

Managing ADHD in the Workplace



To disclose or not to disclose

What is ADHD in Adults?

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by persistent patterns of inattentive, impulsive and sometimes hyperactive behaviour. ADHD may present in adults in three ways:

Predominantly inattentive type, which indicates problems with organisation, time management, listening and remembering information. Adults may struggle with excessive procrastination, sustaining attention over a long project and with working memory.

Predominantly hyperactive type, which manifests as ongoing restlessness. They may talk excessively, experience sleeplessness or feel “on edge”.

Combined type, which means the adult has symptoms from both categories.

People with ADHD often struggle with executive function. There are six areas where your executive function may be affected in the workplace.¹

1. **Activation:** you may find it difficult to organise, prioritise or start tasks. Routine procedures like filling out forms or planning can stop you from working.
2. **Focusing:** you may struggle to stay focused on your work because of external distractions like chatty colleagues or phone calls in an open office. You may also find it difficult to participate in long, structured meetings unless you have the opportunity to interact with others.
3. **Regulating alertness, sustaining effort, effort and processing speed:** if you are working on a boring task, you quickly lose your energy and alertness and feel tired easily. You enjoy working on different tasks at the same time, unless you find a specific task that captures your interest.
4. **Managing frustration and modulating emotions:** you get easily frustrated and may express your emotions in a way that offends workplace rules of courtesy and etiquette.
5. **Utilising working memory and accessing recall:** you may find it difficult to process information quickly, resulting in poor understanding and reduced non-verbal memory of instructions given to you by your manager.
6. **Monitoring and self-regulating behaviour:** you may find it difficult to identify appropriate social cues in a stimulating environment, which means you may appear quite intense and behave inappropriately in verbal discourse.



ADHD Does Have Its Strengths

However, your ADHD can also be an advantage in the workplace. With the right support and feedback, as well as working to your natural strengths and interests, you will be able to thrive in the world. These strengths can be summarised in six basic themes:²

1. **Cognitive dynamism:** You have the ability to come up with original and interesting ideas³. You are at your most original through competition with others. When something of interest captures your attention, you are able to focus intensely on it for long periods of time (known as hyperfocus).
2. **Courage:** You are able to confront fear and uncertainty more easily than the average person because you are not afraid of being non-conformist. You're also a risk-taker, which is a useful advantage to have if you started your own business.⁴
3. **Energy:** You have a lot of energy for the tasks that you enjoy, which can allow you to complete enormous amounts of work with the right motivation.
4. **Humanity:** When you are in a comfortable environment where you are supported, you can have a great sense of humour and you are able to empathise with the struggles of others more easily, as they are reflective of your ADHD experience.
5. **Resilience:** Because of the difficulties you have faced in your life as someone with ADHD, you are also resilient and able to face other hardships.
6. **Transcendence:** Your appreciation for beauty and excellence may mean you can create work that is meaningful and of high standards that would be highly valued in creative arts fields.

Should you Disclose Your ADHD to Your Managers or Colleagues in the Workplace?

The short answer is that it depends. ADHD is a condition that receives a lot of stigma and misunderstanding from professionals. Here are the pros and cons of disclosing ADHD in the workplace.

The Yes Case 😊

- Telling your boss means that you can ask for accommodations for yourself within the workplace, reasonable adjustments, especially if you are struggling at work.
- You may be protected from unlawful discrimination when your employer is aware of your ADHD, which is classified as a disability under anti-discrimination law.
- Your manager will help you succeed at work rather than performance-manage you, while you help to educate your manager about your ADHD.

