

# How to Talk About Your Mental Health with Your Employer

by

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*Summary: Up to 80% of people will experience a diagnosable mental health condition over the course of their lifetime, whether they know it or not. The prevalence of symptoms is the same from the C-suite to individual contributors, but almost 60% of employees have never spoken to anyone at work about their mental health status. Even though managers, direct reports, and colleagues have been more vulnerable than ever due to shared societal challenges and the blurring of the personal and professional during the past 18 months, the effects of stigma can still loom large. The author presents four strategies for disclosing your own mental health challenges at work.*

By the time I disclosed my generalized anxiety disorder at work, it was too late. It had spiraled into debilitating depression and I could no longer even craft a basic email, much less do the rigorous job I was hired for. My previously high performance had very noticeably suffered, compelling me to nervously share the truth and ultimately forcing me out on a leave of absence.

In retrospect, a simple accommodation early on likely could've prevented all of that, saving me tremendous personal turmoil and my organization the extra workload.

What I didn't know then is that up to 80% of people will experience a diagnosable mental health condition over the course of their lifetime, whether they know it or not.

The prevalence of symptoms is the same from the C-suite to individual contributors, but almost 60% of employees have never spoken to anyone at work about their mental health status. Many high performers, including anxious achievers like myself, have strengths that often result from these challenges. I was not nearly as alone as I thought.

Mental health is a spectrum that we all go back and forth on, just like physical health. Most of us fluctuate between stress, burnout, and diagnosable conditions like depression or anxiety depending on what's happening in our lives. While it may feel harder to disclose bipolar disorder than burnout, everyone should be able to relate on some level.

This has never been more true than it has been over the last 18 months, between the stressors of the pandemic, racial trauma, and more. Managers, direct reports, and colleagues have been more vulnerable and authentic than ever due to shared societal challenges and the blurring of the personal and professional with remote work. We've also benefited from the courage of Simone Biles, Naomi Osaka, and Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Not only did they choose to share their mental health challenges on a public stage, but they also made difficult decisions that put their well-being first.

That said, the effects of stigma can still loom large. My self-stigma told me that I was weak and should be ashamed of my anxiety and depression. Societal stigma told me that I would be judged and that professional repercussions would follow if I disclosed. However, since I widely disclosed my condition in recent years, none of those things have happened. As a result of my experiences, I founded Mind Share Partners, a nonprofit that focuses on changing the culture of workplace mental health. Here's what we recommend if you're considering disclosing a mental health challenge at work.

## **Understanding: Self-reflect**

First, consider what you're experiencing and what the impact is — on your work performance, demeanor, and other factors. What is the duration of the impact? Is it a short blip that will go away in a few days, a longer but episodic challenge, or a chronic condition? Think through what caused your symptoms if they aren't always present. Was it work related, something in your personal life, or a macro stressor?

For me, these elements were clear with minimal self-reflection. I had started a new job with a short-staffed team several months prior. I was unable to do everything asked of me for the first time in my life. On top of that, I had gone off my anxiety medication and was unable to see my therapist regularly because of my new commute. Given everything, I should have been seeing her more often. I had gone from being a high-performing, cheerful colleague to a far from competent, aloof individual. It didn't take much for me to put it all together. That said, others may have more complicated narratives that would benefit from discussion with family, friends, or a therapist.

## **Deciding: Consider the context and resources**

I wish that I'd decided to share enough to get an accommodation right off the bat, or that my organization had promoted flexibility so that I wouldn't even need one. All I needed from my employer was permission to see my therapist during the workday, which was tricky given my long commute. This would have meant coming in late once a week or working from home on Fridays, the latter of which was permitted for employees only after their first six months. However, given my own self-stigma and unfounded fear of what my manager might think, I didn't pursue this simple accommodation. I sometimes wonder how things would have turned out if I'd attributed my need to leave the office to a physical health requirement like a weekly allergy shot.

