

Recommendations to Create a Supportive Workplace for Individuals with Mental Health Conditions

About 1 in 25 adults had a serious mental illness (SMI) in the past year, or approximately 4.2 percent of the adult population within the United States (CBHSQ, 2017). Employment is a critical piece to recovery for those with serious mental illness, as it can provide financial stability, social integration, and a sense of purpose and self-worth (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law [Bazelon], 2014). However, 64 percent of individuals with serious mental illness do not have full-time employment (Interdepartmental Serious Mental Illness Coordinating Committee [ISMICC], 2017). While individuals with serious mental illness may experience challenges obtaining and maintaining employment, the vast majority express interest in working, especially if there was adequate support (Bazelon, 2014). However, fear of stigma and discrimination discourages individuals with serious mental illness from seeking help or disclosing their illness to employers (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2004).

Please Note: All recommendations included within this document are meant to serve as suggestions or points of discussion, and they should not be considered legal advice. Employers may have other obligations to employees, dependent on relevant national, state, and local legislation and regulations.

Further, employers can also benefit from employing individuals with serious mental illness by taking measures to support employee mental health. Challenges related to mental health—for all employees, regardless of a formal mental health diagnosis or a diagnosable SMI—can lead to lost productivity, absenteeism, and increased health care costs. For example, one study estimated that employees with severe depression missed work more frequently and had a salary-equivalent lost performance of almost 200 dollars a month (Birnbaum et al., 2010). Creating a supportive workplace can also increase job satisfaction, which may, in turn, improve recruitment and retention of employees (Pronk, 2014).

This set of recommendations was developed for employers to help create a supportive, mentally healthy workplace environment for individuals with SMI.

Recommendation #1: Develop Policies, Processes, and Procedures

Employers should develop clear and comprehensive protocols on how to address any matters related to an employee with an SMI or other mental health condition. Having written documentation of how things should be done increases the likelihood that is how they will be done. Policies, processes, and procedures should be established before they are needed. They provide helpful guidance to employees or supervisors, and are important to have should there be any concerns about equal employment opportunity disputes.

At a minimum, there should be a specified policy, process, or procedure related to:

- the disclosure and consideration of psychiatric disabilities during the application process;
- onboarding of employees with disclosed psychiatric disabilities;
- reasonable accommodations;
- crisis intervention;
- medical leave of absence due to mental health;
- return to work; and
- confidentiality and privacy protections.

Recommendation #2: Build a Supportive Culture

Words have power—speaking openly about mental illness can help break down stigma and promote inclusion.

Employers should take measures to create a supportive culture and aim to reduce stigma amongst staff. Leaders' priorities help drive an organization's culture and shared values. Therefore, leaders within the organization need to demonstrate their commitment to mental health by discussing its importance often. To show the organization's support for those with mental health conditions, employers may host special programming, such as a health and wellness fair with information about mental health and SMI or guest speakers to recognize National Mental Health Awareness Month (SAMHSA, 2004).

Also, employers should take measures to increase awareness of mental illness and to promote a better understanding of SMI. For example, some employees may be concerned that a coworker with SMI is prone to violence. Instead, these employees should be educated that individuals with SMI usually are not dangerous and are actually more likely to be victims of violence than to commit violent acts themselves (Treatment Advocacy Center, 2016).

Recommendation #3: Require Training

Supervisors should be trained in how to create a safe and comfortable space for employees to voice their concerns and to respond with understanding and compassion.

Employers should train members of leadership and other supervisors about SMI and the accommodations process. The goals of this training should be to learn about SMI and the resources that are available to help employees. The intent of this training is not for supervisors to try to diagnose SMI among their employees. Rather, they should know how to recognize changes in work performance that may be potentially related to mental health issues. These changes may include decreased productivity; low morale; difficulty with concentration, decision-making, and memory; frequent absenteeism or tardiness; strange or grandiose ideas; etc. (SAMHSA, 2004).

Training should specifically cover how supervisors should engage and communicate when employees disclose their mental illness and how to sensitively discuss the employee's needs and work performance. Finally, supervisors should be trained on how to properly maintain an employee's confidentiality, as discussed in Recommendation #6.

