Project T.R.A.I.N.
Opportunities for People with Disabilities
A CWIC Initiative

Spyglass: Tools for the Road

JOB ACCOMMODATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

According to the National Mental Health Association (http://www.nimh.nih.gov), a mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, resulting in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines. There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness. Some of the more common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorders, seasonal affective disorder (SAD), and anxiety disorders. Symptoms may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal. An estimated 54 million Americans suffer from some form of mental disorder in a given year.

The following is a quick overview of some of the job accommodations that might be useful for people with mental illness. For a more in depth discussion, access our publication titled "Work-Site Accommodation Ideas for Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities" at http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/Psychiatric.html and http://www.jan.wvu.edu/soar/psych.html. To discuss an accommodation situation with a consultant, contact JAN directly at 800-526-7234 (V/TTY) or jan@jan.icdi.wvu.edu.

Tips for Dealing with Issues in the Workplace

Maintaining Stamina During the Workday:
- Flexible scheduling
- Allow longer or more frequent work breaks
- Allow employee to work from home during part of the day, or week
- Part time work schedules

Attendance Issues:
- Provide flexible leave for health problems
- Provide a self-paced work load and flexible hours
- Allow employee to work from home
- Provide part-time work schedule
- Allow employee to make up time

Memory Deficits:
- Allow the employee to tape record meetings
- Provide type written minutes of each meeting
- Provide written instructions
- Allow additional training time
- Provide written checklists

Maintaining Concentration:
- Reduce distractions in the work area
- Provide space enclosures or a private office
- Allow for use of white noise or environmental sound machines
- Allow the employee to play soothing music using a cassette player and headset
- Increase natural lighting or provide full spectrum lighting
- Plan for uninterrupted work time
- Allow for frequent breaks
- Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and goals
- Restructure job to include only essential functions

Difficulty Staying Organized and Meeting Deadlines:
- Make daily TO-DO lists and check items off as they are completed
- Use several calendars to mark meetings and deadlines
- Remind employee of important deadlines
- Use electronic organizers
- Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and goals

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Working Effectively with Supervisors:

- Provide positive praise and reinforcement
- Provide written job instructions
- Develop written work agreements that include the agreed upon accommodations, clear expectations of responsibilities and the consequences of not meeting performance standards
- Allow for open communication to managers and supervisors
- Establish written long term and short term goals
- Develop strategies to deal with problems before they arise
- Develop a procedure to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodation

Interacting with Coworkers:

- Educate all employees on their right to accommodations
- Provide sensitivity training to coworkers and supervisors
- Do not mandate employees attend work related social functions
- Encourage employees to move non-work related conversations out of work areas

Difficulty Handling Stress and Emotions:

- Provide praise and positive reinforcement
- Refer to counseling and employee assistance programs
- Allow telephone calls during work hours to doctors and others for needed support
- Allow the presence of a support animal
- Allow the employee to take breaks as needed

Issues of Change:

- Recognize that a change in the office environment or of supervisors may be difficult for a person with a psychiatric disability
- Maintain open channels of communication between the employee and the new and old supervisor in order to ensure an effective transition
- Provide weekly or monthly meetings with the employee to discuss workplace issues and productions levels

Other Related Links of Note:

Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health: Culture, Race, Ethnicity Fact Sheets

Fact Sheet: African Americans
http://www.mentalhealth.org/cre/fact1.asp

Fact Sheet: Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders
http://www.mentalhealth.org/cre/fact2.asp

Fact Sheet: Latinos/Hispanic Americans
http://www.mentalhealth.org/cre/fact3.asp

Fact Sheet: Native American Indians
http://www.mentalhealth.org/cre/fact4.asp

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Accommodating Employees with *PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES*

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. **What are signs an employee may exhibit that require a supervisor's intervention?**

A. Persons with psychiatric disabilities are often described as anxious, withdrawn, agitated or timid. There is no single group of characteristics that generally describes persons with psychiatric disabilities. Supervisors and managers should take notice of changes in an employee's appearance or behavior that may signal the possibility of a psychiatric disability. These changes could be related to productivity, attendance, concentration and/or interaction with coworkers and supervisors. Do not ignore the employee's own expressed concerns. Early recognition can allow the supervisor to communicate in a positive and helpful way.

Q. **How do I approach an employee exhibiting signs of potential psychiatric disability?**

A. To discuss a situation with an employee whom you believe needs help, arrange a private conversation. Keep your communication clear and focused by pointing out specific, observable job performance problems. Listen attentively and allow the employee to talk about what is going on. Do not give unsolicited advice or try to cheer the person up. A person experiencing this type of disability cannot simply "shape up." It is best to remain objective, and to calmly ask the person how you can help. Research resources in advance that can help the employee to identify options. Make the person aware that resources are available to assist her/him in determining the appropriate type of intervention. Above all, treat this individual as you would wish to be treated yourself.

Q. **Who can request accommodations?**

A. The employee with the disability, a family member, friend, health professional or other representative may request a reasonable accommodation on behalf of an individual with a disability.

Q. **What type of documentation is required?**

A. An employee requesting an accommodation does not have to use any specific wording and does not have to submit the request in writing. Supervisors presented with a request for accommodation may need to ask questions and clarify the medical documentation submitted. Employees seeking reasonable accommodation may be asked to provide appropriate medical documentation from their health care provider related to their disability and the essential function of the job.

Q. **Is there funding available to help cover the costs of accommodations?**

A. It is the responsibility of the unit to reassign work and cover any additional costs. Temporary staffing and work reassignment are recommended to help a work group absorb the loss of a contributing employee.

Q. **What information can a supervisor disclose to superiors, the work group and others concerned about an employee?**

A. Information about an individual's psychiatric disability requires sensitive and confidential communication. The information must be limited to those with a legitimate need to know. Respect for an employee's privacy is critical. Documentation must be kept in a separate medical file. It is best to let employees tell their coworkers what they want concerning their current and/or prior health status.

This resource material was adapted from material developed by the Employment Taskforce of the Council for Disability Concerns and the Office of Equity and Diversity Services at the University of Michigan and a Job Accommodation Network. The actual resources can be viewed at http://www.umich.edu/~hraa/ability/aepd/index.html and http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/employmentmifact.doc respectively.