



Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

# Managing an Employee with a Chronic Health Condition

•Understanding chronic conditions•Providing support in the workplace•Steps to take when an employee's chronic condition is affecting productivity•Five common health concerns and ways to offer support•Monitoring the situation

An essential part of every manager's job is knowing how and when to support an employee who has a chronic health condition. Some of these employees have physical illnesses, such as heart disease, that limit their ability to perform certain kinds of tasks. Others have health concerns that are a natural part of the aging process, such as joint, knee, shoulder, or back conditions.

To provide appropriate support for employees with chronic conditions, you will need to understand your employer's policies and related legal and privacy issues. For this reason, it's important to work closely with your human resources (HR) team or representative to support your employees while also protecting their privacy.

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# Understanding chronic conditions

A chronic condition is a health concern that has lasted for a long time -- typically, a year or more. Common chronic conditions include diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and arthritis. No two people are affected in exactly the same way by a chronic condition. Some of your employees may have the same health concern, but very different symptoms and needs. For this reason, managing employees with chronic conditions begins with understanding each employee's unique health and work concerns.

- *Listen to and get to know your employees.* Spend time getting to know your employees and their skills and abilities. This will help you be aware of a health concern early on, before it becomes a serious productivity issue. For example, one manager noticed that his long-term employee, who had always been a high performer, was behind in finishing her work in her scheduled shift. When he brought this to her attention, the employee said she was often running late because she had started to experience joint pain in the morning.
- *Understand the skills required for jobs performed by your employees.* For example, is frequent bending or squatting required to perform the job? Is heavy lifting required? Be familiar with the specific requirements and challenges of each employee's job.
- *Show concern for employees with health conditions.* Research indicates that people with chronic conditions tend to perform better when managers show concern for their wellbeing. Let employees with health conditions know you value their work and want to help them stay productive.
- *Avoid making assumptions.* Don't assume you know what an employee with a chronic condition can do or would like to do. Don't assume that the employee needs an accommodation unless the employee expresses that adjustments or changes are needed. Also, employees' abilities may change as they gain strength or new treatments become available.
- *Don't pry into the specifics of the employee's medical condition.* Listen sympathetically but don't ask medical questions. Focus on understanding the person's abilities and limitations in relation to his job duties. Then be sure not to discuss his health issues with others, except to the extent it's necessary with your own manager and your human resources representative.
- *Always keep the lines of communication open.* To help someone with health concerns stay productive, you may need to have many conversations about the kind of support that would be most beneficial. Keeping the lines of communication open also makes it easier for your employees to raise their concerns with you. Determining how to reasonably accommodate an employee with a chronic condition should be an interactive process.
- *Protect employees' privacy.* In Canada, individual health records are confidential, and protected by privacy laws either federally or by your province/territory, depending on your location. Touch base frequently with your HR representative to ensure you stay up-to-date on employer policies about chronic conditions and disabilities, as well as the legal and privacy issues that these involve.
- *Always contact HR if you have questions about health or productivity issues regarding an employee.* Your HR representative can help you find the information you need to handle the issues you may be facing as a manager.

## Providing support in the workplace

As a manager, you need to support all of your employees, but you have extra responsibilities if a member of your team has a health concern or disability. With some exceptions, employers are required by law to provide reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities. Accommodations are changes or adjustments that help employees perform the essential functions of their job or receive the

benefits and privileges open to people without disabilities. These accommodations may include the following:

- acquiring or modifying equipment or devices
- job restructuring
- part-time or modified work schedules
- reassignment to a vacant position
- leaves of absence

In some cases, you may want to provide accommodations for people who have temporary conditions. A workstation adjustment for a sore wrist, for example, may prevent full-blown carpal tunnel syndrome from developing. Your HR representative can tell you about your organization's policies on this.

