are making the transition from unemployment to working again, appropriate support programs are not often available. Having effective supports along the way will significantly increase the chances of maintaining the job.

Low self-esteem and confidence

For people with psychiatric disabilities, low self-esteem and confidence can be a very real problem on the job. This could be a direct result of the illness or a result of being out of work. If the person doesn't feel good about themselves or their abilities, they may shy away from taking on challenges or they may feel unworthy of the job. As a result, they may give up too soon, before giving the job a chance.

SECTION THREE

EMPLOYEES WITH A PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITY COMMENT

"I feel I have two sanctuaries in my life – home and work. These are places I feel safe."

Disclosure

To disclose or not to disclose, that is the question.

The decision to disclose or not to disclose a psychiatric disability is not an easy one. Of those interviewed, the responses were a real mixed bag. Some employees said that disclosing was not an issue for them, while others said that they would definitely never disclose. Several of those interviewed didn't have a choice; they were "outed" in the workplace. The onset of symptoms that were not easily hidden during work brought their disability into the open.

Risks of Disclosure

The stigma around having a psychiatric disability continues to be very strong. It evokes strong emotions and makes disclosing a risk that only those who feel they can deal with the fall-out can take. The idea of being ostracized is not an attractive one, nor is being treated like an invalid.

In a perfect world, disclosure would not be an issue. But we're not there yet, and we need to be cautious and think it through thoroughly. Not everyone is going to embrace our differences. One person I interviewed disclosed her psychiatric disability and within a week she was laid off.

There is a possibility that your supervisor/boss and co-workers may treat you differently once you have disclosed. Furthering your career under these circumstances may not be easy. Your employer may be reticent to advance you, perhaps feeling that you might not be able to handle added pressure.

Co-workers may treat you with apathy or disdain. This is why it is so important to surround yourself with positive people wherever you can. This can offset the disappointment you may feel if co-workers act indifferently.

Benefits of Disclosure

An advantage to disclosing a disability is that it can reduce the tension and worry about someone finding out through other ways.

If an employee easier to ask for workplace.

"There is no way that they were ever going to find out.. people just wouldn't understand."

Disclosing can opportunity to ensure that co-should mental

discloses a disability it is accommodations in the

afford the employee an put strategies in place to workers respond appropriately health issues arise.

Another benefit to disclosure is that it somehow takes the pressure off. If your employer knows your situation you may be able to relax a little bit. If your supervisor/manager is aware that you tend to have high expectations of yourself, he/she may be able to help if they see that you are becoming overwhelmed.

"The reaction to disclosure usually depends on the person's age and gender. I have to test the waters for people's reaction before I can feel comfortable disclosing."

Disclosure can help you to build a strong support network at work. You can find the people that you trust and that you can turn to should the going get tough.

Conclusion

In the end disclosure is a very personal choice. Each person has to weigh the pros and cons. There is no right or wrong answer here. It is very much what the individual is most comfortable with doing. It is hoped that in time, and with continued education in the area of mental illness/mental health, disclosure of a mental illness will not be such a controversial subject.

Factors in consumers' work lives that make long-term employment easier

Some of the challenges that consumers face

In some cases medications can cause side effects that are difficult to control including difficulty getting up in the mornings, difficulty concentrating and/or dry mouth.

Other challenges that were cited are knowing how to schedule time, procrastination and feeling isolated or alone. The absence of supports in the workplace also ranked high with respondents as challenges that they face. These and other challenges can make work such a frustrating and negative experience that the employee gives up. But this does not have to be the case.

What helped consumers deal with the challenges in the workplace

- *Flex Hours*

When interviewees were asked what conditions/considerations/accommodations on the job have made longer-term employment possible, in almost every case, at least where people have been comfortable enough to disclose, the main response was flexibility in hours. This is a huge factor in helping people with disabilities maintain employment.

Several of the employees interviewed discussed starting the work day later to accommodate the medication issue. Often employers are willing to adjust an employee's hours as long as the job is getting done.

- *Talking to boss*

Many of those interviewed said that being able to talk to their supervisor/boss about their mental health problem was a definite plus. This helped to reduce feelings of isolation in the workplace.