The No Case 🚫

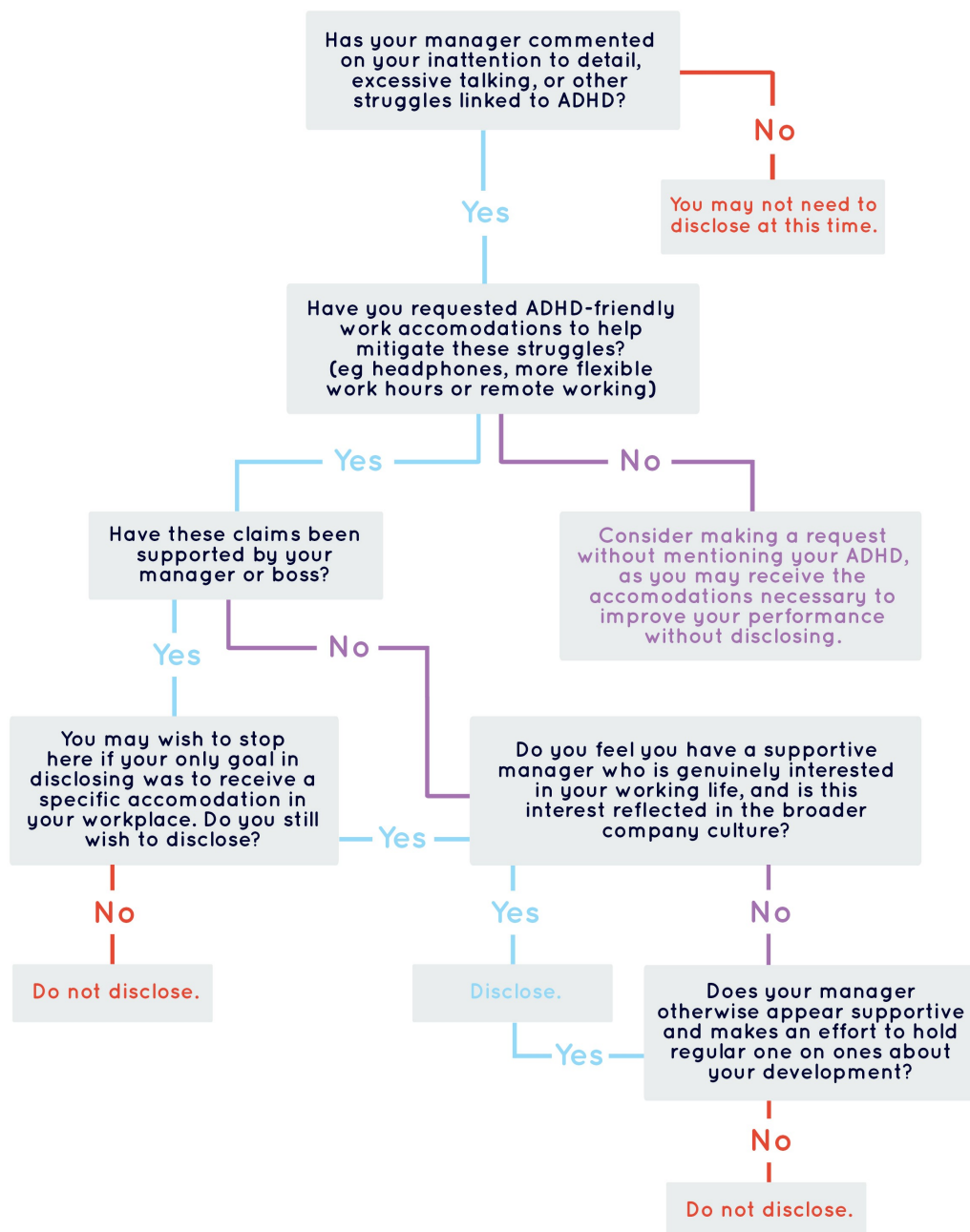
- Your manager may have unfavourable views about ADHD, which may mean you may experience discrimination, which can be stressful, expensive and time-consuming to prove if you make a complaint.
- You can ask for workplace accommodations without having to bring up ADHD, as many accommodations for ADHD (such as a quiet space or headphones) are already extended to other people in the workplace.
- Your colleagues may have misunderstandings about your working ability, which may negatively impact your experience at work.

Factors to Consider:

1. **Rationale:** Most people disclose their diagnosis to obtain reasonable accommodations from their manager that they are not otherwise able to receive through usual channels.
2. **Performance at Work:** If your boss is commenting on your inattention to detail, distractibility or other struggles related to ADHD, you may be at risk of losing your job or being performance-managed. Disclosure may be one way to allow you to improve your performance at work.

3. **Timing:** You are not obligated to disclose your diagnosis during any part of the hiring process, including when applying for a job with your resume or during an interview. It makes sense to disclose when you are already at work.
4. **Knowledge:** You may want to keep the disclosure private to your manager. Depending on your company's HR policy, the HR department may also be made aware (particularly if you are currently being performance managed). You must also decide whether your co-workers should know.
5. **Length of Time in Role:** When you are starting out in a new job, you may wish to keep your diagnosis private until you have established yourself in the workplace and you have gained your footing.

Should You Disclose Your ADHD?



*Disclaimer: this flowchart does not represent all possible workplace scenarios. Although we aim to clarify the decision making process, it is ultimately up to each individual to decide if the benefits of disclosing their ADHD outweighs the potential risks.

If I Choose To Disclose, What Should I Do or Say?

Example Role-Play and Script



If you wish to disclose your diagnosis, request a meeting with your direct manager or supervisor at a time that suits both of you. Make the meeting request by email if possible and get the appointment booked in your calendars. The following example script is based on a fictional marketing role, but the general gist of the conversation should apply to most jobs.

