

Is your graduate program mental health friendly?

“It is becoming increasingly common to be diagnosed with a form of mental health condition and I think the more we are open about it as a society, the stronger we can become in breaking down the stigma”. This is a statement made by a 4th year university student who has re-entered the workforce. Undertaking study and navigating a new career can be particularly stressful for someone with a mental health diagnosis. Employers looking to promote equal opportunity graduate programs would benefit from being aware that many graduates will be living with a mental health diagnosis, and may be worrying about whether or not to share this information on an application or at an interview.

Working on the University Specialists Employment Partnership (USEP) project, David sat down with a recent graduate to chat about her experience of being open about her mental health and why some people might hesitate to disclose this information.

How did you decide that you were going to embark on the journey of studying at University – what encouraged you to enrol? Did you have any fears or doubts?

Encouragement came from within my circle, my husband especially. I had HUGE fears of embarking on the university journey. I hadn't completed high school, having dropped out at the end of grade 10 and becoming a student at the age of 35 was scary.

What are you studying & why?

I am studying a Bachelor of Social Work. I had completed a Diploma of Counselling as I felt the calling to be a professional helper. Through that course my trainer who is also a Social Worker, encouraged me to go further with my training and explore this degree.

You speak quite openly about your mental health and are a positive advocate in this space at a time when it is needed. When did you start discussing your mental health condition with others; and has this openness been beneficial?

It has only been in the last few years that I became open about my mental health condition. I have suffered with depression and anxiety since my teenage years but it wasn't until 2012 that I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome. Along with my fear of not being “smart” enough for university I also was worried about how I would go with my fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue. A benefit I have seen with being open about this, is that others who may have something similar, or even completely different, feel better about navigating university demands with their own conditions. It is becoming increasingly common to be diagnosed with a form of mental health condition and I think the more we are open about it as a society, the stronger we can become in breaking down the stigma.

Was there any unintended or negative consequences from sharing this personal information with others?

While I have only received positive support within the study cohort, sadly this isn't the case for others. In a professional capacity outside of study, I have seen that being open about mental health

conditions has incurred negative impacts. People become scared and judgmental, a lot of this stems from the fear of the unknown. This is where stigma is still very much present in our society.

Has having this discussion with an employer ever been detrimental to you? Why?

One employer knew of my conditions when I came on board but during my time there, there was a change of management. I mentioned my anxiety to my new manager and I didn't receive support. I felt unsupported when I attempted to raise concerns. I ended up looking for other ways to manage tasks which ultimately led me to make the decision to leave. I became depressed, had feelings of being worthless and not a team player.

You have mentioned before that sometimes you'll discuss your mental health status with your employer and sometimes you won't. What factors make you decide either way?

Goes back to fear of the unknown. Some employers I have come across get scared and think someone with a mental illness would be a burden and this would have the potential to hurt the bottom line. For me personally, I also looked at the position and what the duties were, this would factor in as to whether I disclose my conditions. In my case, with my diagnosis being "invisible", I had the opportunity to control what people knew.

More information on supporting graduates with a mental health condition and creating mentally healthy workplaces can be found at:

[Heads Up](#): is about giving individuals and businesses the tools to create more mentally healthy workplaces. Developed by the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance and beyondblue.

[Workplace mental health & wellbeing programs](#): help create a work environment that promotes mental wellbeing, increased staff engagement and greater productivity - Black Dog Institute.

[Sane Peer Ambassadors](#): People who raise awareness, reduce stigma and provide hope to Australians affected by complex mental illness.

[JobAccess](#): National hub for workplace and employment information for people with disability, employers and service providers:

The University Specialist Employment Partnership (USEP) aims to improve graduate employment outcomes by establishing an on-campus specialist recruitment service that links a Disability Employment Services consultant with university career advisors and disability support officers.

www.usep.com.au