

An Exploration of Why and How Employees Disclose Having a Mental Illness

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Impetus for Research

- Mental illness in the workplace of increasing concern in several countries
- Potential **pros** and **cons** of mental illness disclosure/concealment at work
- Limited literature (lack of specificity to MH and/or work context)
- Federal research grant (SSHRC #435-2018-1341) on how managers can make it easier and worthwhile for employees to discuss their mental illness
 - Phase 1: Better understanding of the process of disclosure/concealment at work from employee and manager perspectives

Method

- Inductive, qualitative approach using one-on-one narrative interviewing
- Participants: individuals employed full-time living (or having lived) with anxiety, depression, and/or substance abuse challenges
- Topics explored:
 - Employment history; personal meaningfulness of work
 - Personal history of mental illness and its implications at work
 - Mental illness and identity
 - Disclosure and/or concealment at work
 - Supportive management practices

Results: Why and How of DISCLOSURE

Circumstantial factors (Why)	Motives (Why)	Manifestations (How)
Visible manifestations (e.g., symptoms, absence) Inquiry into well-being Recipient shares something personal/private Cues that the recipient would be open Life-changing events	Managing perceptions Advocacy and stigma reduction Justification for accommodation request Basis for advice seeking Relationship nurturing Being authentic	Suggestive of mental illness (e.g., “I have rough days”) Revealed what he/she considers stressors at work Revealed specific disorder/diagnosis (e.g., “generally anxious,” “SAD”) Revealed use of medication (e.g., antidepressants)

Quote: Circumstantial Factor Inciting Disclosure

Recipient shares something personal/private

“We actually we talked about our thyroid conditions because we both have one. So I was bitching about having to go to my doctor’s office because I need various blood tests and whatever. She was like, oh yeah, I always have to go in because I have a thyroid condition. I was like, oh my God, the same. And then she was like, yeah, does it give you a lot of anxiety? And I was like, well, it doesn’t give me anxiety because I don’t have a thyroid anymore, but I am a very anxious person. And then we just started working together and talking about it. It was not even a mental health related conversation so much as a health-related conversation that we fell into.”

Quote: Circumstantial Factor Inciting Disclosure

Cues that the recipient would be open

“Well, yes, absolutely because **I know that they also talk about things that are stressful to them.** So for me, it confirms that I am not being judged either, that I am not judging that person who is stressed. So I will be more open with that person, indeed.”

Quote: Motive to Disclose

Relationship nurturing

“And taking the time to explain – and they didn’t ask for it, they would have been fine if I didn’t – but for me it was important to say, that’s what happens and **I value the relationship I have with you.** And that’s why I’m taking the time and that’s why I did it with them and not the others because I really didn’t have that strong a relationship with anyone. Others were more like just regular colleagues that I see here and there. Our team, we’re like really, really always together, so that’s why I did it.”



Quote: Motive to Disclose

Being authentic

“So you’re hiding. You feel like, you call it **the mask**. You put on the mask and you go to work every day, and nobody knows really how hard it is. It’s like **you can’t fully be yourself**. So that’s when I did tell everybody. Then I am my true self, and I even wrote a poem about it: [name of poem]. I was able to be the real me. This is me. And if you can’t accept me, then I guess I don’t want you in my life. Whatever. And it’s your loss. It comes with age. You get more ballsy as you get older.”



Results: Why and How of CONCEALMENT

Circumstantial factors (Why)	Motives (Why)	Manifestations (How)
<p>Contractual obligation</p> <p>Cues that others would be judgmental, discriminatory, punitive</p> <p>Cues that others would show lack interest in/capacity to provide needed support</p> <p>Potential recipient contributed to mental health condition</p> <p>Absence of close work relationships</p> <p>Absence of privacy</p>	<p>Self-protection from others</p> <p>Self-protection from self-stigma</p> <p>Not wanting to burden others</p> <p>To avoid constant focus on one's mental illness</p> <p>Lack of need to disclose</p>	<p>Remained vague (e.g., "I'm feeling sick today," "I'm tired from poor sleep")</p> <p>Faked physical symptom (e.g., exaggerated coughing)</p> <p>Deflected (e.g., made a joke)</p>

Quote: Circumstantial Factor Inciting Concealment

Cues that others would be judgmental, discriminatory, punitive

“There are some people that I [don’t] tell stuff to if **I think they’re going to be kind of judgemental** about it. So if they made like an **offhanded comment prior**, I don’t really talk about stuff to them. So there’s one of our agents, we had him with a student who freaked out, and we had to call protection on them, whatever. And she was like, well, we’re not qualified to do this, blah blah blah. **Why are we dealing with mental health issues?** She was really opposed to a cohesive thing. So I am never going to talk to her about anything. **I’m like you are going to be judging and not open and not caring and not receptive.**”

Quote: Circumstantial Factor Inciting Concealment

Potential recipient contributed to mental health condition

“I think it’s very hard to open with your manager when you know that it was actually the **situation at work** that I don’t want to say caused, but I want to say **triggered everything**, right? So it’s very hard. I find it’s very hard, and I’m still struggling with it because there are some days that I have the symptoms again, you know, and **just by talking and just the way he talks sometimes will trigger the anxiety and the stress.**”

Quote: Motive to Conceal

Not wanting to burden others

“She has a lot of pressure on her. And you **don’t want to add to her workload**, basically. She’s got enough on her plate, and **I don’t want to burden her** with my like whatever I need. So I just want to fly under the radar. I’ve done my thing. I’ve told my story. It’s out there. Now I just want to sort of fly under the radar and just not cause any problems, right?”

Quote: Motive to Conceal

To avoid constant focus on one's mental illness

“There were two colleagues whom I was really, really close and worked with all the time. But even to them I hadn't said anything because for me, everyone in my life knew about it, but **work was kind of my safe place where I didn't have to talk about it or have to be questioned about it all the time.**”



Take-Aways and Next Steps

- More nuanced depiction of reasons for disclosing/concealing at work
- Ways of disclosing/concealing seem to exist along a continuum
- Relationships between circumstantial factors and motives?
- What are the various positive and negative consequences of disclosure?
- How do identity and personal history with mental illness influence disclosure/concealment?
- How do managers experience having an employee living with mental illness conditions?
- What can managers do to make employees comfortable discussing their mental health and mental illness?



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