Potential training resources include:

- ICU Program
- Right Direction
- Managing Mental Health Matters
- Mental Health First Aid

Recommendation #4: Offer Reasonable Accommodations

An accommodations process may include the following steps

- Identify the skills and competencies required to fulfill the essential job responsibilities
- Assess the employee's needs and functional limitations
- Ask the employee for their input and opinions

Continue » » »

Every employer should have a collaborative process that helps identify how best to support the needs of employees with SMI. The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal law that prohibits employers from discriminating against applicants or employees with disabilities, including "psychiatric disabilities" such as SMI. To be compliant with the law, employers must provide reasonable accommodations that help the individual perform the essential functions of the job unless it would cause undue hardship to the employer (ADA National Network, 2017).

Accommodations can help support the productivity and performance of employees with a psychiatric disability, which ultimately benefits both the employee and the employer ("Accommodation Strategies," n.d.). For example, an employee may be taking medications that affect their energy levels throughout the day, and a typical workday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. may be challenging. A reasonable accommodation could allow the employee to adjust their schedule to a later start time, like working 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., so it is easier to wake up in the morning.

- Brainstorm strategies and accommodations that may help
- Check in at defined intervals to assess how well the accommodation is working

Adapted from the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation

There are many types of reasonable accommodations that may help an employee's mental health and work performance. Accommodations often have low to no direct costs to employers, though they may require extra staff time or a change in processes and approaches ("Accommodation Strategies," n.d.).

Table 1 lists examples of accommodations that may be put in place. See next page.

Recommendation #5: Develop a Plan

In addition to any reasonable accommodations made, employers should work with their employee to draft a detailed, written plan that will help specify the expectations of both parties and how best to support the employee with SMI ("Accommodation Strategies," n.d.). Employers should develop this workplace plan when the employee is well, and it should, at a minimum, clearly identify the:

- Employee's short- and long-term goals;
- Accommodations to be implemented and a process to assess their impact;
- Workplace and life stressors for the employee;
- Planned response if the employee appears to be unwell;
- Employee's preferences for communication and feedback; and
- Scheduled check-ins with the employee to ensure they feel supported.

Recommendation #6: Maintain Privacy and Confidentiality

Role playing may be helpful to prepare supervisors in how to properly respond when other staff inquire about one employee's accommodation.

All employers should protect an employee's right to privacy whenever a mental illness is disclosed and throughout the accommodations process. Employers may have specific obligations related to privacy that are required by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) or similar state legislation (SAMHSA, 2004). Employers should maintain the confidentiality of any private health information as well as all communications about the mental health challenge or reasonable accommodations. Documentation of accommodations should be kept separate from the employee's main personnel file, and access to this information should

Table 1: Types of Accommodations

CATEGORY	EXAMPLES
Scheduling	
<i>Flexibility in job scheduling allows employees to work around their unique needs.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow reasonable time off for counseling or medical appointments• Adjust start/end times of the employee's work day• Allow graduated return to work after an employee has taken medical leave• Permit employees to take more frequent, but shorter breaks• Allow employees to work remotely either on predetermined days of the week or as needed
Work Environment	
<i>Modifications to the physical environment can help support employee well-being.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Move the employee's workspace to a quieter area in the office• Allow the use of headphones or a white noise machine• Change desk lighting or increase exposure to natural lighting
Concentration & Memory	
<i>Measures to support memory may help individuals who are facing challenges related to cognitive functioning.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a recording device so employees can re-listen to instructions or information discussed at meetings• Set up recurring reminders of important meetings or deadlines• Provide memory aids, such as organizers or planners
Feedback & Supervision	
<i>Aligning management styles to an employee's preferences can help support mental health and work performance.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schedule regular times to check in and discuss employee performance• Use employee's preferred word choices• Communicate feedback via the employee's preferred method• Avoid hand gestures or body language that make the employee uncomfortable• Assign a mentor to the employee
Organization	
<i>Measures to increase organization can improve productivity and help employees who are struggling with their job responsibilities and tasks.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create a list of tasks and color-code based on priority• Provide written instructions for job tasks• Break larger tasks into a series of smaller steps• Create detailed timelines for job tasks
Training	
<i>Providing employees with training on the job responsibilities can promote improved comprehension and understanding.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide one-on-one, individualized job training• Offer re-training after a medical leave of absence
Stress & Emotions	
<i>Work may unintentionally expose individuals with SMI to emotionally stressful situations.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide positive reinforcement• Allow employees to make phone calls for emotional support during the workday (within reason)• Connect employees to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)• Develop strategies to effectively handle conflict between employees• Encourage the use of stress management techniques• Allow the presence of a support animal

only be shared on an as-needed basis (Job Accommodation Network [JAN], n.d.). Additionally, employees may have preferences about what information may be shared with other supervisors and coworkers (SAMHSA, 2004). As JAN recommends, supervisors could respond by saying, “we look and treat employees individually and make considerations based upon good business reasons, which allows for privacy of each individual” (Orslene, 2013).