Most of the employees interviewed said that having a good relationship with the boss is key to long-term employment. Being able to talk with a supervisor/boss in a friendly, interactive fashion is paramount. If you are unable to express your ideas, or speak frankly with a supervisor, you may not have the outlet you need and frustration might grow.

"The managers I work with are aware of my mental health issues and this helps to take that pressure off."

Your boss is probably the most important person to you in the workplace. If this relationship is an unhappy one, or if you feel you cannot talk with him/her, the workplace can be a very lonely and unproductive place. If this is the case, perhaps you can find other employees with whom you can share your thoughts.

- *Quiet Place to Work*

One employee said that his employer has been able to provide him with a small space of his own. This space is very small but it is "off the beaten track" and therefore a much more conducive corner to work in. The employee says that his concentration is much better when he doesn't have to deal with a lot of outside distractions.

- *Scheduling Work*

Some employees have found difficulties in scheduling their work duties. Prioritizing what has to be done can be a daunting task. What seems to work best is to keep an up-to-date "to do" list handy. This helps to get stuff out of your head and down in black and white. It is important to work closely with your supervisor to ensure that deadlines are being met. Scheduling regular meetings to discuss priorities with your boss can help to alleviate the pressure.

- *Dealing with Procrastination*

A couple of respondents said that they had issues with procrastinating on the job. They said that work is pressure and it is easy to get caught up in putting things off, particularly if they are not feeling confident about the tasks at hand. In a world of multi-tasking it is important to make yourself take one thing at a time. It is better to do one job well, rather than doing five things poorly.

- *Good relationships with co-workers*

Respondents said that they try to maintain positive relationships with their co-workers. You spend a third of your life at work, and cultivating good relationships is an important factor in maintaining that job.

Co-workers can be positive supports especially when you would like to bounce ideas off someone. Given the right circumstances co-workers can be real allies.

"I have a very supportive partner who is emotional back up for me and reminds me of how far I have come."

able support system in s said that having supportive are the cornerstones to mental health.

Taking Meds

For some, medications are helpful. They can assist with the symptoms of mental illnesses such as, depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia. This is a personal choice and one that should be arrived at with input from people you trust.

"Without medication, I don't think I could function as well as I do at work."

Factors in consumers' personal lives that make long-term employment easier

Support Networks: Buck up, my deer

When respondents were asked if anything in their personal lives has helped make long-term employment possible, all of the interviewees said that they need some type of a "support network" in place to be successful.

"Having a very supportive family has made it so much easier for me. In fact, having a supportive family makes long-term employment possible."

Support networks typically consist of partners, family, friends, psychiatrist/therapist, local supported employment program, supportive professionals and community agencies, a spiritual outlet such as a prayer group or

faith community and/or significant others.

SECTION FOUR

EMPLOYERS COMMENT

"A lot of employers think that if they hire someone with a psychological disability, they're going to have to make a whole lot of special allowances. What I tell them is that they're already making allowances for their employees without disabilities, and that any allowances they might have to make for someone with a mental health problem are not that different than what they're already doing."

What has worked well with respect to employing people with psychiatric disabilities?

Be flexible

The majority of employers interviewed said that flexibility in work hours was an effective support that they could offer.

Treating the employee with a psychiatric disability with the same respect as any other employee is a key to success.

Show respect

"Employing someone with a psychiatric disability also helps us as an employer and fellow employees to understand mental health issues."

It is very important to role as the employer. a doctor or a specialist not have the expertise or deal with mental health

Know your role

"I am not a psychiatrist or a counselor. I hope that the person already has that type of support in place."

know your You are not and you do training to issues.

Give clear direction

Some people with psychiatric disabilities need a lot of direction and very clear input. Sometimes it is helpful to put directions in writing.

Ask for help

"A person with a mental illness may get discouraged easily. Try to give clear direction so that the person doesn't feel overwhelmed."

Don't be afraid to ask for help. If a person has come from an employment program, call the staff of that program should you need assistance. A list of CMHA branch/regions and divisions can be accessed at www.cmha.ca.

Provide workplace awareness and education

Both an employee and employer observed that workplace awareness and education on mental health issues has been extremely important. Asking experts on mental health issues to come to the workplace to educate the staff helps all employees to feel involved and included, and there is less of a chance that employees will feel that preferential treatment is being given to the employee with a psychiatric disability.

