

Should I Say?

A detailed guide for learners about disclosing mental health difficulties



Are you taking up learning?

Do you have a mental health difficulty – and have you thought about telling your learning provider?

This leaflet has been written with learners, for learners.

Taking up learning is an exciting step. Research shows that learning can have a positive effect on both physical and mental health. It might help you:

- Meet new friends
- Learn new skills
- Gain qualifications
- Have fun!

If you are taking up learning and you have a mental health difficulty, you should think about whether you want to tell your learning provider. This is called 'disclosing'.

Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is for anyone who has a mental health difficulty and is taking up, or already involved in, any kind of learning. This learning might be at a college, university, community centre or somewhere else. We use the phrase 'learning centre' to cover all these places. This leaflet has been written to help you think about whether or not to disclose. It also gives tips on what you can do to make disclosing easier.

We use the term 'mental health difficulty' but you might describe your condition or illness differently. By using the phrase 'mental health difficulty' we are talking about any mental illness or mental health need – it might be mild, moderate or severe. It might come and go. Whatever your mental health difficulty, we hope this leaflet will help you in your learning journey.

How can I disclose?

If you decide you want to disclose a mental health difficulty to your learning provider, you can do this in lots of different ways, like:

- On your enrolment or application form. (These forms should ask if you have a disability. Most mental health difficulties would be considered disabilities).
- At an interview.
- By telephoning, emailing or writing to the learning centre. (They should then contact you to find out more.)
- By talking to someone at the learning centre face to face.

Can I disclose later on?

You can disclose when applying or at the start of a course. But you can also disclose later on, when you feel more comfortable with the learning centre. The college or learning centre should give you lots of opportunities to disclose. If you disclose your mental health difficulty later on, you should still get help and support at the learning centre.

Can I change my mind and retract my disclosure?

If you disclose and then later on you decide you want this removed from your records, you can talk to your learning provider about this. However, if they have given you any support they might not be able to remove it from your records. For example, if they gave you extra time in an exam, they might need to keep a record of this.

What are my rights?

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) covers most mental health difficulties. The DDA means that:

- Learning centres have to offer support and make changes (reasonable adjustments) to meet the needs of disabled learners. Learning centres cannot discriminate against disabled people. This means they cannot treat a person unfairly just because they are disabled.
- Learning providers have to encourage and support learners to disclose any disabilities they have.
- Once a person within the learning centre knows about a learner's disability or illness they should ask the learner whether they agree for this information to be shared with other people at the learning centre. They should only share this information if the learner agrees. They should only share this information so that the learner can get more and better support. If the learner agrees for this information to be shared then the whole learning centre is deemed to know. Being 'deemed to know' does not mean everybody will know. It does mean that the people the learner agreed to will know and that it is their responsibility to make reasonable adjustments and to support the learner. It also means the learner will not have to tell different people over and over again.

Learning providers also have an 'anticipatory duty'. This means they should be thinking in advance about what sort of support and adjustments disabled learners might need. They should also be planning ways to support disabled learners.

The Data Protection Act 1998 sets out rules about confidentiality and passing on personal information. Under this act, information about a disability or mental health difficulty cannot be passed onto others without the learner's consent (unless there is an extreme safety risk, or if the information relates to a crime).

But remember...

If you do not disclose your mental health difficulty, and the learning provider gives you several opportunities to do so, you may not be able to make a complaint against them if they do not meet your needs. This is because it might not be their fault if they did not know about your needs.

Should I disclose?

If you are thinking about disclosing, you might want to weigh up the reasons to disclose and the reasons not to disclose:

Reasons why you might disclose

- Telling someone about your mental health difficulty will mean you are more likely to get the support you need.
- If people know about your mental health difficulty, they will be more understanding if you behave in an unexpected way or if you are having a bad day.
- If you feel accepted after disclosing, this can be confidence building.
- You might help raise awareness and challenge some of the myths and prejudices about mental health difficulties.
- You could share your experiences and help your learning provider improve the support they offer to other learners in the future.
- You will be more likely to find out about any support groups and activities specifically for people with mental health difficulties.

On the benefits of disclosing...

'If you disclose that you take medication, for example, when it's time to take your med they're accepting that you're taking medication, whereas if you haven't disclosed that you take medication they'll think, 'what are they doing?''

'The more people who know about mental ill health, the better it's got to be.'

Reasons why you might not disclose

- You might think it is nobody's business.
- You might think that your mental health difficulty will not affect your learning.

