

When an employee discloses a recent diagnosis

The following depicts a hypothetical conversation between an employee and their Human Resources (HR) contact. In some organizations, the topics they cover would require the involvement of more than one HR professional. Guidelines around paid time off (PTO) may differ by company.

Hi Janelle, do you have a minute?



Hey, Alicia. What's on your mind?

Well, I just got some news from my doctor and I talked to my manager, Jill, about it because I am not exactly sure what to do next.

Jill suggested I come to see you as a first step as I'm concerned this might impact my ability to stay in my role – which I love. **I'm feeling a combination of anger and confusion right now.**

And, if I'm being totally honest, I'm more scared than anything else.



I'm glad you stopped by. What's the news?

Well, I'd been having some eyesight problems for a while and then noticed I was getting a little unsteady on my daily walks – I actually fell a couple of times for no reason at all.

I visited a couple doctors, underwent some tests and was just told I have multiple sclerosis.



That must have been quite a shock. How are you doing?

Honestly, I'm still in shock. I wasn't prepared for an MS diagnosis.

My doctor told me that I am in the early stages, which is good. I'm not sure how much you know about MS, but it can worsen over time and the medication I just started helps to slow the progression.

Right now, I'm worried about my job and my health insurance benefits.





I am sure you're still in shock, however, you did the right thing by coming in. Part of our mission here in HR is to partner with employees in situations like this when life throws a curveball.

Your openness to getting us involved early is great and allows us to assist as much as possible.

Hearing that makes me happy that Jill encouraged me to come see you.

I've started treatment and things seem to be going well. The medication my doctor started me on is covered by our plan which was great because I wasn't sure it would be. I'm most concerned about my options as the disease progresses.



Where do we go from here?



You actually have a lot of options – and you don't have to do anything now. **Continue to follow the plan your physician recommended, come to terms with your diagnosis and focus on your responsibilities at work...**

That said, let me just reassure you - the Americans with Disabilities Act covers chronic illnesses including MS. It's designed to protect employees from discrimination at work based on illness. It also ensures employers play an active role in providing **reasonable accommodations** which are changes in the way the job is done or to the work environment to enable a person to perform essential job functions and enjoy equal employment opportunities.

Again, we're not there yet – I just want you to be aware of the measures that are already in place.

I am on my feet a lot at work, but I feel good these days and I really hope to keep going as I normally would.

What happens if that changes?



Practical Tips

- Create a culture of openness and honesty
- Train managers on how/when to refer issues to HR
- Take the time to understand the employee's specific needs

At that point we'd start to consider reasonable accommodations for you.



I'd work with Jill to figure out the specifics, but depending upon what your doctor suggests it might involve something like getting you a parking place closer to the entrance, or different lighting to improve visibility at your workstation, or a chair or dedicated rest area so you can sit down if you get tired. We'll have to see what works best for you when the time comes...

Who knows, years from now it might mean a new role altogether at the company if you're open to it.

Again, I know you're not there now, but I want to **let you know that we'll work with you** and Jill to make sure that you have what you need to stay on board.

That's a big relief. **I was worried that I would be let go if my MS got in the way of fulfilling my job responsibilities.**

I don't want to think about it, but what happens if I have an episode caused by the MS that makes me unable to show up to work for one or more days?



You have an allocation of **paid time off (PTO) due to illness** so it would be like any other sick day.

What would happen if my sick days **exceed** that PTO allocation?



I know it's hard to think about, but if that happens you might be able to access benefits under the Family Medical Leave Act.



Under FMLA, employers are required to provide up to 12 weeks unpaid leave and keep an employee's position open until they're well enough to return.

Wow, it's great to know these options exist.



Practical Tips

- *Ensure the employee knows how and where to access information relating to their rights (FMLA, ADA, etc.)*
- *Reinforce that the company may be able to offer options at the right time*
- *Reinforce the importance of working together to find the right balance*

Definitely - **we always want to tell employees who are going through a trying time that their jobs are entitled to certain protections like those provided under the ADA.**

And we have a lot of additional information on our online benefits portal. Feel free to access that or I can give you handouts today to explain the various options.

How would you feel about having a check-in from time to time? We can spend a few minutes each time so you can keep me up-to-date on how you're handling things and if your needs have changed. That way, I can be proactive and help you plan and stay ahead of things here.



That sounds great. And in the event I need to pare down my responsibilities, or take some time off, you're here as a resource to help with that. That's a load off my mind.



Absolutely. I know you're still processing the initial diagnosis, but I also wanted to mention that **we have a great Employee Assistance Program as well as mental health services available that can help you and your family if you'd like to access them.**



Okay, I will give that some thought. I am really glad I came in to see you. I'd appreciate it if you could **keep this between us, and Jill of course, until I am ready to let my co-workers know.**



Of course, I'm actually legally bound not to disclose your diagnosis to your coworkers, **so no worries about that.**



Sounds great. How about I check back in with you in a month?



That sounds great. Thanks again for coming in, Alicia.



Practical Tips

- *Agree on future plan to keep communications open*
- *Reinforce the various ways that HR can lend value/support*
- *Visit [MS-Workspace.com](https://www.ms-workspace.com) for additional resources*