Further, employers should be sensitive to the privacy of the employee throughout any discussions of mental health conditions. In general, employees cannot be compelled to disclose a psychiatric disability unless they are requesting an accommodation. Employers are then allowed to request supporting documentation from a provider before granting reasonable accommodation (ADA National Network, 2017). However, employers should take care to focus on how the mental health condition impacts their job tasks rather than ask for specific details about the employee’s diagnosis and symptoms. If there are any concerns about violating any rules or regulations related to privacy or confidentiality, employers should always consult a knowledgeable legal professional first.

Recommendation #7: Evaluate the Impact

Tracking metrics as part of a process evaluation will help employers understand how the program is being implemented and identify areas for improvement.

To fully understand the impact of the accommodations program, employers should collect and analyze relevant program metrics (JAN, n.d.). The evaluation should consist of two components: a process evaluation and an outcomes evaluation. The process evaluation should include the type, frequency, reasons for, and outcomes of accommodation requests (i.e., approved, denied, or appealed). Employers should also track the time it takes from a request for an accommodation to its implementation to ensure that employees’ needs are being met in an efficient manner. Further, outcomes data will allow employers to assess whether the program is effective in producing a noticeable change in the employee’s work performance or mental health. Examples of outcomes data include days lost from work or employee satisfaction.

Acknowledgements

This product was developed by Policy Research Associates, Inc. with substantial contributions from Caroline Snyder, M.P.H., and Glynis Jones, M.S.M., Westat, Inc.

For more information, contact wellbeing@prainc.com

References

- Accommodation Strategies (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/managing-workplace-issues/accommodation-strategies>
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) National Network. (2017). Mental health conditions in the workplace and the ADA. Retrieved from <https://adata.org/factsheet/health>
- Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. (2014). *Getting to work: Promoting employment of people with mental illness*. Washington, DC: Judge David L. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. Retrieved from <http://www.bazelon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Getting-to-Work.pdf>
- Birnbaum, H. G., Kessler, R. C., Kelley, D., Ben-Hamadi, R., Joish, V. N., & Greenberg, P. E. (2010). Employer burden of mild, moderate, and severe depressive disorder: mental health services utilization and costs, and work performance. *Depression and Anxiety, Journal of ADAA*, 27, 78-89.
- Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation. (n.d.). How-to tips for employers developing accommodations. Retrieved from <https://cpr.bu.edu/resources/reasonable-accommodations/how-to-tips-for-employers>
- Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (CBHSQ). (2017). *2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables*. (NSDUH 2016, Table 8.6B). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).
- Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation. (n.d.). How-to tips for employers developing accommodations. *Boston University College of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences*. Retrieved from <https://cpr.bu.edu/resources/reasonable-accommodations/how-to-tips-for-employers>
- Interdepartmental Serious Mental Illness Coordinating Committee [ISMICC]. (2017). *The way forward: Federal action for a system that works for all people living with SMI and SED and their families and caregivers*. Rockville, MD: SAMHSA. Retrieved from <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/The-Way-Forward-Federal-Action-for-a-System-That-Works-for-All-People-Living-With-SMI-and-SED-and-Their-Families-and-Caregivers-Full-Report/PEP17-ISMICC-RTC>
- Job Accommodation Network (JAN). (n.d.). JAN Workplace Accommodation Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://askjan.org/toolkit/>
- Orslene, L. (2013). The manager's dilemma: "An employee is asking about a coworker's accommodation. As a manager, what do I say?" [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://askjan.org/blogs/jan/2013/12/the-manager-s-dilemma-an-employee-is-asking-about-a-co-worker-s-accommodation-as-a-manager-what-do-i-say.cfm>
- Prok, N. P. (2014). Placing workplace wellness in proper context: Value beyond money. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, 11, E119. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd11.140128>
- SAMHSA. (2004). *Workplaces that thrive: A resource for creating mental health-friendly work environments*. (SAMHSA Publication No. P040478M). Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, SAMHSA.
- Treatment Advocacy Center. (2016, June). Risk factors for violence in serious mental illness. Retrieved from <http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/evidence-and-research/learn-more-about/3633-risk-factors-for-violence-in-serious-mental-illness>