In fact, one employee and an employment counselor from a local supported employment program conduct workshops on mental health/illness issues for all of the staff at the employee's place of business.

"When things didn't work out, it was not directly because of the person's disability. It would more likely be the result of the person getting upset because they felt they weren't doing a good job or that they felt they were doing something wrong."

What hasn't worked well?

The employers interviewed did not cite many issues here. One employer did say that allowing the person to work in an isolated area can be a problem if the employee tended to isolate themselves.

What is the impact of employing someone with a psychiatric disability on your organization?

Employers mentioned that employing someone with a psychiatric disability brings a new perspective to the workplace, and a new level of sensitivity among all employees to one another.

"Employing someone with a psychiatric disability has been extremely positive because we have found the employees to be hard working, dedicated and a positive addition to the workplace."

The hidden consumer

One of the employers interviewed for this booklet felt that it was important to acknowledge the "hidden consumer" in the workplace. There are employees and employers in the workplace who do not feel comfortable to disclose a mental illness. This may be because of the stigma associated with having a mental illness, fear of being passed over for a promotion, fear of co-workers treating them differently, shame of being seen as "weaker", and the fear of being under a microscope as far as their work is concerned.

This situation was brought to light by a national, representative survey by CMHA to explore public experiences and perceptions relating to stress and depression. It found that Canadians are increasingly uncomfortable letting others know when they are receiving treatment or counseling for depression.

SECTION FIVE

FOR EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS

What employees with psychiatric disabilities want to know Strategies/Tips for Sustainability - for employees with psychiatric disabilities from their peers

Say when

Have you ever had someone who is filling your coffee cup say to you "say when" (in other words, how much coffee do you want in your cup)? We have to accept ourselves and understand that it is okay to say, "I have too much on my plate." We often feel inadequate at the best of times, so when we are faced with an unrealistic workload we have difficulty asking for help.

Our expectations of ourselves are often much too high. We want to do well in our jobs, and we want to please our supervisors and/or our co-workers. Be as realistic about your duties as you can be, and if you begin to feel overwhelmed, check things out with someone you trust (a co-worker, friend, service provider). We are often hell-bent to make up for past failures so we set ourselves up to fail again by placing the bar too high and overdoing it.

Everyone knows what it feels like to be overwhelmed at work. This is a normal state of working. We can't afford to get caught up in this. If you are feeling overwhelmed, don't be afraid to say so. Try not to wait until you are worked up about it. Talk with your supervisor; perhaps an accommodation can be made or there might be alternatives or strategies the two of you can work out together to lighten the load.

Don't compare yourself to others (co-workers)

We all tend to compare ourselves to others but when we have mental health problems this is often magnified. Our core (self-esteem and confidence) may not be as strong as we would like and we may fall into this way of thinking. We feel we should be doing as much as others are doing, and that we should be doing as well as they seem to be. This can be a real stumbling block.

If you begin to compare yourself to others, stop yourself and tell yourself that you have your own abilities, gifts and attributes. You may have heard this from counselors, psychiatrists, family and friends. It is true; believe it. People are often poor judges – magnifying their shortcomings and minimizing their strengths. Let the boss do the evaluating.

Remain calm

You've seen these two words used in the instructions on how to proceed during a fire alarm in elevators or hotel rooms. Try to remember these words. Make them your focus for each day. As people with psychiatric disabilities, we can be so anxious that we are in a constant state of anxiety at work. Try to relax. There is nothing that can't be fixed. If you make mistakes, and we all do, this is part of being human.

Try not to get caught up in the climate that surrounds you. Today's fast-paced world is not always conducive to staying mentally healthy. If you are working in a place where the pace is frenetic, don't allow yourself to feed into it. We can't afford to do that.

Put yourself and your health first

People with psychiatric disabilities have difficulty putting themselves and their health first. This may be why we became ill or affected by mental health problems in the first place. Remember that if we don't put our health first, we will be the ones to lose out. We will be the ones to suffer increased symptoms or complete debilitation. Longevity in our work lives depends on making our mental health a priority.

Know that you are worthy

This is so important. Just because you may have been affected by a disorder/illness doesn't mean that you are not worthy or able to work. We need to be constantly changing our negative thoughts. Believe that you are worthy and that you belong because you do.