At the time, workplace mental health wasn't on anyone's radar. No one talked about it openly or had trainings on how to navigate it at work. Now, there are more likely to be indicators of whether your company, HR team, or manager support mental health.

First, consider your company's culture. Have leaders spoken about mental health? Does your company offer workplace mental health trainings? Is there a mental health employee resource group (ERG)?

Next, think about whether your manager is a safe, supportive person for you. Have they talked about their own mental health or shared other personal challenges? This level of authenticity builds trust and can be telling. Consider whether your manager has modeled mentally healthy behaviors — even regular exercise, sleep, and vacation. This can help you decide who to share with and how much to disclose.

Then, educate yourself about the protections and benefits you're legally entitled to as an employee. In the United States, for example, businesses with 15 or more employees are required by law to provide reasonable accommodations. Resources and legal protections vary by region, so check your local regulations if possible. This way, you can advocate for yourself if your manager or HR falls short.

Finally, think through the resources or support that would be helpful to you, whether it's access to mental health care, a formal accommodation, or something simpler. Who "owns" this resource? It may be HR, your manager, or someone else. Consider what your goals are for sharing.

## **Preparing: Explore your comfort level**

How much are you comfortable sharing? How much do you actually need to share to achieve your goal? This could be as detailed as your diagnosis and history if you're especially close with your manager. Or, it could be as little as, "I've been having a hard time because of the pandemic. Is it okay if I take Monday and Tuesday off?"

As a new hire, still trying to prove myself and terrified of professional repercussions, I hadn't wanted to share anything about my anxiety diagnosis upfront. However, I very likely could have achieved my goal of flexible work hours to go to my therapy appointments by sharing much less.

If you're not comfortable speaking with your manager, you may prefer to speak with HR or another manager. It's important to have a sense of psychological safety with whomever you choose. Note that your direct manager is typically required to share employee health information that impacts work with HR — not to be punitive, but to ensure consistency across managers and access to the full array of resources.

Consider in more detail what specific resources or solutions for flexible work you think would be most helpful. You may want to have these ready to name in your conversation. Examples include everything from routine therapy appointments to more frequent check-ins to "offline hours" or protected time to focus on work.

If you're like me, you'll also want to turn to safe spaces for input. Since I was already in the throes of anxiety and depression when I decided to disclose, my cognition didn't allow me to problem-solve or make decisions like normal. So, I brainstormed everything with my husband, parents, and therapist. Others might turn to a trusted colleague, friend, or a mental health, neurodiversity, or disability ERG for advice.

## **Sharing: Start the conversation**

Once you've decided to share your experience, set up a time to talk one on one in private. Budget more time than you think you'll need so that the conversation isn't cut short. Be clear about the impact your mental health challenges are having at work. If the cause is work-related, share that also.

As much as possible, come with suggestions for how your manager or HR can help you. Have ideas about what changes or resources you'd find beneficial. These can range widely. Examples include: "I'm doing fine now, but it'd be helpful to know what resources are available if I ever need them," and, "A conversation about working styles could help set up some clarity around our norms and relieve stress." This simple practice of sharing what you and your team members need to do your best work is often all that's necessary. Always feel free to suggest co-creating a solution with your manager and HR — the onus shouldn't be on you to have all the answers.

Just as you hope that your manager or HR will have empathy for you, try to also have empathy for them. While you may have thought about this in great detail, this is probably news to them. They may not get everything right in the conversation, but they likely have good intentions. Give them grace and allow them to take some time to circle back with next steps. Be sure to set a time to follow up.

As many of us start to return to the office, I hope that we don't fall back into all of our old work patterns. Instead, I hope that companies and managers make it easier for employees to disclose their mental health challenges and co-create solutions to ensure that they thrive. I hope that we embrace the opportunity to continue to be vulnerable and authentic at work, as recent events have necessitated. Rather than saying, "I'm fine," let's give the full, honest answer to "How are you?" We're all dealing with something, however big or small. We just need to let each other know.

<https://hbr.org/2021/07/how-to-talk-about-your-mental-health-with-your-employer>