



PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES

In spite of the presence of symptoms, many people with mental illness work every day or attend school. Many successful individuals in government, arts, theater, law, education, entertainment, and medicine have some form of mental illness.

DID YOU KNOW?

- + Four of the 10 leading causes of disability for persons age 5 and older are mental disorders.
- + An estimated 15% of the U.S. population use some form of mental health services in any given year.
- + Mental illnesses are treatable.
- + One in 5 people will experience mental illness in his or her lifetime.
- + One in 4 people knows someone personally who has a mental illness.

MENTAL ILLNESS EMPLOYMENT CONCERNS

Employers who have no known experience with mental illness may be concerned about hiring a person with a psychiatric disability. Unfortunately, there are numerous stereotypes that impact society's attitudes. Some employers may assume that a person with a mental illness will act inappropriately or be unreliable when performing essential job functions. Fortunately, accommodations and workplace supports can help the employee overcome functional limitations.

A small number of people require minimal support while others need occasional or substantial support. The level varies over time for the individual. Typical support needs include help in maintaining concentration, handling stressful situations, interacting with co-workers, or responding to supervisor feedback.

ACCOMMODATION CONSIDERATIONS

There are a variety of accommodations that are effective for people who are experiencing mental illness. Following are a number of accommodation examples:

Supervising Effectively

- + Provide continual feedback and reinforcement
- + Develop clear expectations of responsibility
- + Develop strategies to deal with problems
- + Develop a procedure to evaluate accommodations

Maintaining Concentration

- + Reduce distraction in work area
- + Provide space enclosures or private office space
- + Plan for frequent breaks
- + Divide large assignments into smaller tasks

Maintaining Stamina During Workday

- + Allow flexible scheduling
- + Provide additional time to learn tasks/new responsibilities
- + Allow use of a job coach
- + Allow the employee to work from home

Interacting With Co-Workers

- + Educate employees on rights for accommodations
- + Provide sensitivity training to co-workers/supervisors
- + Make attendance at work-related social functions optional
- + Encourage nonwork conversations out of the work area

Handling Stress

- + Provide praise and positive reinforcement
- + Refer to counseling and employee assistance programs
- + Allow telephone calls to doctor during work hours

Aiding Memory

- + Allow the employee to use a tape recorder
- + Provide for typewritten notes, checklists, and instructions
- + Allow additional time for training

EMPLOYMENT SCENARIOS

Medication – Due to medication, a senior management employee becomes very tired in the early afternoon. She is allowed to come in an hour earlier and to complete her work from home electronically late at night.

“This flexible schedule is not that different from the administrative assistant who is a single mother and does not have a disability but has two small children. She is allowed to come in an hour earlier in the morning, leave in time to pick up and care for her children after school, and complete her job from her computer after putting the kids to bed.”

Larry Dale, State Liaison for Louisiana BLN

Schizophrenia – A young man diagnosed with schizophrenia hears voices. At the floor-cleaning company where he works there is often a lot of walking traffic. As an accommodation, the young man is allowed to wear earphones and listen to music as he does his job. He does his job so well that his supervisor reports that he is the most dependable, hard-working person he employs. He has been working in the job for more than 10 years.

“This accommodation is not greatly different from the young man on the construction job who goes about his work with earphones on. He knows his work and gets his job done while listening to whomever the latest pop or rap artist happens to be. He does not have a disability. Music helps the job pass—more interestingly and more enjoyably.”

Larry Dale, State Liaison for Louisiana BLN

Mood Disorder – An employee in an office environment has a mood disorder and is affected by whether her surroundings are dull or bright. Her office has been painted a bright color and has lots of extra lighting. This helps her to feel more comfortable and able to achieve at a very high level. She has won continuous recognition awards for her agency.

“This lady is not much different from the senior employee who is indispensable to a company and has turned 45 years old. She needed more light because she has become unable to read the size of the print she used to be able to read. Disability? I wouldn't think anyone would say yes. Would the company give her as much light as she needed to feel comfortable doing her job? I think so!”

Larry Dale, State Liaison for Louisiana BLN

These examples represent some simple and inexpensive ways to make accommodations for employees with disabilities. Businesses are accustomed to making individual adjustments for employees. The lesson here is that people with psychiatric labels or people with disabilities are accommodated in ways similar to employees without disabilities.

RESOURCES

- + Job Accommodation Network (JAN) – 800-526-7234
<http://www.jan.wvu.edu>
- + National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)
800-524-7600 – www.nami.org
- + Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University
617-353-3549 – www.bu.edu/sarpsych
- + VCU-RRTC on Workplace Supports
www.worksupport.com/biznet/news.html



Center for Workforce Preparation
U.S. Chamber of Commerce
1615 H St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20062-2000
202-463-5525 VOICE; 202-463-5308 FAX
www.uschamber.com/cwp



**YOUR GATEWAY TO EMPLOYMENT
FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

VCU-RRTC on Workplace Supports
1314 W. Main St.
Richmond, VA 23284-2011
804-828-1851 VOICE; 804-828-2494 TTY
804-828-2193 FAX
www.worksupport.com/biznet/index.html

Editors: Valerie Brooke, VCU-RRTC and Beth B. Buehlmann, Center for Workforce Preparation, U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Contributors: Cathy Healy, Center for Workforce Preparation; Larry Dale, Louisiana BLN; Job Accommodation Network; National Alliance for the Mentally Ill; Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, Boston University; National Mental Health Association; and VCU-RRTC on Workplace Supports. Layout & Design: Jeanne Roberts



VCU School of Education and Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation is an equal opportunity/affirmative action institution and does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, age, religion, ethnic origin, or disability. If special accommodations are needed, please contact Valerie Brooke at VOICE (804) 828-1851 or TTY (804) 828-2494. Funding for this product is provided by grant #H133B980036-02B with the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation Research with the U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C.