Remember it's not the end of the world

We tend to think that if this job doesn't work out, our life is over. We instantly think that we'll never get another. This is black and white thinking. There is a gray area and there are **always** options. If this isn't the job for you, there'll be others. As consumers we often look at things with excess negativity. The ideal is to become accurate in our assessment of situations.

We better get those wagons in a circle, boys!

Rely on your support network. Use whatever means at your disposal to "stay in the game": family, friends, faith, self-help and/or supportive service providers.

Reach out when you need to. There is no shame in doing this. We all need one another and effective people know this. Many of us when stressed tend to isolate, smoke and ruminate. This is the worst thing that we can do. Stay in touch with friends and confidants.

Every person who was interviewed said that having a support network of sorts in place is a must. Each person talked of the importance of having people you trust to back you up.

Don't let your work become your life

Another stumbling block for many of us is that we take the worries of the day home with us. Therefore, we hardly get rest from work. If we want to enjoy longevity in our work life, we have to leave our jobs where they belong, at work. Remember you aren't paid to rent space in your head away from the job. We all reflect on our day occasionally, but say no to obsessing and worrying!

Take one day at a time

Research today shows that mindfulness – staying in the moment – is a successful strategy for combating depression and anxiety. Try not to let worries of the past, or the future, occupy your mind. We can only deal with what we have when it's in front of us. You have a right to enjoy life, and not be controlled by the worries that are associated with your job.

Whenever you hear yourself saying “what if”, it is a sign of trouble. For instance, many of us worry about getting laid off or our contracts ending. Working on hypothetical problems can only cause major anxiety and leave you feeling helpless. If the problem you are worried about arises, you can work to solve it.

Give credit where credit's due

Take the time to give yourself a pat on the back for what you do on the job. If our self-esteem is at a low ebb, we tend to think that almost everything we do is inconsequential. This is far from the truth. Take time, on a regular basis, to think about all that you do. People with psychiatric disabilities are amazing people. We are resilient. We keep trying no matter the odds against us. For every time that you "step up to the plate", feel good about what you've done.

Keep a journal

Another way of coping with problems on the job is to journal your thoughts and feelings. This doesn't have to be an onerous task, and it can be quite helpful with organizing your thoughts objectively. Just write down the things that are bothering you, and then brainstorm possible ways to deal with them. Think of how you would ideally like things to look without the problem present. Usually by the time you have written it all down, things quite often sort themselves out.

Be aware of your Employee Benefit Plan

Take full advantage of the services of your Employee Benefit Plan, if one is available to you. Plans differ, so you need to be knowledgeable about what is offered. For instance, some plans cover a limited amount for massage, and you may have access to a psychologist who may be able to help problem solve what you are dealing with on the job. You may wish to access counseling if the employer provides an Employee Assistance Plan (EAP).

Get to know the local after-hours mental health services

If you do not want to take time off work to address mental health issues, community help is becoming increasingly available in the form of self-help and peer support groups, crisis or warm lines, safe houses, mobile crisis teams, and trained counselors and crisis

workers. These supports can be accessed through your general hospital's emergency department after regular working hours. To find out about these resources, contact your local CMHA branch (a list of CMHA branches/regions and divisions can be accessed on our web site at www.cmha.ca).

Check out Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

This can be a very useful form of therapy which can provide you with tools you can use on an ongoing basis to deal with problems on the job such as depression, anxiety, fears and phobias.

Use the internet

The Centre for Psychiatric Rehabilitation has a free internet e-mail mailing list on accommodation at school and on the job, which you can subscribe to from their web site. Although a lot of the discussion centres on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it can be supportive, provide information on how other people are handling problems, and allow you to pose your own questions to the list.

What employers of employees with psychiatric disabilities want to know

- *Can we expect people with mental illness to maintain employment?*
Through our national research initiatives, we have learned that people who experience serious mental illness can hold responsible jobs and make significant contributions to their work, home and leisure lives despite both the diagnostic label and the level of severity of their illness.
- *What factors help most with job retention?*
Individuals who were most successful at finding and keeping work are those who continue to receive both formal (e.g. mental health providers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, therapists, etc.) and informal support (e.g. friends, family, self-help/peer support groups) whether directly within their work environment or outside of work.

