

RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURES OF DISABILITY, MENTAL HEALTH AND/OR CHRONIC ILLNESS



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spécialisés pour l'emploi des
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Individuals sometimes report feeling uncertain with how they should respond when another person comes to them and shares information about their disability, mental health or other personal health circumstances. This article was written with the supervisor/employee dynamic in mind, however, the principles can be easily adapted to many situations where there is a power differential between the person disclosing a disability, and the person receiving the disclosure (e.g. instructor/student). By being aware of these tips, you will be able to better navigate these conversations and avoid further marginalizing or stigmatizing persons with disabilities.

1. LISTEN ACTIVELY.

Employees don't expect their supervisors to understand everything that they are going through, but they do expect to be treated with respect, dignity and be listened to.

Be careful not to compare their experiences to that of other people you may know. This is a form of microaggression that people with disabilities experience often. For example, an employee shares that they have an autoimmune disorder, and you say "oh! My cousin's friend had that same disorder".

While said in the spirit of building rapport, this type of comment falls flat, and may detract from your capacity to listen if you are comparing their situation to another's.

You can thank the staff member for trusting you enough to share this information. Disclosures can be fraught with fear of retribution, or bias, and acknowledging this can go a long way to put someone at ease.

2. AVOID INTRUSIVE PERSONAL QUESTIONS.

- Do not ask employees to share more information about their health, including their diagnoses with you. Different individuals may be comfortable with disclosing, while others are not. Respect this.



3. PAY ATTENTION TO THE NEED.

- Is the person asking for an accommodation? Are they sharing this with you so that you are aware, but don't expect any actions? Does the employee need to prepare a contingency plan with you, in the event that their disability flares up? Are they looking to know what supports are available to them on campus? Employees have different reasons for disclosing their disability. If it is not immediately obvious, you can try probing with "how can I support you as your supervisor right now?" or "what motivated you to share this information with me today?" This will influence the direction that the rest of your interaction takes.



4. DIRECT THE CONVERSATION TO HOW THIS IMPACTS THEM IN THE WORKPLACE.

- Self-advocacy is a skill that people with disabilities develop at different stages of their lives, and like all skills, requires practice. Some individuals may know exactly what they need and are able to request an accommodation clearly. Others may not know how to approach this with you. You can support employees practicing self-advocacy by asking them to reflect on how their disability might impact them in the workplace. You are looking to find the **barriers** that they experience, and how they appear in the different contexts of their work environment (e.g. team meetings, administrative tasks, communication). You can use this information to guide a conversation on accommodations or available supports, as needed.
- The slogan of the disability rights movement, “nothing about us without us”, means that you shouldn’t be making decisions that impact the person with a disability without their input. This should be a dynamic process.



5. BE CLEAR AND DIRECT WHEN COMMUNICATING

- If you are offering instructions or advice, be clear when communicating. It may be helpful to follow up an in-person conversation with an email to clarify any instructions given.

6. PROVIDE INFORMATION ON AVAILABLE SUPPORTS IF REQUESTED

- What accessibility resources are available at your institution? You may have accessibility advisors, office ergonomic assessors, Human Resource professionals, Employee Family Assistance Programs or others that may be helpful to suggest.

7. MODEL INCLUSION

- The impact of a supportive, communicative supervisor for an employee with a disability is immeasurable. Likewise, feedback from your employees on the barriers they are experiencing in the workplace can enhance your own leadership. Creating an inclusive workplace is an iterative process, with each interaction between employee and supervisor enhancing it.

A FEW WORDS OF CAUTION:

Persons with disabilities can experience a range of microaggressions, which, over time, significantly impact their sense of belonging and inclusion in the workplace. The definition of a microaggression is not that they are explicit discriminatory comments, but a series of comments that reveal underlying ableist assumptions, or discriminatory attitudes about disability. Be aware of your own implicit biases in regards to disability, and be careful.



Some ways that microaggressions or discrimination can show up:

- An employee is advised to retire or go on medical leave, instead of providing reasonable accommodations
- Telling an employee to “toughen up” or dismissing their experiences
- Surprise at the accomplishments of employees with disabilities
- Treatment of persons with disabilities as “inspirational”
- Comparing one person’s experience of a medical condition to another’s (e.g. a professional violinist with a broken arm and an administrative assistant with a broken arm will have unique experiences)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources can help guide you in these conversations:

- [Guidelines on Accommodating Employees with Disabilities](#)
- Roseph: www.roseph.ca
- Québec interuniversity Equity -Diversity -Inclusion Network : www.rigedi.com
- [EDI2 Institute](#)

