



## 12.5 Accommodating Mental Illness in the Workplace



Mood and anxiety disorders can affect a person's ability to work productively and to be effective in their job. While some employees may require a short- or long-term disability leave, the majority are able to continue working with some adjustments or accommodations in how or where they work.

There are many benefits to accommodating an employee with a mental illness to keep working:

### Employee Benefits:

- A daily routine and sense of purpose
- Social connection within the workplace
- Income

### Employer Benefits:

- Business continuity
- Goodwill with the employee that can lead to stronger engagement and trust
- The goodwill ripple effect with other employees who see that their colleague is supported

## Duty to Inquire and Duty to Accommodate

There are two important legal requirements to be aware of when it comes to mental illness and the workplace:

### 1. The duty to inquire.

Managers who think that an employee may be struggling with a mental health challenge have a legal duty to inquire. Simply put, if you think there is a mental illness you must ask the employee.

### 2. The duty to accommodate.

All employers in Canada are required by law to accommodate an employee with a disability, up to the point of undue hardship. This includes a mental illness such as a mood or anxiety disorder or addiction.

# Myths About Accommodations

## **Myth #1: A person with mental illness is incapable of working.**

When we think about a person who has a mental illness, we often believe that they are unable to work, and the only solutions are for them to take a disability leave or quit their job. The reality is that most people experiencing a mental health challenge can continue to work with some simple adjustments. In fact, there are likely employees of yours right now who have a mental illness and are working – you just don't know about it.

## **Myth #2: Accommodating a person with a mental health challenge is hard to do.**

It is a common misconception that providing an accommodation for a person with a mental health challenge is hard. An accommodation is really just an adjustment – often temporary – that can help an employee to continue doing their job and contributing to the work of your organization. Usually, the best place to start is talking to your employee to find out what elements of their job they might be struggling with and coming up with solutions that help remove those struggles.

# Common Accommodations

According to Mood and Anxiety Disorders Canada, of those who are currently working or have worked since being diagnosed with a mental illness, 50% reported requiring an accommodation or adjustment in the workplace.

Examples of workplace supports, accommodations, or adjustments for mental health challenges include:

Symptom or Challenge	Accommodation
Tardiness	A later start and finish time
Absenteeism; time away for medical appointments	A flexible work schedule that may include work from home options, split days off, or a compressed work week
Agitation from noise	A quieter workspace/location
Setting unrealistic goals; poor time management; challenges with interpersonal relationships	Coaching from the manager; more frequent check ins and one-to-one meetings
Difficulty finishing tasks	Modifying or adjusting some job duties, reassigning some work

Accommodating mental health challenges may require time and patience from both the manager and the employee. The first adjustment that you try might not work. That's OK, keep trying.

## Always Ask the Expert: Engage the employee in the accommodation discussion.

The most important thing to know about accommodating an employee with a mental health challenge is this: you are not the expert. Nor should you be – you are not a trained healthcare provider. Ask the employee what they think will work for them. If it's a new illness they might not know. If it's a pre-existing or recurring illness, they will likely know what will work and what won't work. Either way, it's essential to engage the person with the illness in the conversation. And always ask your employee to talk with their doctor about accommodations and treatments.

## Undue Hardship

It is important to note that while there is a legal requirement to accommodate a person with a mental illness, it is only up to the point of undue hardship. That means that if you are a small business and the accommodation would have a significant impact on your ability to continue to operate your business, you do not need to make the accommodation.

The planning for an accommodation is a joining conversation where both sides – employer and employee – may need to meet somewhere in the middle.

## The Accommodation Process

Chances are that you and your employee will need help with the accommodation process. Depending on the size of your organization, you will have either lots of resources available to you or not many. Here are some suggestions to help you either way.

### What to do if you don't have a Human Resources department or Employee and Family Assistance Program:

- Contact subject matter experts in the community such as your local [Canadian Mental Health Association Chapter](#) and ask for help.
- Do some research online – there are lots of free resources that can provide you with some relevant information like the [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#) or [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#).
- Ask another manager in your organization for suggestions as to how they have supported their employees in the past (remember to maintain confidentiality!).
- If you belong to an industry association, ask other members if they have some advice.

### What to do if you do have a Human Resources department or Employee and Family Assistance Program:

- Ask your HR Consultant for guidance with the accommodation process.
- Use your employee and family assistance provider as a resource to:
  - a. Help you as a manager to support your employee; and
  - b. Provide supports to your employee.

## What to Tell Other Employees

Confidentiality and trust between the manager and employee are essential. However, when you accommodate an employee with changes like a flexible work schedule or modified tasks, other employees will be curious and may make assumptions. Anticipate this and talk with the employee about how to address this as part of the accommodation plan.

The employee is not required to disclose a medical diagnosis or any personal information relating to their illness. It is up to the employee to decide how much or how little they share with their colleagues.

### **Sources:**

<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada. (2015, June 3). *Mood and anxiety disorders in Canada*. Retrieved from [Mood and anxiety disorders in Canada - Canada.ca](#)

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