



# Time2Work

## Module 1:

Support materials for young people entering the workplace for the first time

### Talking to employers, managers and co-workers

Whether or not you disclose your condition to a potential employer, current employer, manager or co-workers is ultimately up to you. This document looks at some considerations you may want to think about or discuss with family, friends or someone you respect and trust.

Depending on the severity of your condition and disability, there may be physical manifestations of your rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease (RMD) that make it impossible to hide. In this case you may have to inform a potential employer about your condition and what this means in terms of what you can do. This gives you an opportunity to discuss how you could manage your work and your condition, for example by flexible working or with possible workplace adaptations.

If your condition is not obvious and your symptoms are not severe and/or are well controlled, you will face the dilemma of many other people with RMDs: whether to tell a potential employer, your employer and/or co-workers about your condition. In an ideal world you should feel comfortable about saying that you have a RMD that may require you to occasionally take some time off work for a hospital appointment or treatment, or to work flexibly when you have a flare and/or that you may need to have some workplace adaptations. The reality can be very different. Many people with RMDs do not want to disclose their condition if they don't have to, because they want to feel like everyone else and don't want to be discriminated against because of their condition.

You may feel more comfortable disclosing your condition if you feel your employer, manager or co-workers would be supportive. If they are supportive, you will also

experience less workplace stress. Their attitude may in turn depend on your attitude. People will always be more willing to help someone who is trying – and this applies to everyone, not just people with RMDs! Employers, managers and co-workers do not react well to someone who is constantly complaining, or who they think is using their condition as an excuse to take off more time than they need. Therefore, good communication is vital.

## 1. Do you need to disclose your RMDs?

You do not have a legal requirement to *volunteer* information about your condition, unless there is national legislation involving health and safety at work. For example, if you were operating any form of machinery where your RMD might affect your or your co-worker's health and safety at work, in which case you might be obliged to inform your employer.

[NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS TO ADD ANY LEGISLATION WHERE A PERSON WITH AN RMD MIGHT HAVE TO INFORM AN EMPLOYER ABOUT THEIR CONDITION]

You are more likely to be trusted if you provide details of your condition to your employer or manager. Also, if you don't let people know you have a problem, they can't help you.

Other advantages to telling your employer or manager about your RMD include:

- It can be a strain hiding your symptoms and it may be a relief to disclose your condition
- If your employer or manager knows about your RMD they should make reasonable adjustments for you if you satisfy the definition of a disabled person as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (*Persons with disabilities include those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others as a physical or mental impairment which has an effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-top-day activities*).

See also fact sheet, ***Approaching potential employers***

## 2. General rules for talking to your managers and co-workers about your RMD

When you talk about your RMD, you should always remember a few simple points. These apply not just to conversations that you have with employers, managers and co-workers, but also more generally.

- **Don't go into too much detail about your disease and use medical language, tell people only what they *need to know*** – many people do not want

to be given medical details, only discuss the aspects of your condition that may affect your work and how you can work with them to find solutions.

- **Always try to be positive about your condition (even when you don't always feel that way) and offer solutions.** If you are really not able to cope with your work, you may need look for other solutions or consider alternatives. Some ideas you can use are listed below.

Simple things that you could say to explain your condition and how it affects your work are:

- RMD involves inflammation of the joints
- Most people with a RMD will experience pain and difficulty moving around
- RMDs can also cause loss of strength and grip, stiffness and fatigue, which can make some daily tasks difficult
- RMDs can affect other parts of the body, such as eyes, so people may need breaks from looking at a computer screen to help with dry eyes
- Pain can be felt in places other than the affected joint(s), muscle(s) or tissue(s)
- As for most people, there will be some good days and some bad days

If your employer or co-workers actively ask more questions and want to know more about your RMD, the best thing to do is to point them in the direction of your national organisation's website or the relevant national health department website on RMDs. They may even find out more about how they can provide support!