- *How widespread is mental illness?*
We know that nearly three million Canadians will experience depression at one point in their lives, and that one in five Canadians will be affected by mental illness.

- *What do we mean by psychiatric disabilities?*

Some of the most common psychiatric conditions are:

- Anxiety disorders
- Depression
- Bipolar disorder (“manic-depression”)
- Schizophrenia

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is a common human experience, however, some people experience such pronounced anxiety that they may find it difficult to enjoy activities, often avoiding them completely.

Most people experience anxiety from time to time. But if anxiety is so strong that it interferes with a person’s ability to carry on their normal routine, it may be a psychiatric condition called “anxiety disorder”.

Depression

As with anxiety, we all feel “blue” from time to time. But a person experiencing severe depression may have feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness that last for long periods, and may not be able to enjoy their usual activities.

Depression can touch anyone, from family and friends to co-workers. Depression can affect men and women of any age, education, economic or social status. Most often, depression affects people in their working years between the ages of 24 and 44.

Bipolar Disorder

A person who has bipolar disorder can “swing” from periods of depression to periods of extreme excitement,

hyperactivity, decreased need for sleep and inflated self-esteem.

Schizophrenia

Common symptoms of schizophrenia include confused thinking, lack of contact with reality, sensory delusions (seeing, hearing, or smelling things that are not there), mood changes and withdrawal from the outside world.

- *How do I refer to a person with a psychiatric disability?*

There are acceptable terms to describe psychiatric disabilities. These include “psychiatric disability”, “mental illness”, “mental health problem”, and “emotional disorder.”

To some, none of these terms may be comfortable at all. Do not refer to the person as “a depressive”, “a manic depressive or bipolar”, or “a schizophrenic.” If you need to refer to the individual, put the person before the disability/illness. Better yet just refer to the person by their name. We know that labels can be stigmatizing and unnecessary.

- *How do I help someone with a psychiatric disability?*

Most employers are responsible community members who would be willing to hire people with psychiatric histories, but are unsure of what this entails. Because of widespread misconceptions about the nature of most mental illnesses, they worry about unpredictable behaviour on the job. These fears can be minimized with the facts about mental illness.

The most uncertainty for employers lies in the area of how to provide accommodations. People with physical disabilities usually require an adjustment that is concrete and well-defined, such as a ramp for a wheelchair, or a special computer for someone with a visual impairment. But what is it that people with mental illness need in the workplace, and how can it be implemented?

What employees and employers want to know (based on Diversity Works, CMHA National)

The Basics

Accommodation is any modification of the workplace or in workplace procedures that makes it possible for a person with special needs to do a job.

Employers are realizing the importance of including persons with psychiatric disabilities in their workforces. One of the main reasons for this is that they realize the many benefits associated. Employing people with psychiatric disabilities impacts a workplace in many positive ways. For instance, employers have learned that many persons that have been affected by a mental illness generally try harder to do a good job. Their lives may have been interrupted by illness and they are eager to prove to themselves that they can get a job and keep it. Many people with psychiatric disabilities work without accommodations, and others may need them from time to time.

Research indicates that employers want to accommodate employees with psychiatric disabilities, but lack information on how to start.

Principles of Accommodation

- ❑ Create an environment where accommodations are accepted by addressing the individual needs of each employee.
- ❑ Respect the employee's desire for confidentiality and identify specifically the form and the degree of confidentiality.
- ❑ Be willing to engage in joint problem solving.
- ❑ Make all accommodations voluntary for the employee.
- ❑ Be prepared to review accommodations periodically to meet changing needs, and keep in mind that needs may change.
- ❑ Be flexible in enforcing traditional policies and procedures.
- ❑ Be concrete and specific when identifying accommodations. Putting them in writing is a good idea.
- ❑ Set up an easy and accessible mechanism for reviewing accommodations.

Accommodation is not preferential treatment. The fact that some of your employees may see accommodation this way represents a challenge for employers. Education and discussion are the keys to eliminating wrong assumptions about people with special needs. Strive to create an environment that addresses everyone's individual needs and you will also eliminate feelings that one employee is getting preferential treatment over another.

Strategies/Tips for Employers

Everyone feels stress when beginning a new job. However, for people who are experiencing mental health problems, this can be particularly daunting. Even as time goes on, the person may continue to feel anxious and expect too much of themselves.

