



## **Work and Mental Illness: Getting Back to Work**

Many people find work a fulfilling and worthwhile use of their time and skills. You may have given up work due to mental illness and now feel ready to get back, either in a full-time or part-time capacity, or you may just be looking for something to do with your time and the ability to earn your own money and respect. This leaflet should give you helpful information on the following topics:-

- Choosing work.
- Options for work.
- Applying for jobs, interviews and job offers.
- Work and benefits.
- Further information.

### **Choosing work**

Before you decide to go back to work you should research the subject fully. Questions you might ask yourself include:-

- Where do you want to work?
- What sort of work do you want to do?
- What support will you need?
- What is your financial situation and how might that change?
- Where can I get help in job seeking?

You can get help in answering these and other work related questions by contacting your local job centre. They have set up a specific department for dealing with people with disabilities.

In practice the people you will deal with (known as 'brokers') who will guide you around job seeking may not have any experience of mental illness which means you may have to make them aware of how your illness affects you and what problems you expect in the workplace.

### **Options for work**

There are many different options for someone wishing to work. Among them you may consider:-

- Voluntary work.
- Employment projects.
- Supported work.
- Part-time work.
- Full-time work.

Each one has its pros and cons and you will need to investigate which suits your needs best. You may start on one and progress to another. What you choose may be influenced by what is available in your area. Here are some guides to help you choose.

- ***Voluntary work***

Voluntary work is a good starting point for getting work. You can try out different jobs and get a feel for what you are interested in. Voluntary work may lead to improved chances of getting a part-time or full-time job.

- ***Employment projects***

The work done by employment projects varies but is usually done in a sheltered workshop and will usually be largely people with mental health problems. Some projects are very basic and you will do simple tasks. There will be ongoing support from a professional caseworker.

- ***Supported work***

Supported work is more flexible than employment projects. You could be working in a sheltered workshop but you may also be working in a large organisation. You will be supported while you work and may have opportunities for additional training.

- ***Part-time work***

Part-time work has the advantages that you will be able to ease yourself into work more than if you took on a full-time role. Part-time work may also leave you with the flexibility to go to therapy appointments during the day, do some additional training or look after your children.

- ***Full-time work***

For many, part-time work is not an easy option because of the difficulty in coming off benefits and into work. If you are returning to full-time work after a period of illness ask yourself what were the stressors that caused your mental illness. If any of these were work related try to reduce them. For some people a change of role or job would be advisable.

## **Applying for jobs, interviews and job offers**

Applying for a job with a mental health problem need not always be a negative experience. People with mental health problems often have qualities that people without do not readily possess. The positive aspects someone with a mental health problem can bring to a job are: -

- Problem solving.
- Ability to work with and relate to different sorts of people.
- Tenacity.
- Diplomacy.
- Creativity.

Make use of your experiences both in writing your CV and in the interview. You do not have to refer to mental illness, just the skills that you have developed as a result of it.

## **The application form and interview**

On most application forms there is space for declaring if you have a disability. There are many pros and cons for deciding whether to tell your prospective employer that you have had or have mental health difficulties.

### **Pros**

- If you declare that you have a disability you may be automatically given an interview as many organisations are trying to increase the number of disabled people working for them.
- If you admit that you have a disability in that you have a mental illness you will be covered by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) which means that it will be illegal for the prospective company to discriminate against you.
- Admitting you have a disability means that under the DDA the prospective company must make reasonable adjustments to enable you to do the job. This may mean additional supervision for someone with a mental health problem.
- Admitting to having a mental health problem allows you to control how this is presented to your employer. For instance, you may have particularly strong interpersonal skills or problem solving skills if you have mental health difficulties and you could tell them in this way.
- Admitting the difficulties you've had and highlighting the ways you have overcome those difficulties shows maturity and determination. Employers may be impressed by these qualities.

