![Logo for CDL Hub
Career Development Learning Hub]()

# Finding understanding and support to manage mental illness – Amira’s story[[1]](#footnote-1)

Amira is a university student in her 40s studying a postgraduate qualification in counselling. Amira moved from South Asia with her family after high school to attend university but three years later was diagnosed with depression. Amira reflects on how this condition can have a broad and diverse impact on her day-to-day life as well as her studies.

After successfully completing her first degree, Amira was invited to pursue her Honours. However, her family preferred that she enrol in a vocational qualification. Amira went against these wishes and undertook honours. This decision was a difficult one for Amira, and she was determined to push herself harder to prove that hers was the right choice – studying excessively, staying up too late, exercising for longer than she needed to and not eating adequately. At this time, Amira was also diagnosed with depression.

**Key Learning: Family members can be key influencers of students’ educational and vocational decision-making. Culture, religion and familial expectations can all have significant influence on students’ decision-making.**

Learn about the impact of mental health conditions on university study [here](https://www.adcet.edu.au/inclusive-teaching/specific-disabilities/mental-health-condition).

Amira describes her depression as being a rollercoaster of emotions that affects her every day. She describes her mental health challenges as coming with “a loss of identify and self”. Since her diagnosis, Amira has been on an incremental journey of “building herself back up”, which, in terms of education and work, has been a series of activities including volunteering, short courses, part-time work and longer courses.

**Key Learning: The varied work experiences and alternative pathways that Amira undertook reflected her capacity and context at the time, and this participation largely supported her in moving forward.**

Amira thinks that the biggest barrier to her success is herself. Amira’s condition makes her ruminate, engage in negative self-talk and devalue herself. She compares herself to others, gets frustrated by her limitations and questions her choice to continue studying.

***You want to read, you want to understand, you want to write, you want to produce, you want to be a productive member but that illness in itself, in your mind, is actually stopping you.* Amira**

Amira also sees a lack of awareness and understanding of mental health issues in the community as a problem. Amira’s journey has also been impacted by a lack of disability information, guidance, education and advocacy. Amira has also generally found a disjunct between the dialogue related to inclusive practices around disability and the reality of it.

Medical vs Social Models of Disability

The medical model sees disability as health problems that should be fixed or cured.

The social model sees impairment as expected aspects of human diversity that should be accommodated by the physical, attitudinal, communication and social environments.

Watch this short [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qhwnrthy9gc) for more information.

**Key Learning: There are social barriers to Amira’s success; that is, barriers that lie with the attitudes of others, the practice of inclusive education and the provision of disability information and support.**

Despite experiencing barriers, Amira has found the university disability support staff, policies and practices invaluable to her success in studying with disability. The access and inclusion office has been a big support for Amira as she has learnt about her rights and can talk to someone if she feels she is being misinterpreted or misjudged.

Having someone who understands and supports you makes a huge difference. You don’t realise it but if you have someone who validates your experience, that in itself is a gift. Amira

Amira also acknowledges the support of her parents, friends and colleagues who all helped her to get where she is.

**Key Learning: Amira found support from a range of sources including her university’s disability support staff, policies and practices as well as from family, friends and colleagues.**

## Implications for career development learning (CDL) in further education

* CDL that considers the role of key influencers in students’ decision-making is supportive of the unique contexts within which students are planning their futures. Involving key influencers in CDL activity might involve providing them with information (through documents, internet links or events) and consulting with them as well as the student. For students in further education, these key influencers could be parents and siblings, as well as partners and children.
* Alternative pathway courses, microcredentials, volunteering, part-time work and other options can be supportive choices for students with mental health conditions.
* Working in partnership with student support units across an institution to provide coordinated support is critical.
* CDL staff that are disability aware and confident provide an environment for CDL activity that is inclusive of students with mental health conditions.

## Implications for employers

* Flexible working conditions such as variable hours; remote, part-time and casual work; and volunteering can provide opportunities for employees to work to their maximum potential.
* Open dialogue with employees and work experience students with disability about needs and supports is important for successful outcomes.
* A coordinated approach to supporting employees with mental health conditions is critical. Line managers, the human resource unit and support services in your organisation should work in partnership to understand and support employees.
* Employers that are disability aware and confident provide an environment for CDL activity that is compliant and is inclusive of people with mental health conditions. An example of a training module is [here](https://disabilityawareness.com.au/purchase/).
* A guide to good practice in supporting students with disability in the workplace is available in the [CDL Hub](https://www.adcet.edu.au/resources/cdl-hub) for students with disability.

1. This story is the experience of one university student interviewed as part of the research project: O’Shea et al. *National Career Development Learning Hub for students with disability*. National Careers Institute Partnership grant (2021–2023). The research involved interviews and surveys with students, parents/carers and stakeholders and analysis of existing data sets. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)