

# **INVISIBLE CONDITION EMPLOYER CONVERSATION GUIDE MANAGERS/HR**

This guide will give managers and HR the tools and confidence to better support people living with invisible disabilities and conditions in the workplace.



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## INTRODUCTION

This conversation guide is designed to give managers and HR the tools and confidence to better support people living with invisible disabilities and conditions in the workplace. It can be challenging to manage an invisible condition alongside a job, and there will be times when your staff will need support to manage their wellbeing, job satisfaction and productivity.

There will be varying levels of understanding and experience with invisible disabilities and conditions across your company, and this guide is about making sure that everyone has the necessary tools, resources and confidence to talk about invisible conditions.

This guide provides information on invisible conditions, phrases to help you approach conversations, tips for planning your conversations and signposting to further support for you. In addition, it is worth

considering a follow-up workshop for your manager and HR, to discuss invisible conditions together (page 7) and role-play some mock conversations.

This guide is part of the Not Every Disability is Visible campaign – which means your company has pledged its commitment to better supporting people with invisible conditions in the workplace.

This guide is one of many resources to help your company better approach invisible conditions; you can find a full list of the resources [here](#). It's important that both sides of the conversation have the confidence and resources, so we've created a conversation guide to help staff living with invisible conditions talk to [you](#). You can also read the Invisible Condition Rep guide, so you understand how that role supports you and the [campaign](#).



## DISCUSSING INVISIBLE DISABILITY

Here are some questions for you to consider in your own time or discuss with other managers as part of a training exercise to explore perceptions of invisible disability. When thinking about these questions or discussing with others, it is important to remember that your thoughts at the end of the exercise might be different from your thoughts at the start. It's all about considering the world from different perspectives and learning from the expertise of others.

### INVISIBILITY

1. Can you think about any examples of invisible disabilities or conditions?
2. People can have both an invisible and visible disability – do you think there are any barriers to discussing either type of disability?
3. People may assume that someone with an invisible condition is 'well' – what do you think some of the issues are with this assumption?
4. What percentage of people who live with a disability class their disability as invisible?

### DISABILITY VS CONDITIONS

5. Can the same disability be invisible in one person and visible in another?
6. What is the difference between a disability and a condition? And what is the difference in terms of how you support an employee with either one?

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HOW WOULD YOU TELL THE TEAM?

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CAN THE SAME DISABILITY BE INVISIBLE IN ONE PERSON AND VISIBLE IN ANOTHER?

PEOPLE CAN HAVE BOTH AN INVISIBLE AND VISIBLE DISABILITY

??

WHO WOULD YOU TALK TO?

HOW WOULD YOU APPROACH THE SITUATION?

REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS?

### REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

- 7. What do you understand about the term 'reasonable adjustments'? If you are stuck, you can find out more [here](#).
- 8. Are there any adjustments that would not be possible for some roles in your team/your company?
- 9. Do you think that reasonable adjustments should be permanent? If not, why not, and how could you alternatively manage them?
- 10. If you felt that someone was struggling at work with their invisible condition, how would you approach the conversation?

### HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT DISCUSSING INVISIBLE CONDITIONS

- 11. How would you feel if a member of your team who had been with you for a long time, suddenly revealed to you that they have an invisible condition since they started working for your company? Why might they not have told you? Would it be right to ask them why they were only just telling you?
- 12. If a member of your team asked you to tell the rest of your team about their invisible condition, on their behalf, so they could feel better understood at work – would you feel comfortable doing that? How would you tell the team? What things would you consider? Are there any things you would clarify with them beforehand?

### SUPPORT FOR YOU

If you needed support about issues surrounding invisible conditions, who would you talk to? See page 29 for more information.

# 3

## BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE

It is down to the individual as to whether or not they disclose their condition to work. Knowing about someone's invisible condition gives you the opportunity to better support them in the workplace, which promotes wellbeing and productivity.

So, creating a workplace where people feel comfortable to discuss their condition benefits both the individual and the company. However, it can be challenging to disclose a disability or condition – here are some of the common barriers to disclosure:

**NOT BEING BELIEVED:** One of the unique things of living with an invisible disability or condition is that because it cannot be seen, people might not believe you or realise how severe and wide-ranging the symptoms can be.

**BEING DIFFICULT:** People don't want to be viewed as making a fuss or being difficult by asking for support, so they might choose not to say anything. This can be harmful in the long run to the person's wellbeing.

