



ACCOMODATING CHRONIC PAIN @ WORK

Do you feel upset or frustrated that you are unable to meet your deadlines or participate fully at work due to your chronic pain issues? Chronic pain has a widespread effect on personal, psychological, social and work life. It hinders the ability to complete tasks, makes it challenging to meet deadlines and can create negative feelings or misunderstandings at the workplace. Over time, chronic pain becomes an invisible disability creating barriers in achieving goals with the need to be self-managed on an everyday basis.

An essential aspect of self-managing chronic pain is utilizing work accommodations – every worker's right and employers duty to provide. Using good and sustainable work accommodations will not only help in managing chronic pain at work but also improve overall wellness, mental health and productivity. The goal is to manage the pain long term and establish a comfortable environment at the workplace.



TIPS FOR SUPPORT OF CHRONIC PAIN ACCOMODATION

- Honest disclosure
- Flexible and changed job design
- Replace the equipment and modify workstations
- Change the task intensity
- Break tasks into smaller tasks
- Flexibility in work hours and location
- Support groups

TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Asking for work accommodations can be a daunting task, but it all begins with the small step of disclosing your condition with the management. Communicating chronic pain issues and concerns about work help in avoiding misunderstandings and can create a strong support system.

A support system includes establishing work accommodations, and provision of resources to make work more manageable and customizable- depending on the pain condition. Accommodation is a collaborative process which requires input from both the worker and the employer, to ensure that all needs are met and an inclusive environment is created. Using work accommodations are useful for current employees with chronic pain, and for employees in a return to work program who are coming back from sick leave. In either case, it will prevent further prolonged sick leaves and redistribution of work to other employees.

WHAT IS INCLUDED IN WORK ACCOMMODATIONS

Research has shown that workers feel most productive and positive when they are working, despite suffering from chronic pain, as it helps to maintain positive mental health. Productivity at work can then be improved by making sure that there is constant communication between the management and employees and adequate accommodations can be provided. Once there is trust and communication established between the worker and management, then specific work accommodations can be put in place. Some initial accommodations include replacing current equipment and changing work station design to best fit worker needs utilizing ergonomic principles.

Depending on the job type, flexible job timings or using the ‘work from home’ initiatives are also useful work accommodations. Flexibility in schedules would help to fit in any medical or rest needs around the job timings, limiting harm to the job expectations. On the other hand, changing the overall job design with variety in tasks, permission to take work home, widespread deadlines, or customized work-rest schedule are all helpful in managing chronic pain and workload simultaneously. Similarly, breaking up large projects into smaller deadlines can help to distribute work and manage the load in the long term. Maybe fitting in a few minutes of exercise or a walk with coworkers during a break can also boost your morale and motivation to work.

Forming worker support groups with workers suffering from similar pain or other chronic illnesses can improve morale and emotional health, provide workers with a platform to share their concerns with fellow workers, and combat feeling of isolation. An unfortunate consequence of chronic pain is suffering from concurrent mental health and low self-esteem – both of which can be improved when there is a strong support system in place.

Open communication with your management and finding a middle ground for what works best for both parties is all that is needed to manage chronic pain at the workplace and establish a positive working environment.

REFERENCES

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