

May is Mental Health Awareness Month

According to the National Mental Health Association, a mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, resulting in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines. There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness. Some of the more common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorders, seasonal affective disorder (SAD), and anxiety disorders. Symptoms may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal. An estimated 54 million Americans suffer from some form of mental disorder in a given year. Some job accommodations that might be useful for people with mental illness include but are not limited to the following:

Maintaining Stamina During the Workday:

- Flexible scheduling
- Allow longer or more frequent work breaks

Maintaining Concentration:

- Reduce distractions in the work area; provide space enclosures or a private office
- Plan for uninterrupted work time
- Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and goals

Staying Organized and Meeting Deadlines:

- Make daily TO-DO lists and check items off as they are completed
- Remind employee of important deadlines; use electronic organizers
- Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and goals

Dealing with Memory Deficits:

- Allow the employee to tape record meetings
- Provide type written minutes of each meeting
- Provide written instructions

Working Effectively with Supervisors:

- Provide positive praise and reinforcement
- Develop written work agreements that include the agreed upon accommodations, clear expectations of responsibilities and the consequences of not meeting performance standards
- Allow for open communication to managers and supervisors

Interacting with Coworkers:

- Educate all employees on their right to accommodations
- Provide sensitivity training to coworkers and supervisors
- Do not mandate employees attend work related social functions

Handling Stress and Emotions:

- Provide praise and positive reinforcement
- Refer to counseling and employee assistance programs; allow telephone calls during work hours to doctors and others for needed support
- Allow the presence of a support animal

Maintaining Attendance:

- Provide flexible leave for health problems
- Provide a self-paced work load and flexible hours; allow employee to work from home
- Provide part-time work schedule
- Allow employee to make up time

Dealing with Change:

- Recognize that a change in the office environment or of supervisors may be difficult for a person with a psychiatric disability
- Maintain open channels of communication between the employee and the new and old supervisor in order to ensure an effective transition
- Provide weekly or monthly meetings with the employee to discuss workplace issues and production levels