**BEING SEEN AS LESS CAPABLE:** People with invisible conditions or

disabilities can feel pressure to work harder, to compensate for their disability or condition. Needing support in the workplace should not be confused with someone's capability to do their job – these are two different things.

**PAST NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES:** People could have had negative experiences at work or with other managers when they have asked for support so could feel concerned that this will happen again. Negative experiences outside the workplace with friends or family could also impact on what employees feel comfortable sharing.

## **PERSONAL NATURE OF THE CONVERSATION:**

At work, we mainly focus on work and not on our personal lives and health. Living with an invisible condition or disability sometimes means that your personal life collides with your professional life. It can feel challenging and sometimes emotional to talk about your health in the workplace.

Everyone is different, so not everyone with an invisible condition will identify with all or any of these barriers, but this should give you some insight into how challenging it can feel to talk about your condition at work. It should also give you confidence that if someone is talking to you about their invisible condition, they feel confident enough that you will do what you can to support them

## **REASONS FOR DISCLOSURE:**

People living with an invisible disability or condition will be at different points in their journey – they may have been born with their condition, recently diagnosed or struggling with it in new ways because of worsening symptoms. Regardless of their current situation, there are two main reasons someone will talk to you about their condition.

### **1. NEEDING SUPPORT**

At some point during their working life, someone living with an invisible disability or condition will need support at work. If someone has a disability as defined by the Equality Act 2010, employers have a duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' for them in the workplace.

If they do not fall under the definition of disability, many companies still offer adjustments that could support them in the workplace through existing policies such as flexible working, medical appointment leave or decisions on

a case-by-case basis. It might be worth checking your company's policies, so you are up to date.

As a manager, you'll have a good idea of what reasonable adjustments are possible for a particular role, and HR should be able to support you in agreeing reasonable adjustments. Asking the employee what benefits the adjustments will bring them will aid your decision-making.

It's also important to manage expectations. A reasonable adjustment for one role might be unreasonable in another role – if you can't support the request of the employee, always consider and discuss other alternative adjustments.

### **2. BEING UNDERSTOOD**

Someone might not require any reasonable adjustments: they might just want to disclose their condition to you. For some people, letting work know can be a weight off their mind or just

be for information in case they become unwell in the future. It's worth double-checking whether they do need any support at the moment and, if not, discussing how they want to discuss their condition in the future, if at all.

# 4

## USEFUL PHRASES

We can all sometimes struggle to find the words. Here are some useful phrases to help the conversation flow:

**WHAT IS IMPORTANT THAT I UNDERSTAND ABOUT YOUR CONDITION?**

This is a great open question to get the conversation started.

**WHAT CAN WE DO TO BETTER SUPPORT YOU IN THE WORKPLACE?**

If they don't make it clear, do ask them to explain what the positive impact of any adjustment will have on them.

**HOW DO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT YOUR CONDITION IN THE FUTURE?**

You could check in regularly during 1-2-1s or agree they arrange a meeting if they need one. Either way, just make sure it's clear how you communicate with each other about their condition.

**HOW DOES YOUR CONDITION IMPACT YOU AT WORK?**

This question allows you to focus on the condition at work.

**CAN I JUST CHECK MY UNDERSTANDING? SO, YOU ARE SAYING THAT...**

Reflecting back what someone has said or asking a clarification question is an excellent listening tool, helps make the person feel understood and shows that you're engaged in the conversation.

**THANK YOU FOR TALKING TO ME ABOUT THIS**

They might be worried how you feel about them, particularly if they have just disclosed a condition for the first time. So, thank them for sharing and make it clear that talking about invisible conditions in the workplace is OK and part of your company's culture.

**IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I NEED TO KNOW?**

Sometimes people leave the most important thing out of the conversation because it feels difficult to discuss, so it is worth checking in and asking if there is anything else they want to discuss. Just be mindful that if you do that at the end of the conversation, you might need to extend the meeting or book in some more time later to discuss so you don't rush it.

**NOT-SO-USEFUL PHRASES**

With the best intention, we can all say things that we don't mean or phrase badly. Here are some phrases that are best avoided around invisible conditions in general.

**I KNOW ALL ABOUT THAT CONDITION BECAUSE MY FRIEND HAS IT**

Whilst it can be nice to know that you have some experience of the condition, make sure you follow up by asking how the condition affects that particular person. No experience of a condition is the same – so take the time to understand how it affects them at work.

