

# Why You Should Encourage Workers to Disclose 'Invisible Disabilities'



The law protects workers from discrimination based on various characteristics, including having a disability. And employers have a duty to accommodate disabled workers to the point of undue hardship.

An employer can't accommodate or otherwise assist a disabled worker if it doesn't know the worker has a disability. But despite the protections, workers may not disclose a disability, especially if it's concealable. So-called 'invisible disabilities' include hearing or vision loss, chronic fatigue or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Concealing a disability has implications for the worker himself, his employer and his co-workers. A study by researchers at Purdue University and Northern Illinois University looked at the unique challenges for workers and organizations posed by invisible disabilities.

For example, suppose a worker who operates a forklift has epilepsy but doesn't tell anyone about his condition. If he has a seizure while driving this equipment, he could endanger himself, his co-workers, customers or clients, and anyone else in the workplace.

The researchers note that workers may choose not to disclose a disability for various reasons, including the potential stigma that could accompany co-workers' and supervisors' knowledge of the disability, especially for highly stigmatized disabilities such as mental illness or conditions for which co-workers might hold the worker accountable (such as HIV/AIDS).

But concealing a disability itself is stressful and could affect workers' health, job performance and social relationships. So workers with invisible disabilities must weigh the social costs against the work (and potential physical/mental/social) benefits of disclosing their condition to employers and co-workers.

Individuals in the workplace should be open to the possibility that disabilities may exist of which they're unaware. Likewise, employers should be prepared to accept as legitimate those disabilities that aren't always obvious or well-known or that don't create visible performance issues.

To foster an environment in which workers feel safe disclosing their disabilities, the study recommends that employers:

- Train and educate supervisors and workers on the ambiguous and transitory nature of many invisible disabilities. Such training could highlight the unique challenges that invisible disabilities present to workers, who must determine whether a known disability might interfere with job performance or whether an as-yet undiagnosed disability might be causing performance declines, and then decide whether to disclose it.
- Have policies to help workers who may be in an ambiguous situation regarding the detection, diagnosis and/or personal acceptance of a disability. If a worker doesn't have clarity on his own disability status, he can't feasibly disclose a disability and/or request accommodations to buffer the impact of the disability on his job performance.
- Adopt practices that regularly assess the well-being and work challenges of all employees, especially when job roles and job designs might change in a way that causes previously irrelevant disabilities to require accommodation (see, well-being checklist). Such check-ups would not only detect disability-related changes among individual employees but also convey a general concern and value for all employees. Plus, keeping a regular check on employee well-being and the climate and culture for fairness could help create a culture that encourages disclosure and psychological safety.