

Talking to Your Family & Friends About Your Mental Illness

It may be difficult to talk to people about your diagnosis. You may be concerned about how others will react to this news.

This handout is designed to help you prepare for different situations you may face when returning to your daily routines.

Talking to Friends and Family

Remember that mental illness is not your fault. It needs to be treated. If your friends and family are supportive, tell them about your condition. Teaching others about your condition helps others understand how to help you. It also helps you understand their thoughts and feelings.

Your friends and family can be a vital part of your support network by:

- Giving encouragement.
- Being there for you.
- Helping you follow your treatment plan.



When explaining to your child:

Tell your child that you love him or her.

Tell your child that you do not feel well.

Explain that your condition (depression, bipolar disorder, etc.) is an illness.

Tell your child you need support from your family.

Talking to Your Child

During your treatment, you may need to explain your mental illness to your child. Your illness could cause stress in your relationship with them. Children may sense this stress and think it is their fault. Your children may be genetically at risk for your condition. It is helpful for them to learn the signs.

Talking to Your Employer

You don't have to tell your employer that you have a mental illness. But if your symptoms are causing problems at work, you might want to explain that you don't feel your best because of an illness.

When you go back to work, you may find that you may need special accommodations. Some examples of phrases you may say to your employer are:

- o I have a medical condition that requires more frequent breaks to do my work.
- o I take medicine for a disorder that makes it hard to get up early in the morning. I will need to come in later and stay later.

If you have been open with your supervisor about your diagnosis, but don't wish your coworkers to know, make this clear.



What Should You Say?

Even though you don't have to tell your coworkers, it might become clear that you are getting different treatment. How can you handle this?

For example: one of the other employees approached you about why you are "going home early" or getting "special treatment"

If you want to keep your health information confidential, you might say:

- o My boss and I have an agreement that lets me take care of personal matters during work hours, but I make up the time
- o I have an appointment each week that I can't schedule for evenings or weekends, so I changed my work schedule to make up the time

If you feel comfortable discussing the fact that you have a health problem you might say:

- o I have a medical condition that requires me leaving early for treatment, but I make up the time at lunch and in the evening.

Request assistance from Human Resources and EAP for your transition back to work.

Some Questions You May Be Asked:

- o Where have you been?
I was in the hospital.
- o Why?
I was sick, but I am better now.
- o Will you get better?
With the right medications and therapy, most people get better.
- o Are you crazy?
No. I'm not crazy. I just needed help dealing with some problems.

Examples of Difficult Situations that May Arise:

- o I can't make my tennis lessons or book club meetings because of my therapy sessions. What should I do?

Many therapists would encourage your participation in your activities outside of work. It is important to discuss this with your therapist when scheduling appointments. They should be able to work around your schedule. If not, see if there are other times that you can participate in the activities you enjoy doing.

- o My friends have shut me out. How do I help them to understand my condition?

You can tell your friends that you are the same person you were before. Some friends may shut you out because they don't know how to help. They might not know what to say. You can explain to them that they can best help you by continuing to do things together as you had in the past.

You can also talk to your therapist. They can advise on how to talk about your situation to your friends and family.