

Active Living with Arthritis Podcast #8

When and How to Tell People at Work about Your Arthritis or Other Rheumatic Condition

Karen: Welcome to the Arthritis Answers (Active Living with Arthritis) Podcasts, presented by the ENACT center at Boston University as part of our Interact with ENACT series. We're here to bring you evidence-based information related to arthritis and rehabilitation. Make sure to subscribe to our podcasts to receive episodes as they are produced. I'm Dr. Karen Jacobs, an occupational therapist, a professor in occupational therapy at Boston University, and your host for this very interesting podcast about when and how to tell people at work about your arthritis or other rheumatic conditions. I'm delighted to be speaking with Dr. Saralynn Allaire. Saralynn is a professor of medicine at Boston University and the Associate Director of ENACT. Let's get started.

Saralynn, if people have some form of arthritis or another rheumatic condition, should they tell their employer?

Saralynn: Karen, it depends on the situation. Two major factors to consider are whether the person's condition is visible and whether the person needs an accommodation. Accommodation, I should explain is any modification or adjustment to a job or workplace that enables the person to perform the job as well as possible. Now in general, people are not obligated to tell an interviewer, for example, on a job interview, that they have a disability or a health condition. Now, if the person's condition, however, is very visible, of course the person knows. The other person can see that they have some changes to their body or they use a cane, for example. Even in that situation, you don't have to discuss it but in general most people say it's a good idea to do that because it's sort of the elephant in the room.

Karen: yes, I can understand.

Saralynn: It's very obvious and the interviewer is probably curious about it and in particular is probably wondering how the person is going to do certain job tasks. So, generally it is advised that you do bring it up. Don't discuss it lengthily or for a

long time, but if there are questions about how you would perform certain tasks, then it would be good to tell that interviewer how you would do that.

Karen: So, would you say “I have this health condition?” Would I disclose exactly what it is?

Saralynn: Generally, you do not have to tell the name, just “a medical condition”. I would suggest that you do tell the name just because it makes the other person curious and they may think you have something that is worse than it really is. But in general you want to keep the discussion brief. You don’t want to give a lot of details or use medical terms. What you do want to give information about is how it affects your ability to do a job, and in that case you would also want to try to think of some ideas of how that could be accommodated. I’ll give you an example – a person has rheumatoid arthritis that affects their knees and the job requires a fair amount of standing. So in that case, a person would say that the arthritis causes pain and stiffness in the knees and that the disease can cause damage in the long term and one thing you’ve thought to do to relieve this is to use a high stool to sit on periodically to relieve the pain. If the person is at a counter, for example, serving customers, they could say that the height of the stool will allow them to be at eye level with the customer so it would not be apt to affect their work.

Now if the person’s condition is not visible, and you are applying for a job, it is generally advised that you do not tell an interviewer at the first level, for example in the human resources office, about your condition. If it is not visible and you know that you’ll need an accommodation once you start working, then you do not even have to tell that until you start working, but in general the advice is to tell that you will need an accommodation to the *second* level of interviews to the person who would be your supervisor or, maybe even better yet, after a job offer has been made. If you wait until you start working, your supervisor may feel angry or betrayed and I think you want to avoid that sort of thing. Now if you are already employed and you wish to obtain accommodation, of course at that point you do need to disclose that you have a medical condition.

Karen: Saralynn, you know what I wanted to ask you? Is there any other information about telling people at work about arthritis that you recommend?

Saralynn: Definitely. It is a very excellent idea to plan ahead what you are going to say. It's good to practice with a family member, a friend, or a supportive co-worker because it is extremely important that you feel confident and comfortable about talking about your condition then you can be positive and emphasize your ability to do the job and if you receive accommodation you can think of possible accommodations that may work and so forth.

Karen: That's great. Now, I'd like you, in our last few minutes of our podcast if you can share with us the pros and cons of telling an employer about having a health condition.

Saralynn: Good point. Let's talk about the cons first of all. Certainly the major reason why many people don't tell their employer is discrimination. Now, we know that the federal law, the Americans with Disabilities Act, prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities or health conditions in the workplace. But of course, discrimination can be very subtle and hard to detect. Sometimes people just have negative perceptions of people with disabilities or health conditions. They may view them as complainers or costly because of absenteeism or health insurance costs or being absent a great deal and so forth. So that is a major reason not to tell. Another possible reason is that sometimes it attracts unwanted attention. So, you tell a co-worker you have arthritis and then the co-worker wants to know a lot of specific information about it, more than you really want to discuss. Sometimes the co-worker will tell you about his or her arthritis or somebody they know with arthritis and then often what happens is that they want to give you advice about how to treat your arthritis. So those are some reasons not to tell.

But there are reasons to tell too, there are pros. The first is that though some subtle discrimination is possible, it's also possible that you'll get a positive or supportive response and greater understanding from co-workers and your employer. Research studies have shown that people who are in a supportive workplace are more likely to work longer than people who don't receive support. Another reason is to receive accommodation and you have to reveal that you have a medical condition to receive accommodation. The benefit of accommodation is that it will enable you to perform well, equally to other people. That will increase job satisfaction, the satisfaction of your employer with your job, and your own personal satisfaction which is important to consider because other research suggests that when a person with a health condition can't do their job

well it reduces their own job satisfaction and this is what leads them to think about stopping work. So then, a third reason to disclose is that it relieves the strain of hiding your condition. If you are constantly worried that people are going to find out about your condition because maybe you are limited in this way or that way, limited in some days and so forth and so on, you feel you need to hide it and it is a strain. So if you disclose it, that relieves that strain.

Karen: Well, thank you. These were excellent example of the pros and cons. You've really given our listeners some great ideas about when and how to tell people at work about their arthritis or another rheumatic condition. Saralynn, thank you so much for being on this podcast and thank all of you for listening. If you'd like to give us some feedback, ask questions or let us know of other topics that you are interested in, please send an email to ENACT@BU.edu. ON our website, which is www.bu.edu/ENACT we have information about the center and a list of online resources. Until our next podcast, stay active!