Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Discussing your mental health issue

When you're diagnosed with a mental health disorder, sharing the news with family, friends and co-workers can be a daunting task. The stigma and mystery attached to mental illnesses, concerns about relationships changing and unfair judgment can create fear and communication barriers. But solid emotional and physical support can have a positive impact on your recovery journey and can do wonders for your spirit and well-being.



Should I share?

Your decision to share information is just that—your own. You have a right to be selective about who you tell and how much you divulge. When deciding, it's important to consider that:

By talking about your mental health you ease your own mind, remove stigma and put to rest other people's fears with honesty and openness.

- Being prepared for all types of questions can soften a potentially emotional situation. Determine what information you're comfortable sharing and how in-depth you're willing to get. Then, practice answering—and politely declining to answer—with a loved one or health professional.
- Privacy, comfort level, anticipated support and safety will factor in your decision. Remember, people with cancer or hypertension aren't forced to share their medical status and you shouldn't be either.
- You're not alone. More than 4.5 million Canadians—or 20 per cent—will suffer a mental illness at some point in their life.

Personal matters

Will you tell only immediate family? Can you trust friends to stick around when the going gets tough? Deciding what and how much to tell those closest to you can be challenging. But loved ones can also offer support and an understanding ear when you need it most. When considering whether to talk about your situation, consider:

Personality. Some of your loved ones may be judgmental while others can be caring and compassionate. The personality of individuals will play a big role in how they respond to your mental illness. Trustworthy, open-minded, confident people are more likely to offer encouraging words and loving support. If you're unsure, start by saying you've been having a rough time lately and gauge their response before you reveal more information.

Your needs. Could your disorder put you in danger? Is your behaviour going to change? Your needs should play a role in who and how many loved ones you decide to talk to. Drives to the doctor, help shopping or a shoulder to lean on might help with your recovery. Communicate with loved ones who can cast a positive light on your recovery.

On the job

At work, the decision to talk about mental illness can be even harder. Uncertainty about how management will take the news and fear of office gossip can make your decision difficult. Reflect on:

Privacy. It's one thing to tell your manager but not Mary-Jo in cubicle four and Yvette in the cafeteria. Keeping something private at work can be difficult. Pick a person you trust—preferably a manager or supervisor—who can be an outlet and aid in the workplace.

Changing needs. If you'll be taking medication, extra breaks or need flexible hours, it may be a good idea to disclose your mental illness to your boss or immediate team. Support from trusted co-workers may actually take the pressure off because you're no longer forced to hide your illness.

Safety issues. Your safety and the safety of your co-workers can play a strong role in the decision to disclose. If there's any chance of a crisis situation occurring because of your illness or if you take medications, you might need to tell someone at work so they're prepared to respond to an emergency.

Deciding who to tell about your mental illness, and how much to share is a selective process. You may have fears about how you'll be perceived and the changes that could happen. But by carefully sharing information with trusted loved ones and colleagues, you'll begin to build an invaluable support network, challenge the secrecy and stigma associated with mental illness and empower yourself in the recovery process.

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