### 3. Positive suggestions

When you talk to your employers/managers and co-workers about your condition, remain positive and always focus on what you CAN do, rather than what you cannot do. Try to offer solutions.

Below are some problems you may have as a result of your condition and some potential solutions you can offer.

Problem	Solution/s
<p><b>Absenteeism</b> – for medical appointments or related to your condition flaring up</p> <p><b>Job disruptions</b> - e.g. arriving late/leaving early, unable to attend meetings, unable to take on extra responsibilities or apply for a promotion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If you know when your appointments are or can anticipate when you will have to be away from work, tell your manager and co-workers as early as possible and find out how you can best manage your workload</li> <li>▪ Find out what meetings you have – could you potentially dial into calls from your home? Or try and participate or stay in touch with the group in some other way, such as through having regular catch-ups with team members or a co-worker</li> <li>▪ Find out what activities or responsibilities are required in your job or that your employer/manager would like you to start doing. If you need support with these, such as adaptations made to your</li> </ul>

	<p>workplace, or help from a co-worker, discuss the options with your employer/manager</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your healthcare professionals or local RMD support group may have some advice or information you could take with you to discuss with your employer/manager</li> </ul>
<b>Difficulties with co-workers or supervisor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good communication is essential. Keep people informed so they can plan, where possible</li> <li>Keep everything up to date in case you have a sudden flare and need to take time off work. This will make it easier for co-workers to pick up from you</li> <li>Make sure that everyone is aware of your timetable and how to contact you if you are not at work</li> </ul>
<b>Cannot take on specific activities or responsibilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Select a job that is realistic for you</li> <li>If you are given activities or responsibilities where you feel you need support, such as adaptations made to your workplace, help from a co-worker, or assistive devices, discuss options with your employer/manager. Your healthcare provider or local RMD support group may have some advice or information that you could discuss with your employer/manager</li> <li>You may need to rethink your job and look for other activities and responsibilities that you CAN do</li> </ul>
<b>Anticipatory coping</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid the problem from happening if possible, such as by pacing yourself or taking regular stretching breaks</li> <li>If you think an issue may arise in the future which affects your ability to perform your job, raise it as soon as possible and always be prepared to explore and offer solutions</li> </ul>

#### 4. How to divert questions about your RMD

If you do not wish to discuss your RMD when your employer or co-workers ask questions or actively want to know more, good ways to divert the conversation are to:

- Direct them to a credible website that provides a range of information on RMDs, so they can learn as much as they want to know
- Politely say that you do not wish to discuss your condition. If you wish to explain this a little further, you could also add that you do not think it is relevant to your job/do not want it to affect your work or how people at work treat you/do not want to make it a big deal or focus in your life

Always be polite and remember that it is not something you have to discuss with your employers or co-workers, unless it affects your work and safety/the safety of others. If you do discuss your condition, **be positive and offer solutions!**

While most people you work with will be supportive, you may encounter a few colleagues who might not be. If you encounter unsupportive colleagues it might be a good idea to discuss issues with someone in your Human Resources (HR) department, senior managers or co-workers.

Use your knowledge of your co-workers and work situation to decide the best approach.

## 5. Work changes / transitions are common

Whether this is your first job or first full or part-time job, working can help improve your well-being and allows you to be more independent. It can also offer other benefits and it is often a great way to meet people. However, remember:

- Changes in the way that you work, such as being given new tasks and/or responsibilities, are very common as more demands are put on businesses and organisations in the current economic climate
- Work is only one part of a fulfilling life, try and spend quality time with your family and friends as well
- If you find your work very stressful, or your job is making you unhappy, you may want to reassess your situation, rather than struggle on. Talk through any big changes with friends, family and others you respect who may be able to offer you sound advice
- If you are struggling to keep up with your work, but are reliant on the money, find out if you can adjust the way you are working or change to another position. Find out about what state benefits you would be entitled to if you are not able to continue working