## **Steps to take when an employee's chronic condition is affecting productivity**

When an employee who has a chronic condition is a high performer, there is nothing you must do as a manager beyond being supportive, as you would be with any employee. However, if you have reason to believe that an employee's chronic condition is affecting productivity, take the following steps:

- *Involve HR.* Schedule a time to meet with HR to review the situation. Your HR representative will be able to advise you and help you develop a plan.
- *Work with HR and your supervisor to ensure that the employee is treated fairly and respectfully.* The goal is to try to work with the employee to help her stay in the workforce and remain a productive and valued member of the department.
- *Consider offering additional support to the employee.* You might offer support through retraining, a modified schedule, or in other ways.
- *Seek support for yourself as a manager.* Contacting HR is a good first step in finding the support you need as a manager. Support is also available through the program that provided this publication.

# Five common health concerns and ways to offer support

Here are five common health concerns and ways to offer support:

- *An employee with a back problem has trouble bending down, making it difficult for him to complete necessary tasks at work.* Solutions and support: Observe the employee's work habits and determine if the employee is using proper procedures. You may have occupational health staff who could work with your employee, or you could hire a trainer to teach proper bending and lifting procedures. Together with your HR team, you might decide to offer retraining to your employee to make sure he is using all the tools available to him and following proper procedures.
- *An employee gets tired because of a condition that reduces energy.* Solutions and support: Offer a modified work schedule. For example, consider shifting the employee's hours or offer a reduction of work hours. Perhaps it would help the employee not to work an early morning shift, or to offer a split-shift which would enable a midday rest.
- *An employee is not performing up to standards because of failing eyesight.* Solutions and support: Sometimes all that is needed is over-the-counter reading glasses for close-up work and reading improvement. Encourage your employee to arrange a vision exam with an optometrist, and to inquire with her benefits provider about coverage.
- *An employee who suffers from depression has difficulty concentrating or maintaining stamina.* Solutions and support: As a first step, talk with HR about how to recommend to the employee that she arrange an appointment with her physician, and contact the program that provided this publication to speak confidentially with a consultant.
- *An employee has arthritis in her hands, which makes it hard for her to do her work.* Solutions and support: Offer an alternative position in a different department that may be less physically straining, if your organization allows.

## Monitoring the situation

Chronic conditions change over time. That's why it's important to monitor the situation when an employee has a health issue. Here are some ways to do that:

- *Follow up with your employee.* Find out how well any changes you've made are working. Don't hover over the employee or ask for health-related information beyond the job-related facts you need, but continue to show your support and willingness to help with any difficulties that may arise.
- *Focus on performance, not on health issues.* When your employee does well, praise his work without referring to his health. Similarly, if there are problems with his performance, don't assume they result from health issues. Instead, ask open-ended questions that will help you understand the cause: "I notice that you weren't able to complete your workload in your assigned shift twice last week. Why do you think this happened?"
- *Make adjustments if needed.* Keep in mind that some people may require only temporary adjustments or accommodations at work. Others may need additional accommodations as a condition becomes more severe. Make adjustments as abilities change. Encourage your employees to take on new challenges if they would welcome them, and if they would play to their strengths. Let your employees know what they would need to do to receive new responsibilities.
- *Notice how changes are affecting other employees in your department.* If other employees seem resentful of what they see as "special treatment," you may want to talk with your manager or HR about how to clear the air while protecting the employee's privacy. Sometimes conflict arises

when co-workers think an employee is exaggerating a health issue to get special treatment. Alternatively, you may want to watch for signs that other employees are "covering" for an employee with a health concern. This may be a sign that support measures aren't working as well as you had expected.

When you manage an employee with a chronic health condition, you may face many challenges. At times, you may need to plan for the future without knowing exactly what the future holds for this employee. This requires flexibility and help from your HR team. It's important to remember that your efforts will be worth it, sending the message that your organization is a place where people with all kinds of abilities matter and make contributions.

This information is provided to supplement the care provided by your physician or mental health professional and is not to be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. Always seek the advice of your physician or another qualified health or mental health professional if you have questions about a medical condition or plan of treatment.