

Mental Health:

How To Respectfully Support Employees With Disabilities

As a clinical social worker and a person with a disability, Mark Chaney-Gay's biggest piece of advice to employers is to let employees with disabilities "be the expert of their own experience."

Ahead of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, DiversityInc spoke with Chaney-Gay to learn what advice he had for employers when thinking about their employees with disabilities, from a mental health, accommodation and support perspective.

About Mark

Chaney-Gay grew up in the foster care system and had some good social workers who influenced his career path.

"I've always had a passion for helping people and mental health and so I just kind of fell into the social work space when I started college," he said.

Today, Chaney-Gay works as a clinical social worker in the Los Angeles area and also provides therapy through his private practice, Chaney Therapy. He is very open about his experience living at the intersection of being disabled and being a gay man. He has learned from his lived experiences to be more understanding and empathetic of others.

His experiences have influenced his approach to talking about mental health with others as well.

"Knowing that I live with a disability, that is a label, it is a lived experience, it's taught me personally to be very open to accommodation and finding a path that works for you," he said. "And when I think about that in relation to the work that I do, it taught me to be open and that people are experts in their own experiences and in their own journeys."

No amount of education, certification or lived experience as

a person with a disability will make Chaney-Gay understand or see all of the nuances of a given individual. He believes his patients can help him learn more about his job as a therapist.

"My job is to help support you and identify the strengths and the skills that you already have so that you can do it when I'm gone," he said. "I do want to work myself out of a job when I start working with people. I want to get them to a place where they're doing better and they're feeling like they overcame the things that brought them into therapy or in need of a social worker and that they don't need me anymore."



Mental Stress for People With Disabilities

A study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that adults with disabilities are five times more often to experience mental distress than adults without disabilities.

When DiversityInc asked Chaney-Gay about this, he said he couldn't generalize and speak to the mental health of every person with a disability, but could speak from his own experience with mental health as a person with a physical disability.

Living with cerebral palsy, Chaney-Gay said he has experienced depression, anxiety and PTSD, adding that mental health issues could arise because they are occurring on top of a physical disability.

"Having a medical diagnoses increases the prevalence of mental health issues because if you're physically not feeling well, it's really easy for that to correlate to your mental health," he said.

People with physical disabilities can also face problems with inclusion, discrimination and having mobility challenges that impact how they bathe, get dressed in the morning or get to the store to get groceries, all of which can impact mental health.



Let People Be the 'Expert of Their Experience'

While it's important for employers to think about mental health for employees with disabilities and all employees, Chaney-Gay said employers should not ask someone about their disability. Beyond any potential legal issues, employers should use supportive language when talking to an employee who might have a disability. He said examples of supportive language include:

"I want you to know that if there's anything you need, I'm here for you."

"If there's any sort of support you might need as you take on this job, I want you to know we can figure that out together."

Some employers might know an employee has a disability from their job application or find out from the HR department and take the initiative to bring up a person's disability to them and brainstorm solutions with HR on how to accommodate that person. Chaney-Gay said to avoid this as it could put the employee in a defensive place and take away the power of autonomy from the employee.

"If you're an employer and you're working with someone who you think might have a disability, let them be the expert in their experience because every disability is different," he said, adding that one of his favorite quotes is "don't assume someone's ability based on the presence of a disability."

"Don't assume that they can't do a job or that they need support and need accommodations because they may not. They've been living with this disability or this diagnoses their whole life [in many cases] and they may have learned how to manage it in a way that works perfectly for them."