



TO: Advisors of Students with Disabilities

FROM: Edward Furcinito (Syracuse University)

DATE: August 18, 2021

RE: Advising individuals with invisible disabilities

Advisors, as you are aware, one in four individuals in the United States have a disability; this equates to 61 million people¹. For many of these individuals, disclosing an invisible disability in the work environment is an extremely complex dilemma. It can enable maintaining or obtaining employment. However, disclosure can result in losing employment or to not being hired, due to of discrimination and stigma. This memo will outline recommendations on advising students with invisible disabilities regarding disclosure.

THE SITUATION

Generally, the employment levels of working-age people with disabilities have been lower than non-disabled equivalents². This is not necessarily because people with disabilities are unable to perform the jobs in question, but it is in part due to the discrimination and stigma that results from an initial, perhaps stereotypical, reaction. Studies have shown this by indicating lower social acceptability ratings, decreased pay rates and fewer employment opportunities for people with disabilities². In a survey of current employees with a disability, nearly a quarter had experienced long-term adverse repercussions because of their disclosure³.

Based on these statistics, disclosing a disability whenever possible becomes a dilemma for many individuals. The question is how are we as professionals to advise them? Our students are preparing to enter the job market and will look to us for appropriate guidance.

The lack of disclosure indicates individuals often feel the need to disguise their disability during the recruitment process as well as during the rest of their employment. Having a disability is different from the norm and thus obvious in a damaging way from others. With this potential stigma, individuals are afraid to disclose their disability, lest it adversely affect their employment relations and career prospects.

Let's look at a personal story to gain perspective on what this situation looks and feels like in reality. Here is someone who is living with an invisible disability. This is a video about Ally, a 25-year-old with fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is a disorder characterized by widespread musculoskeletal pain accompanied by fatigue, sleep, memory and mood issues. Researchers believe that fibromyalgia amplifies painful sensations by affecting the way your brain and spinal cord process painful and nonpainful signals. Symptoms often begin after an event, such as physical trauma, surgery, infection or significant psychological stress.



Ally could be any of our students. (It's a short video but powerful).

<https://www.invisibledisabilityproject.org/ableism>

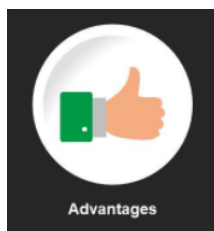
RECOMMENDATIONS

What should we recommend to our students as far as disclosure? It's a problematic issue.

According to Kristen O'Melia, Employment Services Coordinator at ARISE in Syracuse, the disclosure process is complicated. In her role counseling disabled individuals, she encourages individuals to disclose as much as they feel comfortable.

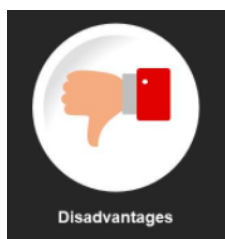
But how much is too much?

An individual needs to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure.



Advantages of disclosure:

- a) It allows individuals to receive reasonable accommodations so that they can pursue work, school, or community activities more effectively.
- b) It provides legal protection against discrimination (as specified in the Americans with Disabilities Act).
- c) It reduces stress, since protecting a “secret” can take a lot of energy.
- d) It gives individuals a clearer impression of what kinds of expectations other people may have of them and their abilities.
- e) It ensures that an individual is getting what they need in order to be successful (for example, through an accommodation or medication).
- f) It provides full freedom to examine and question health insurance and other benefits.
- g) It provides greater freedom to communicate should an individual face changes in their particular situation.
- h) It improves self-image through self-advocacy.
- i) It allows an individual to involve other professionals (for example, educators and employment
- j) service providers) in the learning of skills and the development of accommodations.
- k) It increases an individual’s comfort level.



Disadvantages of disclosure:

- a) It can cause an individual to relive bad past experiences that resulted in the loss of a job or negative responses from colleagues or peers.
- b) It can lead to the experience of exclusion.
- c) It can cause an individual to become an object of curiosity.
- d) It can lead to being blamed if something doesn’t go right.
- e) It can lead to being treated differently than others.
- f) It can bring up conflicting feelings about self-image.
- g) It can lead to being viewed as needy, not self-sufficient, or unable to perform on par with peers.
- h) It can lead to being overlooked for a job, team, group, or organization.
- i) Disclosing personal and sensitive information can be extremely difficult and embarrassing.



As advisors to individuals with invisible disabilities, it is important to review both the advantages and disadvantages with each person.

Individuals can get additional support at the Invisible Disabilities Association:

<https://invisibledisabilities.org/programs/>

Invisible Disabilities® Association

In particular, please refer your students to the link below which takes them to an online support community. This support may be invaluable as they navigate through the complexities of invisible disabilities.

<https://invisibledisabilities.org/connect/invisible-disabilities-association-support-community-on-inspire/>



Join Our Online Support Community Here!

CONCLUSION

People with invisible disabilities are in a vulnerable position as they choose whether or not to disclose their diagnoses. If recipients of these disclosures are supportive, this could create a more positive experience for the individuals disclosing.

However, it should be noted that multiple studies have shown that disclosure during the hiring period resulted in fewer invitations for job interviews.⁴ For example, human resource managers are an important stakeholder group who have mainly negative attitudes and behavior regarding disabilities. Since their job is to act on behalf of their organization, their attitudes and behavior may not change until organizations at the level of management change. We need to keep this in consideration as we advise our students.

This memo has outlined both the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure. To reiterate the overall positive outcomes of disclosure include: Improved relationships with colleagues and supervisors; Authenticity; Work environment support and ADA support. The negative outcomes of disclosure include: Facing stigma and discrimination.

Reviewing this information with our students will substantially improve their understanding of the potential employment situation and ascertaining both the advantages as well as disadvantage of disability disclosure. Knowledge and preparation are power. We must convey that our students are in control of the situation and success is within their grasp.

References:

- ¹ *Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic* | CDC. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Retrieved 16 August 2021, from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.
- ² Ameri, M., Schur, L., Adya, M., Bentley, F.S., McKay, P. and Kruse, D. (2018), "The disability employment puzzle: a field experiment on employer hiring behavior", *ILR Review*, Vol. 71 No. 2, pp. 329-364, doi: 10.1177/0019793917717474.
- ³ De Beer, J., Engels, J., Heerkens, Y. and van der Klink, J. (2014), "Factors influencing work participation of adults with developmental dyslexia: a systematic review", *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 1-22.
- ⁴ Hipes, C., Lucas, J., Phelan, J.C., White, R. (2016) The stigma of mental illness in the labor market, *Social Science Research*, Volume 56, 2016, Pages 16-25, ISSN 0049-089X, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2015.12.001>.