**COULD YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT X, Y AND Z?**

This is not necessarily the wrong approach, as long as you are asking for the right reasons. If the follow-up questions focus on how their condition affects them at work, contrast this with a question that you might be tempted to ask because you are intrigued. You might be asking something that touches on some very uncomfortable or difficult topics, so let them lead the conversation, and keep the questions focused on how their condition and symptoms relate to work.

**YOU ARE SO BRAVE/COURAGEOUS /INSPIRATIONAL**

When someone discloses their condition and how it affects them, it can make you think lots of different things about them, especially if you were not aware before that they had a disability or a condition. However, it is best that you allow the individual to define how their condition has shaped them. The individual may not always feel these things about themselves, as they experience all aspects of their disability, and this can be a complex journey. If someone wants to share their story about living with their disability or condition, you can signpost them to talk to the Invisible Condition Rep.

# 5

## PREPARING FOR A CONVERSATION

If someone wants to talk to you about their condition, here are some tips for before, during and after the conversation.

### BEFORE YOUR CONVERSATION

**MAKE TIME FOR YOUR CONVERSATION:** Make sure you've arranged a time and place that suits you both. There is no point in having a rushed conversation where all you are thinking about is getting to your next meeting, so agree a date, and put it in the diary. Choose a quiet space where you won't be disturbed if you can.

**WHAT DO THEY WANT TO TELL YOU?:** It might be worth asking them to briefly outline what they want to talk about so you can be best prepared and seek advice from HR if you have any questions beforehand.

**PREPPING FOR YOUR CONVERSATION:** You can use the Notes page, page 23, to prep for the conversation using the prompts. Their condition might affect them in lots of different ways, so remember to keep focused on how the condition affects them at work.

**REMOTE WORKING:** If your conversation is online via Teams or Zoom, we suggest you have your video on. If you can see someone's face, it is easier to tell if they have not understood what you have said. However, it's important to do whatever your employee is most comfortable with. Also, internet quality can vary, so if there are time delays or poor video quality, moving over to audio only is fine too.

## DURING YOUR CHAT

### ASK OPEN QUESTIONS:

Someone might find it difficult talking about what is going on for them, so asking some open questions could help. Open questions avoid 'yes'/'no' responses. You could ask:

- Tell me what's been going on
- What support do you feel like you need in the workplace?

See page 15 for further useful (and not-so-useful) phrases.

**EMOTIONS:** Talking about a chronic condition can be emotional. Here are some phrases that could be useful if someone is getting upset:

- That sounds really difficult
- It's OK, take your time, I'm listening
- When you are ready, go on

### NOT SURE HOW TO ANSWER SOMETHING?:

Remember, if you're not sure of the answer to something, just say so. You could check in with HR and come back to them afterwards.

### FINISHING THE

**CONVERSATION:** It would be useful to point out when there is 5/10 minutes left. This helps you manage their expectations and gives you a chance to do all your signposting. Remember, you can use page 23 of this guide to note down anything you might want to signpost to.

**QUESTION TIME:** Allow some time for you to ask any questions you have. The main focus of your questions should be on how their condition affects them at work.

### CHECKING IN, GOING

**FORWARD:** It's worth thinking about how you want to discuss their condition in the future. Options include regular check-ins or leaving it for them to put in a meeting if there is anything further they need to discuss. Having this conversation will help manage both of your expectations.

## AFTER THE MEETING

### LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF:

If you need it, take 5/10 minutes after the call before you get back into work. If you have experience with an invisible condition yourself, the conversations could stir up your own experiences. There is more information on support for you on page 29.

**NOTES:** It's worthwhile writing up notes on the meeting when it is fresh in your mind. Remember to include any reasonable adjustments you have agreed, questions you need to follow up with HR or any policies or information you agreed to send them.

**SAFEGUARDING:** If there are any safeguarding issues you need to raise, please do so straight away, following your individual company process(es).

Please note that some people might not want a face-to-face conversation. It's possible that someone might email you with questions. There is no reason why you can't support them over email, particularly where it is a simple signposting question. However, if it is more than signposting, you may have some follow-up questions that are worth following up in person.

# 6

## YOUR NOTES

This page will help you capture important points from your conversation.

