



Time2Work

Module 2:

Support materials for people who are already employed when they develop a rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease

Talking to co-workers

Even if there are no visible signs of your rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease (RMD), it may be difficult to keep your condition hidden from those you work with most closely. If you are in frequent pain or feeling fatigued, must take time off work because you are unwell or must attend hospital appointments, your co-workers may notice. This could lead to speculation, gossip or questions being asked. Alternatively, if you have reached a point where you are no longer able to manage your current job, you may need to talk to your co-workers about adaptations to your work and/or workload. There are separate fact sheets on whether *to disclose or not to disclose* and *talking to your employer and manager*. If you do decide or are forced to inform your colleagues about your condition, below are some considerations and tips to help you handle this positively.

Although there are anti-discrimination laws, a major concern for many people with RMDs is that disclosing their condition may affect their job security. Ideally you will decide if, when and how you talk to your co-workers about your condition, but a situation may arise where a co-worker asks you directly what's wrong with you. It is therefore a good idea to have considered how you will respond if this happens.

It will help if you consider some of the questions your co-workers might ask, such as:

- “How often will you be off work?”
- “How is this going to affect my/our work?”

- *“Will I/we have to take over your work when you are away?”*
- *“Will I/we be able to plan for when you take time off work?”*
- *“Will you be given (perceived or real) preferential working conditions to me/us?”*

Anything else you can think of that might reflect your job or the way you work specifically.

Taking the initiative to disclose

It is always good to have supportive co-workers, but like all human beings they come with different personalities. Whilst some will be kind, helpful and supportive, others may not. Look out for supportive colleagues.

Having at least one co-worker who is on your side can help you if/when you approach other co-workers and/or your manager or employer.

Tips

- Don't assume a particular response, people differ
- Keep information about your RMD simple, practical and relate it to how it will affect your work
- Do not go into long detailed explanations or use medical terms. If someone wants more information about your condition, direct them to an appropriate website
- Keep your tone neutral; try not to become emotional when discussing your condition; stay with the facts
- Be positive, offer solutions and focus on what you can do (*see also fact sheet on Talking to employers and managers*)
- Rehearse with someone close

Taking a co-worker into your confidence

If you decide to disclose, you may want to start by first talking to a co-worker or colleague who you like and trust and who you feel would be empathic to your situation. Having an ally can relieve the burden of having to keep everything to yourself and provide you with someone who can give you advice and who can support your cause with other co-workers, your boss or manager if appropriate.

You could try opening your discussion with your chosen co-worker by telling them that you have been finding certain aspects of your work a little difficult recently and asking for their advice on how you might manage this. Try to keep this conversation light, rather than having a long moan, even if you are feeling down or anxious and long to unburden yourself.

Once you have established that your co-worker is supportive you can then tell them the basic information they need to know about your condition and how this affects your work. Some co-workers may not feel able to help, depending on their experience and level of seniority, but others may be able to suggest ways that he/she and other colleagues could work around your needs. You might want to reassure your co-worker that you understand that they might not be to do anything, but that you appreciate their support.

You may be able to contain your disclosure to one person, but once you have told one person you should consider how you will handle questions from others and/or full disclosure to all your co-workers and your employer/manager.

Telling your co-workers

Ideally you should be able to decide who, when and where you tell others in your workplace about your condition. Depending on the size of your workplace or department, you may want to talk to your co-workers individually or together as a group.

When talking to your co-workers about your condition anticipate their concerns about how your health needs will affect their workloads. Prepare suggestions on how you can minimise any disruption to working practices and increase in your colleague's workloads. Talking to co-workers individually gives you a chance to discuss issues that specifically affect them. Use this approach particularly if you want to:

- Elicit some support before going to your employer or manager
- Manage co-workers with very different circumstances and concerns
- Manage potentially unsupportive co-workers

Although you may want to sound out some co-workers before going to your boss, make sure your employer or manager is not the last person in your workplace or department to know about your condition!

If you have several co-workers you want to talk to together about your condition, this could be brought up informally during a coffee or lunch break or over a drink after work. Alternatively, your manager may suggest that issues relating to your workload or any change in your working hours or practice could be discussed as a group in a meeting with those co-workers who will be most affected by any change in your work pattern.

Potentially unsupportive co-workers

Not everyone may be supportive. If this happens it can be helpful to enlist the support of a colleague.

Whilst there are anti-discrimination laws, first try to work things out with your colleagues to find the best approach.

Answering unsolicited questions from a co-worker

Even if you have decided not to disclose your RMD to your co-workers you may still be asked questions about why you have to go to the doctors so often, why you have had to take time off work or why you are having difficulty performing a task etc. Prepare some responses before this situation arises, so you are not caught off guard and you are in control over what you disclose. Try not to appear defensive and always be polite when responding to questions about your health or ability to do your work, even if you find the question/s intrusive. Omitting information is not lying (See *also fact sheet on 'To disclose or not to disclose'*).