Work can be hard!  

And a mental health condition can make things complicated. It’s different for everyone, but young people getting started in the workforce can find it hard to:

- Get to work every day
- Get to work on time
- Navigate workplace culture
- Manage what needs to get done
- Handle the stress of a new job
- Stay focused and “on task”
- Ask for help
- Get along with others
- Get work done on time

Accommodations at your workplace can be one helpful solution. But what are they?

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, a reasonable accommodation is a modification or adjustment to the way things are done in the hiring process, the job itself, or the work environment. These changes allow someone with a disability to have an equal opportunity not only to get a job, but successfully do their job to the same extent as people without disabilities. For examples, see Types of Accommodations below.

Who can use accommodations?

People with disabilities have a right to accommodations if their condition gets in the way of doing what’s called “the essential functions of a job.”
Is a mental health condition a disability?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination when applying for jobs, in hiring, firing and job training. “Qualified individuals” means that with or without an accommodation, you still must be able to do the essential functions of a job. Mental health conditions can be considered a disability because they can impact your ability to work, go to school, and more.

What are “essential functions of a job”?

Essential functions are the basic job duties that must be done by the worker, with or without accommodations. Your employer will decide which tasks are the essential functions.

If you have a disability, accommodations may help you perform the essential functions of the job. You still must do those basic tasks, but “how” you do them may be different with the help of an accommodation.

Will everyone know if I get an accommodation?

Reasonable accommodation information can only be shared with other people at work on a need-to-know basis. It should not go into your personnel file or be shared with coworkers. Coworkers and supervisors may be told that they need to do something differently, but not the reason why.

What makes an accommodation “reasonable”?

Accommodations must be “reasonable.” By law, an accommodation cannot cost so much, or change the way things are done so entirely, that it is considered an “undue hardship” to the employer.

How does it work?

Workers can only get accommodations under the law if they have “disclosed” a disability (see our Tip Sheet on Disclosure), meaning, the employer must know that you experience challenges at work related to a disability.

If you need them, work with Human Resources, your manager, or a supervisor to identify and receive accommodations as soon as (or even before) you start working. If you’re not sure what accommodations could be helpful, review some of the resources at the end of this tip sheet, especially the Job Accommodation Network. If you have a mental health provider or job coach, ask them to help you figure out what accommodations will help you, and what to ask for.
Types of Accommodations

Here are some examples of accommodations for people with mental health conditions in the workplace.

**Flexibility at the Workplace**
- Working remotely or from home
- Working in a quiet area, with less traffic/interruptions, or adding walls to lessen distractions
- Shifting minor job tasks to another employee, allowing focus on what is essential to the job

**Flexible Leave**
- Sick leave for reasons related to mental health
- Using vacation time or leaves of absence for treatment or recovery
- Taking short leaves (a few hours at a time) for therapy and other appointments

**Scheduling**
- Working part-time instead of full-time
- Job sharing – splitting one job between two people
- Adjusting work hours, such as starting later if medications make you tired in the morning
- Being able to make up time missed due to the mental health condition

**Flexible Policies**
- Job Coaches allowed at the job or accessed virtually to help you learn or do the job
- Allowing food or beverages, for example if you need water or food for medication side effects
- Allowing music (i.e., headphones) to drown out excess noise/distractions or to help you focus
- Allowing software or apps that help you to organize and schedule work

**Communications**
- Sending instructions via email or in a written list instead of telling you verbally
- Allowing you to record meetings to help with recall later

**Breaks**
- Taking breaks more often than other employees (you may have to make up the time)
- Having the flexibility to schedule breaks at times when they work best for you
- Telephone breaks during work hours to get support from a therapist or others

**Changes in Training and Supervision**
- Allowing extra time for you to learn job tasks
- Offering extra time in supervision to help you learn
- Adjusting the style of supervision and the way feedback is given
- Providing a mentor or buddy to help you get along at work or learn the job
- Helping to divide large projects into smaller chunks so they are more manageable

**Do I have to worry about how much it will cost my employer?**

Not really! Most employers say that accommodations for mental health conditions cost them little to nothing and therefore are “reasonable.”
The Who, What, When, Where and How of Accommodations

Now that you know what a workplace accommodation is, you may be wondering how to go about asking for one. Here is the **Who, What, When, Where, and How of requesting accommodations at work:**

**Who?**

Who should you go to if you need an accommodation? You can decide who to talk to!

» Your supervisor, manager, or director, Human Resources or company reporting hotline.