On feeling confident to disclose...

'I think you'd be more likely to disclose your own personal information if you had some confidence that they were equipped or had some knowledge of it.'

Some people don't disclose because they worry they will be treated badly. But remember – the law is there to protect you from this. So don't let your worries stop you if you think you could benefit from disclosing!

In most cases, it is up to you whether or not to disclose. However, there are certain courses, like some courses in care work, where you have to tell the learning provider. This doesn't necessarily mean you won't be able to do the course, but it is something the learning provider needs to know.

I do want to disclose – what can I do to prepare?

If you do decide to disclose there are some things you can do beforehand to make it easier and to make sure you are prepared:

Remember that you are the expert

Think beforehand about the sort of things you need to discuss. Remember, you are the expert on your mental health difficulty – you know how it affects you. How do you think your learning might be affected by your mental health difficulty or any medication you take? How has your learning been affected in the past? What could the learning provider do to support you? Remember though – it is not necessary to tell your learning provider everything about your mental health difficulty – they only need information that will help them to support you in your learning.

Talking about it

When you are talking to the learning provider use clear, everyday language. Tell the learning provider what they need to know. There is no need to discuss your diagnosis or any medication you are taking. Instead, tell them about YOU, your symptoms and how they affect you - such as 'I get nervous when I have to do something new' or 'my medication makes me drowsy, especially in the mornings' or 'when I get nervous I rock'. Remember, you don't need to tell them everything, only the things that might affect your learning.

Who needs to know?

Think beforehand about whether you are happy for the information to be shared with other people in the learning centre. This might be other staff or tutors who might have contact with you.

Talk it through

Talk to a friend or support worker beforehand to get some support and discuss your concerns. Talk through what you want to say and what you hope will happen.

Do your research

Find out as much as you can about the learning provider and the course you want to do beforehand. You could do this by visiting the learning centre or looking at their website, handbook or prospectus. The learning provider will be able to help you with this. It might be useful to ask if they have any information about how they support learners with disabilities and/or mental health difficulties.

Make a list

You might feel you don't know what to expect when you take up learning. Make a list of questions about the things that worry you. This might be things like busy corridors, large groups or exams. Find out if your learning will involve any of the things that worry you. If it does, ask what support you can get and what reasonable adjustments they can make. Because of their 'anticipatory duty' you might find some adjustments are already in place.

Make some notes

If you think you might forget things you want to discuss when disclosing, it might be a good idea to write some notes beforehand and take them with you.

What if I get ill?

It might be a good idea to think about what you would like the learning provider to do if you get ill and miss any sessions. For example, you might want to talk to them about whether they can send you the work so you don't get behind, or whether they can give you extra time to catch up on work.

Ongoing support

If you have a care coordinator or support worker, you might want to talk to them about how they can support you. They might be able to help you when you disclose. They might be able to help you with your learning. Also, think about whether you would agree for the learning provider to be in contact with them. This might help, for example, if you get ill so they can keep the learning provider up to date on how you are.

What should I expect when I do disclose?

If you do decide to disclose your mental health difficulty to your learning provider, you should expect them to:

Give you the chance to talk it through

They should talk with you in a private place, listen carefully to you and spend enough time with you to discuss your situation fully.

Talk about learning

They should talk with you about the different learning activities in the course you are taking, and help you think about how your mental health difficulty might affect you. Remember, you are the expert on your mental health, but they are the experts on what the learning involves.

Talk about who needs to know

They should ask you whether you agree for them to tell other people – like tutors and other staff who you may have contact with. They should explain how they are going to pass on the information and for what reason (if you agree). They should only share information so you can get better support. You do not have to agree to this, and they must respect your decision. However, if you do not agree for the information to be passed on to certain people, you might get less support.

Tell you about support available

They should talk with you about what sort of support they might be able to give you. Learning providers who are funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) receive 'additional support' funding to help support learners with extra support needs. The kind of support that your learning provider may be able to offer might include:

- Help with planning your learning, such as planning to meet you regularly to help you to manage your workload.
- Help with planning assessments, such as making sure you can take breaks in the assessment or have extra time.
- Providing practical learning aids to support you, such as a Dictaphone, note taker or support worker in the classroom.
- Challenging and dealing with any negative or discriminatory actions of other staff or learners.
- Emotional support and encouragement, such as offering you an induction session or putting you in contact with a support worker.
- Making sure they keep in contact with you if you are ill or have a hospital admission and miss sessions.