The following tips were gathered through speaking with employers of persons with psychiatric disabilities. The following strategies may be of help to you.

Let's meet about the meeting that we didn't meet about last week

Even though it seems that there are too many meetings these days, it is very important for both you and the employee to meet regularly to check the progress of the work being done by the employee.

As with any employee, persons with psychiatric disabilities need to know that they are doing a good job and that they are appreciated. They also need to know if they are not to help them to improve.

Persons with psychiatric disabilities tend to be very hard on themselves, and regular meetings will help both you and the employee to know if changes need to happen to improve performance. These meetings will allow the person to focus on a specific challenge, rather than engage in free-floating anxiety about how everything they're doing is "not".

Consider a flexible work schedule

If the employee is having difficulty with working traditional hours, work with him/her to look at other options. If it is possible for the job to be done in a non-traditional work schedule, consider offering flexible hours such as a later start time to the work day.

Screen out distractions

If possible, provide the employee with a quiet workspace. Separate offices for every employee is not always possible, but perhaps a privacy partition could be provided that would help to shield the employee from excess noise.

Van Gogh would have loved this one

Try to encourage creativity. People with psychiatric disabilities want to feel that they can be creative on the job.

If it is possible, encourage the employee to take on job duties that utilize their creative side. Employers who were interviewed for this booklet said that encouraging the employee to be creative, and tapping into their innovative ideas, worked positively towards helping the employee to feel a real part of the organization.

If at all possible, encourage the employee to take on a leadership role in your organization. The person may not be comfortable doing this, but it can't hurt to ask. You may be surprised.

Help the employee to feel "a part of the group."

Having a psychiatric disability can be one of the most isolating experiences that a person can go through. Due to the stigma surrounding mental illnesses, many tend to keep to themselves. Encourage the employee to take part in social activities: holiday parties, baseball teams, etc.

Don't be afraid to hold the employee accountable

One employer interviewed for this booklet, a psychiatric survivor herself, said that this is most important. Employers may feel reticent to say something to correct a workplace issue with an employee that has a disability because they have a disability.

Everyone needs to feel that they are accountable to their employer and it is no different with an employee who has a psychiatric disability.

Working structures that include regular evaluations can help you to ensure that the job is getting done to your satisfaction.

Seek out input from community mental health organizations

Ensure that you are aware of resources available to you in your community should you need assistance. If there is a local CMHA branch/region or division in your area, volunteers and staff would be happy to help out with any questions you may have (a list of CMHA divisions is at the end of this section).

When you think about it, most of these are considerations/accommodations that you already make for other employees. The items mentioned above are not very different from what everyone needs to be employed successfully long-term.

Where do I get support (for employees and employers)?

The following is a list of CMHA Divisions across Canada. If you want to find out if there is a branch near you, please check with the division.

If you have access to a computer, please check out our national web site at www.cmha.ca for a complete list of divisions, branches and regions.

Also listed is Routes to Work sites across the country. Please feel free to call if you have any questions about employment.

Alberta Division
9707 - 110 Street NW
Rm. 328 Capital Place
Edmonton, AB T5K 2L9
Tel: 780 - 482 6576
Fax: 780 - 482 6348
Email: division@cmha.ab.ca
<http://www.cmha.ab.ca>

British Columbia Division
14 - 3150 East 58th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5S 3S9
Tel: 604 - 688 3234
Fax: 604 - 454 1013
Email: office@cmha-bc.org
<http://www.cmha-bc.org>

Manitoba Division
2 - 836 Ellice Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3G 0C2
Tel: 204-953 2350
Fax: 204 - 775 3497
Email: info@cmhamanitoba.mb.ca
<http://www.cmhamanitoba.mb.ca>

New Brunswick Division
202 - 403 Regent St.
Fredericton, NB E3B 3X6
Tel: 506 - 455 5231
Fax: 506 - 459 3878
Email: cmhanb@nb.aibn.com
<http://www.cmhanb.ca>

Prince Edward Island Division
PO Box 785
178 Fitzroy St.
Charlottetown, PE C1A 7L9
Tel: 902 - 566 3034
Fax: 902 - 566 4643
Email: division@cmha.pe.ca
<http://www.cmha.pe.ca>