### ABOUT THE CONDITION

### REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

## KEEPING IN TOUCH

## NEXT STEPS (E.G. SIGNPOSTING, POLICIES, FOLLOW-UP WITH HR)

**IT MIGHT FEEL  
AWKWARD AT FIRST,  
BUT PEOPLE ARE MORE  
UNDERSTANDING OF  
THINGS WHEN THEY ARE  
MORE INFORMED.**

**BECKY, LIVING WITH AN  
INVISIBLE CONDITION**

**MY MANAGER'S APPROACH IS VERY  
MUCH THAT MY HEALTH IS THE  
MOST IMPORTANT THING.**

**SHE SAYS, "WE WANT TO SUPPORT  
YOU, ANY WAY WE CAN". AND THAT  
ENCOURAGES ME AND OTHER  
STAFF TO BE OPEN ABOUT THESE  
THINGS EARLY ON, SO THAT THEY  
DON'T ESCALATE.**

**ROSALEEN, LIVING WITH AN  
INVISIBLE CONDITION**



## MOCK SCENARIOS

Either as part of a workshop or as a self-reflection, consider how you would approach the following scenarios. Consider the pros and cons of different approaches and where you might go for further support or information:

- You hear from another colleague that one of your direct reports has an invisible condition that they have not disclosed with you. What, if anything, do you do with this information?
- One of your direct reports has just returned to work after a long period of sick leave due to their invisible disability/condition. How would you go about supporting them in their return to work? Are there any reasonable adjustments you might discuss with them?
- An employee asks for some adjustments that you don't think are reasonable. How do you deal with the situation?
- An employee is unhappy with the support you are offering them and is saying they feel discriminated against – what do you do?
- How would you describe the Not Every Disability is Visible campaign and why invisible condition inclusivity is important to:
  - a. an individual?
  - b. your team?
  - c. the organisation?



## SUPPORT FOR YOU

Here are some of the resources that you might find useful.

### HR GUIDE

Essential reading for anyone in HR, this outlines your role in implementing the campaign.

### YOUR COMPANY'S EMPLOYEE-ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME

Some companies have an employee-assistance programme which offers support, such as counselling. Many employee-assistance programmes offer wider support, such as financial advice or couples counselling

### CONDITION-SPECIFIC CHARITIES

You are not expected to know every condition out there, and your colleague may not tell you what condition they have, but you could suggest seeing if there is a charity for their condition. Many charities have resources offering advice for managing conditions in the workplace. Many also have helplines for people to call for information and/or emotional support.

### CROHN'S & COLITIS UK

If your colleague has Crohn's or Colitis, please signpost them to:

#### VISIT

[crohnsandcolitis.org.uk](http://crohnsandcolitis.org.uk)

#### HELPLINE

0300 222 5700

#### EMAIL

[helpline@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk](mailto:helpline@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk)

#### LIVE CHAT

[crohnsandcolitis.org.uk](http://crohnsandcolitis.org.uk)

## MENTAL HEALTH

The following resources might be useful

### MIND

A leading UK mental health charity

### SAMARITANS

A leading UK mental health charity

### CICRA

For children with Crohn's or colitis and their families

### EVERY MIND MATTERS

A wide range of NHS-approved information and resources

### MENTAL HEALTH UK

Support across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

## WELLBEING

If your colleague has Crohn's or colitis and is struggling with their mental health, this wellbeing guide specific to these conditions could be useful.

### WELLBEING GUIDE

[www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/about-crohns-and-colitis/publications/mental-wellbeing](http://www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/about-crohns-and-colitis/publications/mental-wellbeing)

## GENERAL SUPPORT

Your main aim is to focus on their invisible conditions, but if someone needs legal or financial advice you can signpost to:

### CITIZENS ADVICE

[www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)  
Helpline (England):  
03444 111 444  
Helpline (Wales):  
03444 77 20 20  
Webchat: via website

### ACCESS TO WORK

Support at work for if you have a disability or health condition

[www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

### ACAS

Provide information and guidance around occupational health  
[www.acas.org.uk/using-occupational-health-at-work](http://www.acas.org.uk/using-occupational-health-at-work)

### REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

Information and advice what reasonable adjustments are available to you  
[www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers](http://www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers)

### BENEFITS

[www.gov.uk/universal-credit/other-financial-support](http://www.gov.uk/universal-credit/other-financial-support)

### CORONAVIRUS AND EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

[www.gov.uk/coronavirus/worker-support](http://www.gov.uk/coronavirus/worker-support)



[CROHNSANDCOLITIS.ORG.UK](https://www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk)

[NOTEVERYDISABILITYISVISIBLE.ORG.UK](https://www.noteverydisabilityisvisible.org.uk)

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