Tell you about any other support

It is not a tutor's job to be a counsellor or give benefits advice. However, they might be able to help you get in contact with people who can help with these sorts of things. Even if the tutor doesn't know, other people in the college might be able to help.

Talk about what you can do!

They should talk with you about your strengths and the sort of learning you want to do. They should not just focus on any difficulties you might have; they should also talk with you about what you can do, what you want to do and what you're good at!

What can I do if I think I am being discriminated against?

If you are treated unfairly just because of a disability or mental health difficulty, this is discrimination. If you think you are being treated unfairly you can:

- Talk to a member of staff like your tutor or student support services about the problem. Talk about what has gone wrong and ask for an explanation. You can have an advocate with you to help you do this, such as a friend or support worker.
- Look at the learning centre's policies and procedures to see what they should be doing to support you. You can ask to see these at any time or you might find them on the learning provider's website.
- Talk to a different organisation, like a local advocacy group or the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). Remember, you have rights, and can take legal action against a learning provider who has discriminated against you.

If you are treated unfairly, don't feel knocked back! Don't let it stop you taking up other learning opportunities.

It's about learning

For most people with mental health difficulties, taking up learning is a positive experience. It can open up new opportunities and could help you to meet new people and gain new skills. It can be an important part of the recovery process and can help people to regain confidence and self esteem.

In most cases, disclosing a disability helps people get the support they need to help them in their learning. Whether or not to disclose a mental health difficulty to your learning provider is a personal decision. If you decide to disclose, you should be able to receive help and support to make your learning experience even more enjoyable and worthwhile.

Welcome to the learning experience!!

Where do I go if I want more information?

All these website addresses were correct at the time of writing this leaflet.

The following guides have been written for learning providers and contain lots of useful information about disclosure:

- Supporting Learners with Mental Health Difficulties, Kathryn James, 2006. Visit this at:
<http://www.lsneducation.org.uk/pubs/Pages/062531.aspx>
- Disclosure, Confidentiality and Passing on Information, Learning and Skills Council, 2003. Visit this at:
<http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/pre2005/quality/goodpractice/disclosure-confidentiality-and-passing-on.pdf>

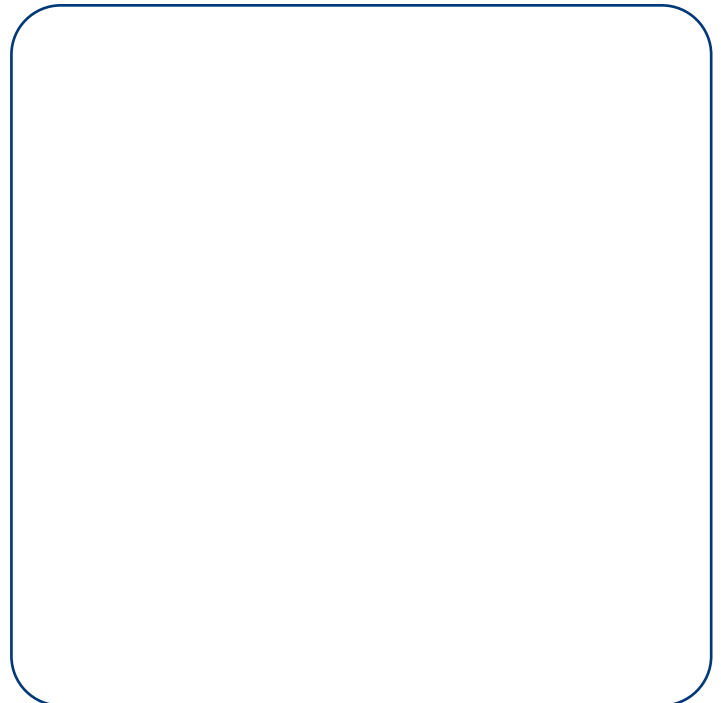
- Learning Journeys, Joy Mather and Sue Atkinson, 2003. Find out about this by visiting **www.niace.org.uk** and searching for 'learning journeys'.

You might also find the following useful:

- Equality and Human Rights Commission - **www.equalityhumanrights.com**
- Information about safer learning and being free from abuse at your learning provider - visit **www.niace.org.uk** and search for 'safer practice, safer learning'.
- Information on funding to support you in your learning - visit **www.direct.gov.uk** and select 'education and learning' or 'disabled people'.

If you don't have access to the Internet, go to your local library – most will let you use the Internet for free.

Contact your local learning provider:



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