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Making the Grade; A Workbook for Students with Psychiatric Disabilities

Disclosure: What's it all About?

In high school, the decisions about who could have access to information about your condition, disability, medical status and educational status were made by your parents and other adults involved in your educational planning. In college, these decisions become yours.

Disclosure means to let something be seen by uncovering it or allowing a secret to be revealed. Therefore, "disclosure" decisions are different for different disabilities. Many people have physical disabilities that are clearly visible. For example, a wheelchair user or a person who is blind cannot conceal their disability from someone else when they are meeting in person.

Other disabilities, including psychiatric, are termed "hidden disabilities" because they cannot be readily seen by someone else. Therefore, a person with a hidden disability has to decide whether or not to reveal or "disclose" his/her disability or condition to another person.

When people talk about disclosing a disability, it is often phrased in a way that suggests that there are only two possible choices--"yes" or "no." For example, "do you want to disclose your disability during your job interview?" would anticipate only a yes or no answer. In reality, there are many choices that lie between the absolutes of yes and no. Asking ourselves the 5Ws and an H can help us make an informed choice about who to share with, why we want to share at that time, and how much or how little we'd like to share. Additionally, when we consider when and where to disclose, as well as how we want to frame it, we can maximize the benefits of disclosure.

5Ws and an H:

These stand for Who, Why, What, When, Where and How. These questions help us to clarify *our* primary goal in disclosing as well as how much we want to share. It's important to remember that we have a right to privacy, and that choosing to limit the amount we share isn't the same as keeping secrets from people. If sharing something doesn't benefit us or, in some cases, may harm us, we have no obligation to share.

Let's think about these questions and why they are important.

Who?

Who we want to or have to tell is always important to keep in mind as we make further decisions about disclosing. If it is a person in a DS office, we know that there will be certain things that we have to disclose to get our accommodations. On the other hand, if it's a fellow student, we know we have more latitude in what we share, and want to think more carefully about that. So identifying who we want to disclose to right up front helps us to put a structure around the rest of our decision-making.

Why?

Why we want to share personal information with another person can be the most critical question we want to ask ourselves. Sometimes, the only "why" is very clear and straightforward, such as "I want to get accommodations." Other times, however, it is far less clear. Some people, especially those with a trauma history, may feel guilty for "keeping secrets." Others may need to "prove" that an accommodation is valid due to a "real" disability. Sometimes, we just feel close to someone and want to share as part of a friendship; at other times, we may think of sharing prematurely when a real friendship hasn't really developed.

Unfortunately, when we disclose a "mental illness," we become vulnerable to widespread misconceptions, myths, and prejudice. Some people continue to equate any mental illness with violence, unpredictability, and that frightening person portrayed on television. Asking ourselves "why" we're choosing to disclose can help us to make an informed choice.

What?

Thinking about what we want to disclose results in our disclosing what is beneficial without disclosing so much that we feel exposed or fearful of the consequences. People can sometimes say things that feel right or safe in the moment, but they may feel regret and vulnerable later. Planning what we want to disclose ahead of time can help us to avoid these situations.

Any personal history comes with the short version, the long version and a myriad of versions in between. The "why" from above can be a guide to what we want to share because our decision is directly related to the goal. If we want to disclose because we want to get some accommodations, we will have to disclose the nature of our disability, our educational history, ways in which our disability impacts us and what treatment we receive. In addition, we will have to provide medical documentation that discloses more about our disability. The DS office typically informs us what needs to be provided, so we know pretty clearly what to disclose.

Some college accommodation processes include speaking with the professor to arrange the accommodations. This may be providing a letter from the DS office and making the arrangements for utilizing the accommodations at the needed time, such as extra time on an exam. In other cases, it may mean actually negotiating the accommodation with the professor. In this situation, it is easier to forget the goal -- negotiating an accommodation -- and instead, find ourselves trying to "prove" our disability by revealing past hospitalizations, current therapy work and other matters that don't affect our classroom success. By going back to the "why," we remember that the professor needs to know the classroom difficulties we might have, such as concentration while test taking or talking notes, needing to have a drink due to dry mouth from medications, etc.

The professor has no need to know other details. They don't inform the professor about what accommodations will be helpful or allowable in class. By taking a few minutes to think of what to disclose, we get our needs met without having to worry what the professor thinks of us, now that he/she has become privy to intimate details of our life.

Determining what we want to share in any situation empowers us to remain who we are -- a student, worker, roommate, friend, colleague -- rather than a victim of stigma and discrimination as much as possible.

When, Where and How?

Anytime we want to have a meaningful discussion with someone, there's a right time and a wrong time. The same is true for where and how. If we think of negotiating extra time on an exam with a professor, for example, trying to talk to her right after class when other students are also trying to ask quick questions is probably not the most effective time to make the request. Similarly, just e-mailing the professor to make this type of request could be too impersonal and may end up delaying your request until the last minute.

It might make more sense to set up an appointment to meet with the professor. The "when, where and how," that will likely be the most successful for your goal would be a face-to-face meeting with the professor during her office hours. Choosing the best type of interaction, the most comfortable space for the conversation and a time when the person

is most likely to be receptive greatly enhances the likelihood that you will have a meaningful exchange.

Choices surrounding disclosure are very personal, and differ from one person to another. But for all of us, taking a few minutes to consider the 5Ws and an H can maximize our success towards our goal by minimizing other factors that will drive the person's attention and focus away from what we want to say. Whether making a disability-related request or sharing from our heart, the wrong place at the wrong time is the wrong way to get the consideration and respect that we deserve.