**What?**

What do I need?

» Let your employer know that you need a change to the usual way(s) things are done because of a medical condition.

» You may need to tell your employer about a disability that gets in the way of doing your job. This is called “disclosure” and is a very personal decision, so weigh the pros and cons.

» Be prepared to get documentation of the condition that gets in the way of success at work from a medical, rehabilitation, or mental health provider. Ask them for a letter describing the nature of your disability, how severe it is, and how long you’re expected to have it, as well as how the disability impacts your work, and why the specific accommodation is needed. They may need to fill out or sign a form given to you by your job. Sometimes you may need to have your provider describe what accommodations you need or are requesting for this job, so think about this before you ask for a letter.

**When?**

There is no hard and fast rule about when to request an accommodation! You have the right to request accommodations:

» **When you’re applying.** Usually this is done if you need an accommodation for the application process, like having a job coach come with you to the interview.

» **At any time while you’re working.** You are not required to disclose a disability or request accommodations before you start work, and you can ask for accommodations at any time if you realize you need them to do the job.

» **When not to.** Don’t wait until things are going badly, like when you’re about to be fired, for example. This is especially true if you have not disclosed a disability or discussed accommodations before, because in those situations, you may not be covered by the ADA.

**Where?**

While there is no right or wrong place, you may want to:

» Find a quiet space. Try not to talk to your employer in a busy hallway with no privacy.

» Reduce the stress of an in-person conversation by writing a letter or email. Say that you need an accommodation, state briefly why, and if you can, give ideas for what would help.

**How?**

» Use plain English! You don’t have to use medical jargon or fancy language. Your employer doesn’t need (or want!) to know all the details of your condition. Tell your employer what you’re good at, what you’re having trouble with, and what you think would help you do the job.

» While you can request accommodations verbally or informally, making a request in writing ensures you have documentation of the request. Want a format? [The Job Accommodation Network](https://www.jacn.org) has one!

» You may not need to specifically ask for it: Your employer can consider your description of a problem that is related to a medical condition a request for an accommodation under the ADA.

» Note that you and your employer will need to negotiate the best solution to the problem for everyone. Be open to different solutions and be creative and flexible.
Resources & References

These resources helped us develop this Tip Sheet and may be helpful to you:

» Accommodations. (n.d.). DOL. https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/employers/accommodations

» ADA National Network Reasonable Accommodations in the Workplace Fact Sheet contains essential information about accommodations at work.

» Adulting Shorts: An Interview Tale, PART 1 — https://doi.org/10.7191/pib.1157

» Adulting Shorts: An Interview Tale, PART 2 — https://doi.org/10.7191/pib.1158

» Applying for a Job: The Young Adults Guide, Revised 2023 — https://doi.org/10.7191/pib.52078

» Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation webpage: Potential accommodations on the job offers important information about accommodations for mental health conditions.

» Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy offers key information for youth/employees:
  » Americans with Disabilities Act information
  » Youth, Disclosure, and the Workplace Why, When, What, and How
  » Maximizing Productivity Accommodations for Employees with Psychiatric Disabilities

» Do I Tell My Boss?: Disclosing My Mental Health Condition at Work — https://doi.org/10.7191/pib.1077

» Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Enforcement Guidance on the ADA and Psychiatric Disabilities offers common questions and answers about the ADA and persons with mental health conditions.

» How to Keep A Job: The Young Adults Guide — https://doi.org/10.7191/pib.1090

» Job Accommodation Network (JAN) website: https://askjan.org offers a wealth of information for individuals and employers about accommodations for all disabilities.
  » Employee guide
  » Costs and benefits of accommodations: Accommodation Compliance: Low Cost/High Impact
  » Sample Language for Accommodation Request Letters
  » Transition/Youth Topics: Accommodation and Compliance, Situations and Strategies

» Outside-The-Box College Accommodations: Real Support for Real Students: Tools for School II — https://doi.org/10.7191/pib.1110

» The 411 on Disability Disclosure: A workbook for families, educators, youth service professionals, and adult allies who care about youth with disabilities offers opportunities to consider and make decisions on disclosure and accommodations.

» Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research has additional Employment-related Tip Sheets for young adults and those who support them, related to employment, including one on disability disclosure.

With thanks to Paul Wagner, Esq., Michelle G. Mullen, Vanessa Mitchell-Wagner, Samantha Hersh, Deirdre Logan, and the Young Adult Advisory Board for their support in developing the contents of this document.