Division du Québec
326 - 911 Jean-Talon
Street Est
Montréal, QC H2R 1V5
Tel: 514 - 849 3291
Fax: 514 - 849 8372
Email: acsm@cam.org
<http://www.acsm.qc.ca>

Newfoundland and Labrador
Division
81 Kenmount Road
St. John's, NL A1B 3P8
Tel: 709 - 753 8550
Fax: 709 - 753 8537
Email: office@cmhanl.ca
<http://www.cmhanl.ca>

Nova Scotia Division
63 King Street
Dartmouth, NS B2Y 2R7
Tel: 902 - 466 6600
Fax: 902 - 466 3300
Email: cmhans@allstream.net
<http://www.cmhans.org>

Saskatchewan Division
2702 - 12th Avenue
Regina, SK S4T 1J2
Tel: 306 - 525 5601
Fax: 306 - 569 3788
Email: cmhask@accesscomm.ca
<http://www.cmhask.com>

Yukon Division
6 Bates Crescent
Whitehorse, YT Y1A 4T8
Tel: 867 - 668 7144
Fax: 867 - 633 3557
Email: deliasmorgan@yahoo.com
[http: no website](http://no website)

Northwest Territories Division
5125 - 50th Street
PO Box 2580
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P9
Tel: 867 - 873 3190
Fax: 867 - 873 4930
Email: cmha@yk.com
[http: no website](http://no website)

Ontario Division
2301 - 180 Dundas St.
West
Toronto, ON M5G AZ8
Tel: 416 - 977 5580
Fax: 416 - 977 2813
Email: info@ontario.cmha.ca
<http://www.ontario.cmha.ca>

Routes to Work Employment Site
CMHA Hastings & Prince Edward
Counties
530 – 199 Front Street
Century Place
Belleville ON K8N 5H5
Tel: 613-969-7816
Fax: 613-969-8294
Email: cmha.hastings@bellnet.ca

Routes to Work
Employment Site
CMHA Fredericton
Oromocto
G23 – 65 Brunswick Street
Fredericton NB E3B 1G5
Tel: 506-455-8218
Fax: 506-443-4349
Email: letswork@nbnet.nb.ca

Routes to Work Employment Site
CMHA Kingston
6 Ordnance Street
Kingston ON K7K 5T9
Tel: 613-549-7027
Fax: 613-549-7098
Email:
routestowork_kingston@hotmail.com

Routes to Work Employment Site
CMHA Medicine Hat
204 – 1865 Dunmore Road SE
Medicine Hat AB T1A 1Z8
Tel: 403-504-1811
Fax: 403-504-2542
Email: ddyer@redi.ca

Routes to Work Employment Site
CMHA Sault Ste. Marie
386 Queen Street East
Sault Ste. Marie ON P6A 1Z1
Tel: 705-759-0458
Fax: 705-945-0261
Email: guy@cmhassm.com

Routes to Work
Employment Site
CMHA Alberta South
Region
426 – 6th Street South
Lethbridge AB T1J 2C9
Tel: 403-329-4775
Fax: 403-320-7432
Email: debf.cmha@shaw.ca

Routes to Work
Employment Site
CMHA Saskatoon
1301 Avenue P North
Saskatoon SK S7L 2X1
Tel: 306-384-9333
Fax: 306-978-5777
Email:
bbeaudry@cmhasaskatoon.ca

Routes to Work
Employment Site
CMHA Colchester East
Hants County
P.O. Box 1413
515 Prince Street
Truro NS B2N 5V2
Tel: 902-895-4211
Fax: 902-895-4027
Email: hlank@eastlink.ca

IN CLOSING

This booklet can be used by employees with a psychiatric disability and by employers as a source of ideas for developing healthy work strategies and workplaces that sustain employment.

Employees can refer to it often to learn what their peers have found helpful in keeping their jobs.

We hope this booklet is helpful to you, whether you are an employer, an employee or just someone who cares. Good luck!

SOURCES

The following documents were used as sources of information for this booklet.

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Julie L. Flatt

Canadian Mental Health Association,
National Office
8 King Street East, Suite 810
Toronto, Ontario
M5C 1B5
E-mail: info@cmha.ca
Web Site: www.cmha.ca

Available in French.
Aussi disponible français



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