### **Cons**

- Admitting if you have had or have a mental health problem can lead to unfair treatment when applying for a job. For instance, you may not be given an interview or may not be offered the job. While you are covered by the DDA, often it is hard to prove that this is because of your mental health problem instead of that you did not make the grade. You must be aware however, that if you are called to interview and you do not have an obvious physical problem you may be asked the nature of your disability.
- You may feel that your mental health difficulties have no direct affect on your ability to do the job you've applied for and so do not want to declare it.
- You may be worried about the stigma associated with mental illness and how this might affect you in the workplace if your employees know about your mental health difficulties.

You should be aware when deciding whether to disclose that you have a mental health problem that many application forms ask specific questions about your health. If you give false information and your employer finds out then they would be in implications then you are legally obliged to tell your employer their rights to sack you. Also, if your medical condition has any health and safety.

For example, if you take medication that makes you drowsy it could be a health and safety hazard to you and others if you operate machinery.

If you choose to do so there are different ways of disclosing your mental illness to an employer. You may wish to tell them on the application form, or on a covering letter. Alternatively, you may wish to wait until the interview. Try to put your difficulties in a positive light as to what you have gained and remembering why you think you can do this job regardless of your mental health difficulties.

## Medical forms and examinations

Before you are given a contract most organisations will give you a medical form to fill out. The purpose of the medical examination is to ensure that you are well enough to do the job and to find out what support you need. If you declare your mental illness you will most likely be required to undergo a medical examination. The doctors involved in medical examinations tend to be GPs with little experience of mental illness. It may in this case be advantageous for you to take along a letter from your psychiatrist and provide this to the employers, explaining about your illness and your fitness to work. If you still fail the medical examination you should ask for the full details of the examination and why you have not been accepted for the job. If however, you decide not to declare your mental illness you may be sacked should it come to light while you work for the organisation. This is a risk that must be weighed up against the risk of discrimination.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), employers should be prepared to make adjustments for the employment of a disabled person. The reasoning that the organisation cannot support or supervise someone with mental health problems is unacceptable. If in doubt, contact the Disability Law Service. They can provide you with the full details of the DDA and how it applies to employment as well as advise you if you have a case against the employer.

## Further information

For further information you can contact any of the following agencies:-

- **Rethink National Advice Service** has proven expertise in dealing with benefits claims and appeals of both service users and carers. They can be contacted at:-

Rethink National Advice Service  
28 Castle Street  
Kingston  
Surrey  
KT1 1SS

Tel: 020 8974 6814  
Email: [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)

Mon, Wed, Fri: 10am-3pm  
Tues, Thurs: 10am-1pm

- **Citizens Advice Bureau** offers free, confidential impartial and independent advice. It has expertise in dealing with benefits claims and appeals but not always expertise in claims involving mental illness. To find your local office look in the Yellow Pages or log onto web: [www.nacab.org.uk/](http://www.nacab.org.uk/)

- **The Benefits Enquiry Line** can provide general information and advice on all benefits, personal benefit calculations, and phone completion of Attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Invalid Care Allowance claim forms. They can be contacted on:-

Freephone: 0800 220 674                      Mon-Fri 9am-5pm  
Minicom: 0800 243 787                      (outside hours you can leave a message).

- **Disability Law Service** can provide information on all matters surrounding disability which includes work and discrimination. They may help you challenge decisions which discriminate against you as a disabled person. They can be contacted at:-

Disability Law Service                      Tel: 020 7791 9800  
39-45 Cavell Street  
London    Text phone: 020 7791 9801  
E1 2BP

- **Your local Job Centre** can provide information, advice and support whilst you are looking for a job. To find your local job centre look in the Yellow Pages or log onto web: [www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk](http://www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk).

# Lancashire Early Intervention Service

## Spoke Teams

### **East Lancashire Spoke Team**

The Mount  
Whalley Road  
Accrington  
Lancashire  
BB5 5DE

Tel: 01254 226390

Fax: 01254 882880

### **Central Lancashire Spoke Team**

1 Ashfield Road  
Chorley  
PR7 1LH

Tel: 01772 645761

Fax: 01772 773545

### **North Lancashire Spoke Team**

#### **Unit 1**

Blackpool Technology Management Centre  
Faraday Way  
Bispham  
Blackpool  
FY2 0JW

Tel: 01253 657470

Fax: 01253 657479