1. Point out how much you enjoy the job, the work, the people and the support of your manager to date.

"Hi John, I am really enjoying my role in marketing and I've appreciated all the great tips that you've provided me about how to create engaging proposals for clients."

2. Point out the great feedback that you have received on the job, from the manager or from your colleagues.

"As you know, I've had some great feedback from my colleague Mary who really liked my idea about how to make Instagram videos that feature dogs."

3. Mention that there is one issue that is holding you back from being able to maximise your work output, such as your difficulty to concentrate in light of distractions.

"I know you've mentioned that I've had quite a few spelling mistakes in some of my recent proposals. I've been sitting in the "hotseat" area of the company, which is full of ringing phones and flickering lights. It's very difficult for me to concentrate in that setting."

4. You can choose to disclose your diagnosis at this point. Ensure you keep the description of ADHD to a brief minimum, with an emphasis on the positive aspects of ADHD.

"I was recently diagnosed and started treatment for ADHD. I am not sure how much you know about ADHD. Most people wouldn't know that ADHD is the two extremes of concentration. That means that I can get very distracted in an environment such as noise and people around me. However, I am able to hyper-focus in situations where I enjoy the work and there are no distractions, like flickering lights or ringing phones."

5. State your proposed solutions and be prepared to negotiate with your manager for a win-win scenario. Write down 2-3 different solutions and refer to them.

"I make fewer mistakes when I work in a dedicated quiet space. Would I be able to work from home like my colleague, Mary, once a fortnight? I can use that day to finish marketing proposals."

"We do have clients coming in all the time and it's a good idea that you are able to meet with them when they do arrive."

"I know that the spare boardroom upstairs doesn't have anyone from 9am - 12pm. Perhaps I can work there for three hours a day to complete my marketing proposals. What do you think?"

"Sure. As long as you keep an eye on your email if we need you to come down for a meeting."

6. If your manager only agrees to the accommodation on a trial basis, make sure you check back with the manager after the trial period. Make notes on how the accommodation has been beneficial for you.

"Hi John, I've been using the boardroom for the last three weeks and I've managed to submit three marketing proposals without too many careless mistakes. You even noted in our last email that there has been a noticeable improvement! I'm grateful for your support and hope we can make this arrangement permanent."

"That's true. I am happy to ensure the boardroom is free from those hours, unless we do have client meetings. I will let you know in advance if that would be the case so you can find an alternative place."

Your Legal Rights and Obligations

Living with ADHD comes with stigma and discrimination. If you choose to disclose your diagnosis to your workplace, you should be aware of your legal rights and obligations.

Disclaimer: The following information provided is general advice only and should not be relied on for actual legal advice for your situation. See the section below on avenues for legal advice.

Workplace Accommodations:

Under the law, workplace accommodations are referred to as “reasonable adjustments”. Your employer is obligated to provide “reasonable adjustments” to allow you to perform at work if you have a disability. ADHD counts as a disability under anti-discrimination law. Your employer can only say no if it’s too expensive or too time-consuming to provide those accommodations, which is known as “unjustifiable hardship”.⁶

As outlined above, many people with ADHD struggle with concentration, particularly in an open-plan office. If sound and concentration is an issue, you may request noise-cancelling headphones or a quiet place to work.

Alternatively, if you are in an office job working on a computer, you could ask for a remote work arrangement. The bigger the organisation, the more likely that your employer will be able to provide these workplace accommodations.

Workplace Discrimination:

Under the law, your employer cannot refuse to hire you, fire you or change your job duties in a way that leaves you worse off because you have ADHD. You are protected regardless of whether you are a full-time, part-time or a casual employee. If you suspect that discrimination has occurred because of ADHD, you should get in contact with Fair Work Australia on 13 13 94 to find your next options, such as lodging a complaint through the Fair Work Commission.⁷

Flexible Working Conditions:

You can ask for flexible working conditions.

- If you have a full-time job, you can only make a request for flexible work if you’ve been working for at least 12 months.
- The request must be in writing. For example, you can send an email to your boss setting out your need for a separate quiet space in the building.
- Your boss needs to respond within 21 days with a yes or no for the request.
- If not, they must explain the reasons why.⁸

Still Confused About Your Legal Rights at the Workplace?

Australian Centre for Disability Law:

<https://disabilitylaw.org.au>

Call 1800 800 708 between 9.30am and 12.30pm on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday for free limited advice over the phone on your situation.

Fair Work Infoline: 13 13 94

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- 9 Deloitte Access Economics 'The social and economic costs of ADHD in Australia' (2019). Report commission by and prepared for the Australian ADHD Professionals Association (AADPA), <https://>



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This factsheet is intended as general information and should not replace professional advice. Please consult with your physician or other qualified health care professional if you have any concerns.

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