

Mental illness and work performance – ideas for on-the-job supports

Psychiatric or mental health conditions may interfere with your ability to function at work, or they may have no effect at all. If your psychiatric or mental health condition is affecting your ability to do things, such as concentrating or communicating effectively, you're probably aware of it. Then again, you may not have made the connection between your disability and your problems functioning. Under the ADA, your employer only needs to provide accommodations for limitations that can be directly connected to your disability or the work limitations related to your condition. You should document the types of functional limitations caused by your disability to show your need for accommodations.

Here's a list of some of the limitations you may be experiencing and how you might cope. If you have a psychiatric disability, you may have trouble doing some of these things. Please remember that since there are many different types of psychiatric or mental health conditions, this isn't a complete list, and that not everyone experiences all, or even any, of these limitations.

- **Inability to concentrate.** You may feel restless, have a short attention span, be easily distracted, or have a hard time remembering verbal directions.
 - Example: It may be difficult for you to focus on one task for an extended period of time.
 - Possible solutions: Break large projects into smaller tasks; ask for tasks to be assigned in writing; take short, frequent breaks to stretch or walk around whenever you feel your attention slipping.
- **Lack of stamina.** You may not have enough energy to work a full day, or you may find your medication makes you drowsy.
 - Possible solutions: Ask for a part-time schedule; ask for flex time or job sharing to be sure you're working only during your high energy hours; take a mid-day rest break.
- **Difficulty handling time pressures and multiple tasks.** You may have trouble managing assignments, setting priorities, or meeting deadlines.
 - Example: You may not know how to decide which tasks to do first in order to complete a project by its due date.
 - Possible solutions: Break larger projects down into manageable tasks; meet regularly with your boss or a job coach for help prioritizing or estimating how long it will take to meet a deadline.
- **Difficulty interacting with others.**
 - Example: You may be too shy to talk with co-workers at breaks, or you may have trouble figuring out "how things go around here."
 - Possible solutions: Ask your employer to pair you with a co-worker who can introduce you around and show you the ropes.
- **Difficulty handling negative feedback.** You may have a hard time understanding and interpreting criticism.
 - Example: You may get defensive when someone tells you your work isn't up to standards. It's hard for you to figure out what to do to improve, or you may believe trying to change is worthless.
 - Possible solutions: Ask that a job coach be present when you meet with your employer for feedback; offer your own perspective on your strengths and weaknesses; ask for specific ways to improve; ask to receive feedback in writing with an opportunity to discuss it later.
- **Difficulty responding to change.** Unexpected changes at work, such as new rules, job duties, or

supervisors and co-workers, may be unusually stressful for you.

- Example: It may take you a long time to learn new tasks, or you may feel especially anxious around new co-workers.
- Possible solutions: Ask your employer for advance warning of any changes; make a special effort to introduce yourself to new co-workers; ask your employer to notify new supervisors of your needs.
- **Inability to screen out environmental stimuli, such as sounds, sights, or smells, which distract you.**
 - Example: You may have a hard time working next to a noisy printer or in a high-traffic area.
 - Possible solutions: Move the printer away from the work area; get permission to wear headphones playing soft music while you work; ask for high partitions to be installed around your desk.

In addition, the US Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (<https://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/psychiatric.htm>) provides information about maximizing productivity and accommodating individuals with psychiatric conditions in the workplace. While not all employees need accommodations, individualized accommodations in consultation with the employee are the most beneficial.

A variety of sources were consulted to develop this information, including:

1. the Job Accommodation Network (www.askjan.org). They have numerous helpful publications about work, work limitations, and accommodations for specific conditions such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia-spectrum disorders, “mental impairments” and others <https://askjan.org/publications/index.cfm>;
2. Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation publications and experts;
3. the following scholarly publications: Workplace Accommodations for People with Mental Illness: A Scoping Review by McDowell and Fossey, *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 197–206, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10926-014-9512-y> and Work accommodations and natural supports for maintaining employment by Corbière and his colleagues. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 37(2), 90–98. <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2014-04298-001.html>

NOTE: The information contained in these pages is for educational purposes only, and is not legal advice. Individuals should contact the appropriate legal resources for specific legal advice regarding their particular situations.

<https://cpr.bu.edu/resources-and-information/reasonable-accommodations/how-might-my-psychiatric-or-mental-health-condition-affect-my-work-performance/>