The Disclosure Decision

Would you tell your boss about your mental illness? A cult TV drama has brought this dilemma to our screens – and with one in five South Africans likely to experience a mental crisis, *Glynis Horning* considers your options.

US ACTRESS CLAIRE Danes, who plays CIA agent Carrie Mathison in the political TV drama *Homeland,* has become the poster child for emotional disorders. She succeeds in her career – identifying terrorists – not just in spite of her concealed bipolar mood disorder (BMD), but because of the flashes of creative brilliance it seems to spark in her. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), one in five South Africans will develop a mental condition at some stage in their lives. Those who do suffer from one might find the TV series' first-season ending disturbing: Unable to convince her superiors that her chaotic theories have merit, Carrie undergoes a manic meltdown – eventually, after her boss discovers that she has a condition, she is suspended for not disclosing it. Danes has been praised for the accuracy of her performance as someone whose judgment (and job) is affected by BMD. But Carrie's story raises an important question: Should you disclose your mental condition at work?

The Big Taboo

Zelda Schoeman, 40, kept her BMD to herself when she joined a Joburg education institution four years ago. "I didn't want to risk the stigma of it. I was coping well on medication and had been in remission for more than 10 years," she says. Zelda performed well at work, until she was put under pressure by a multimillion-rand web design project. "I was pushed hard to complete it. My leave and sick leave were cancelled and I crumbled in the face of unreasonable deadlines. Once, I found myself staring blankly at my computer screen for hours," she says. Her company's occupational health and safety department sent Zelda to a psychiatrist, who booked her off for burnout, but her doctor's notes were disregarded. "I got SMSs telling me to return to work, even though I'd been booked off – in the end, I had no choice but to disclose my BMD." Telling the truth had consequences. "My salary and medical aid benefits were revoked, and my application for permanent health insurance was just ignored. They wouldn't accept that BMD was an illness."

Kate Moekoena,* 31, was happy in her job in a government department in Pretoria. But she soon found she went through phases where she'd be "super-charged": "My work would be perfect, and I'd demand the same of others. I could be a bit arrogant." But after a bad episode, Kate was hospitalised – there, she was diagnosed with BMD. "Once I started taking medication, my moods levelled," she says, but word of her condition leaked to her colleagues. "My work is still up to scratch, but even now, people think of me as unstable, and

whisper about me. I have withdrawn and cocooned myself. I need this job, so I mostly just get on with it, but the only person I can speak to openly is my therapist."

To Tell or Not to Tell?

Disclosure is a delicate issue, according to SADAG operations director Cassey Chambers. "There have been some positive responses to people sharing their illness; I've seen cases where companies have put up posters, handed out flyers and invited an expert speaker to create awareness. But in too many cases, people still feel left out, isolated or teased. Each person should decide for themselves whether to share their diagnosis."

The first question to ask yourself, says Joburg-based clinical psychologist Colinda Linde, PhD, is, "Why are you planning to disclose your condition? Because you need time off to see a doctor, want someone to talk to or just want support on bad days? Then ask, Will these needs be met by the person I'll be disclosing to? Finally, ask yourself, How much do they actually need to know?"

Someone in a human resources role might be more supportive than a colleague, but not necessarily, says Linde. Each person you tell will have their own opinions and biases. You must be comfortable in your choice, and informed about your rights.

Legally Speaking

You aren't obliged by law to disclose your condition, says attorney and disability specialist Peter Strasheim, owner of DLM Labour and HR Management Consulting in Joburg. "Disclosure has many risks – you may face people's unfounded fears, ignorance, unfair stereotyping and even discrimination. Weigh all the facts, then talk to a trusted friend, doctor or labour consultant." But disclosure can have benefits, too, Strasheim says. "A mental illness has disabling effects, so if you're suitably qualified, employers may welcome your application, as the Employment Equity Act (EEA) requires them to recruit a number of disabled employees." The EEA also compels companies to provide medically recommended "reasonable accommodations" that help you function, such as flexible working hours or a quieter office.

Meryl du Plessis, a lecturer in public law at the University of Cape Town, says the EEA also prohibits unfair discrimination on the basis of disability, and the Labour Relations Act safeguards employees against unfair dismissal. She and Strasheim advise caution, however: "It might be enough to ask for support from a psychologist through your company's employee-assistance programme once you are employed, consult an occupational health practitioner or see a nursing sister," he says. "They must respect your privacy."

If you feel your employer has let you down, as with Zelda and Kate, you can turn to the law. But that vindication might not compensate for the distress you have experienced if you already suffer from depression. Zelda chose to take legal action, and as a result, her company's HR policies were revisited. "I could go back, but I don't want to work within that environment. I'm just relieved that through all of this, others with similar circumstances are now, hopefully, being fairly accommodated."

After her ordeal, Carrie Mathison stayed home to grow her vegetable garden – and like her, Zelda is at home, doing art projects. "I can't expose myself to any discrimination again. The price is too high." ◐

**Names have been changed.*

How to Disclose

IF YOU'RE APPLYING FOR A JOB:

1. It's unfair not to disclose if you are unable to do the job properly, says Linda Trump, head of the Johannesburg Bipolar Association.
2. If there are health questions in the application form, leave them blank, advises Strasheim.
3. You can state that you have a disability, but are not required to give details of the diagnosis, effects, or medication taken.
4. Show that you are managing the disorder – focus on the abilities or experience you can bring to the job.

IF YOU'RE ALREADY EMPLOYED:

1. Ask for your HR department's assurance of confidentiality in a private meeting.
2. Tell them your condition has become disabling, without giving the actual diagnosis. Strasheim suggests referring to your condition as "stress-related," or saying it is "a biochemical imbalance."
3. Request your right to "reasonable accommodations" recommended by a qualified health professional.
4. If you're dismissed after disclosing and no attempt has been made to accommodate you, this is unfair dismissal. Remedies include reinstatement or compensation. The CCMA can award you up to 12 months' compensation. It's likely that this is unfair discrimination, too, for which the Labour Court can award 24 months' compensation.

To contact the SA Depression and Anxiety Group, call ☎ 0800 567 567 or send an SMS to 31393. You can also call the Bipolar Helpline ☎ 0800 708 090, or visit *bipolar.co.za*. SADAG also offers awareness training courses for employers.

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