



WORKING WITH EMPLOYEES WITH AN EPISODIC DISABILITY

Information Sheet for Managers

This information sheet provides an overview of episodic disabilities and the different employment challenges often faced by people living with an episodic disability. It also identifies ways in which managers and their staff can be more aware of and sensitive to these challenges, and how they can help minimize and overcome them — all in an effort to collectively build a healthier, more diverse and more productive workplace.

What is an “episodic disability”?

An episodic disability is a long-term condition that is characterized by periods of good health interrupted by periods of illness or disability. These periods may vary in severity, length and predictability from one person to another. Some common examples of episodic disabilities include multiple sclerosis, lupus, arthritis, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, some forms of cancer and mental illness.

Unlike permanent disabilities, episodic disabilities are periodic — the episodes of illness come and go, and may vary in length and degree — but because they are also unpredictable, they can often be more difficult to manage with regard to employment. For example, a person with multiple sclerosis may not be able to work more than two days in a row, due to fatigue. A person living with HIV may have to wait for the side effects from medications to wear off before being able to work, making regular office hours challenging.

Not everyone living with an episodic disability experiences illness-related episodes that move them in and out of the workforce. But for those who do, the levels of accommodation required to help them to sustain employment can range from none to significant, with most cases falling somewhere in the moderate range. Flexible hours, working from home and internal mobility (e.g., transfer or reassignment) are just some examples of accommodation that can facilitate improved employment options for and lead to better performance by people with an episodic disability.

What’s the reality for people living with an episodic disability?

People living with an episodic disability often deal with a number of issues that can have an impact on their work life. Difficulties related to medication (such as side effects and complicated treatment and scheduling regimens), frequent medical appointments, sometimes at short notice and a lack of flexible employment policies and guidelines that acknowledge their physical and emotional realities are but a few examples.

Often, managers are unaware of such problems because people living with an episodic disability choose not to disclose their disability, fearing any number of negative consequences, from being discriminated against to losing their benefits or even losing their job. And even when managers do know their team includes people living with an episodic disability, it can be difficult to figure out how to retain these valuable employees and the expertise, experience and institutional memory they possess.

What can managers do to help?

Living successfully with an episodic disability requires a unique combination of management skills and abilities that are transferrable to the workplace. Managers can support this by building more equitable, transparent and accountable workplaces that celebrate diversity and accommodation. Such measures would enhance organizational productivity, competitiveness and reputation.

For managers, it's important to recognize that a person's episodic disability is only one part of their life; it does not define who they are. Expressing genuine interest in understanding the episodic disability and its consequences on a colleague's work life is the first step in opening an important dialogue about how you can work together more effectively.

Other examples of helpful workplace initiatives include:

- **More education of management and staff** to dispel the myths and misinformation surrounding episodic disabilities and promote safer, better-informed and more respectful workplaces.
- **Anti-discrimination policies** and guidelines to protect those who disclose their episodic disability.
- **Flexible work arrangements**, such as flexible work schedules, working remotely and job-sharing.

- **Assessment of current work activities and environment** (e.g., by an occupational therapist) to suggest opportunities to conserve energy and/or reduce pain and address other work related physical or mental challenges.
- **Review of activities** within the employee's current job description that may be adapted, as well as other positions within the organization that may be of interest, appropriate and available.
- **Improved access to information** regarding existing job accommodation policies and other relevant supports (such as those outlined above) to help employees with an episodic disability to make better-informed career decisions.
- **Management leading by example** to integrate workplace support and education programs regarding episodic disabilities into organization-wide strategic planning and day-to-day operations. This could

include taking personal responsibility for ensuring that current staff and new hires be properly briefed on relevant policies, guidelines, initiatives and programs.

- **Leadership training** to provide people with an episodic disability with the skills to contribute to cultural change within their organization. Such leadership training could eventually allow for peer-support programs directed at co-worker education and mentorship of new employees with an episodic disability.

Contact us

What challenges have you experienced? What has worked well for you? How can we work with you? Let us know. Contact Martine Mangion, Manager of Episodic Disabilities Initiatives, at mmangion@hivandrehab.ca.

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