STAY Tuned Ep. 16- “Suffering in Silence? How to obtain mental health accommodations at work and school” With Debbie Nicolellis

[00:00:00]

**Mei:** Welcome back to STAY Tuned, Supporting Transition Aged Youth. This podcast is brought to you by the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at UMass Chan Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, and in partnership with our research sponsor, the National Institute for Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research.

I'm your host, Mei. And I'm your host, Emily. And today we're joined by Debbie Nicolellis, who is one of our own here at Transitions ACR. Do you want to introduce yourself a little more, Debbie?

**Debbie:** Sure. Thanks for having me. I'm Debbie Nicolellis, and I'm the training director for all things hype and in the transitions to adulthood center for research and I'm super excited to be here.

**Emily:** Yay, we're so excited to have you. So the two of us recently developed some learning and working center courses. They're called engaging young adults and work in school and work in school resources for young adults.

And these courses are designed for mental health providers or young adults [00:01:00] themselves to help them be successful in work and school. So Debbie, do you want to talk a little bit about the goals for this project and why this population is so important to focus on?

**Debbie:** Oh, yeah. And I miss working with you on that.

It was really fun to work together. I know. You know, doing those courses. Me too.

Yeah. So Emily, um, you and I did a lot of work on this series of courses. They're actually part of a series called Promoting Young Adult Success in School and Work. Free training for providers. And I'll give a caveat to that.

They are designed for providers, but really can be helpful to young adults, for anyone who is supporting young adults around work and school. So, This was super important because young adults with mental health conditions want to be going to work in school. They want to be doing all the things that their peers are doing, whether or not they have a mental health, um, concern.

And, um, oftentimes our [00:02:00] services aren't set up to promote work and school, don't really have a lot of options for supporting young adults. To go to work and go to school and be successful there. So these courses are designed to Um, do two things. One is to support the engagement of young adults in work and school.

Um, so that first one, engaging young adults in work and school is really around sort of saying like, why is this important? Why is it so important to engage young adults with mental health conditions in work and school? And it's super important because we know through the research that upwards of 86 percent of young adult college students, for example, Um, with mental health conditions will drop out or stop out of school at some point due to a mental health condition and oftentimes because they don't have enough supports to stay in school and [00:03:00] the employment rates for young adults with mental health conditions are like super low, really, really low.

Um, and so we want to have an impact on that and support providers who oftentimes don't have the training that they need, may not have the support that they need to, um, support young adults in work in school. We want to give them some information. We want to give them some examples and we want to give them some strategies to support young adults as they go to work, go to school, do all the things.

so that first course Engaging Young Adults in Work and School, um, really has to do with, um, the why, as we've talked about here, and then gets into the strategies of supporting young adults, so there's some teaching in there, there are resources in the course that the Providers can use and share with the young adults that they're working with.

And [00:04:00] then some program examples like programs that are doing it really well, how are they doing it? So that the providers have an example to look toward and to kind of see, well, what are other programs doing that might work for us as well? So we really wanted to kind of have an impact on how You know, mental health providers, caseworkers, social workers, all the people out there who are really trying their best to support young adults as they kind of move from, you know, high school to what's beyond high school, whether it's college, whether it's other kinds of training, whether that's work, um, to give them some resources, some information, and some examples to go from.

That's, that was our hope. And then, Emily, you helped me put together this other course as well, um, that is the, um, resources. Work and school resources for young adults and it it has apostrophes around the [00:05:00] U. If anybody's looking at it. Um, both of these courses, by the way, can be found on our hype careers dot org website.

And I know Mei and Emily, you might put the link somewhere where people can grab it. But Um, these courses are free. And this second course is also designed for providers. But the interesting thing about this course, and I think Emily, you were a big, uh, you had a big impact on this, is that we Developed a course that has mostly young adult facing or young adult friendly resources.

So any young adult really can go in there. Family members can go in there, um, to the course and grab these resources that they might need to support a young adult. Um, who is going to work and school, and so that course is really set up to support, um, you know, youth who are looking at school, [00:06:00] choosing, um, getting, keeping, and even leaving school, and the same with work, choosing, getting, keeping, and leaving work.

So, like, what do I need to know? What are the resources out there that can really help me with deciding? what school to go to or what kind of job I want to get into the school or training or job that I'm, I'm looking to get into to keep, which is like kind of where the work begins. You know, like once, once we get into a job, we're like, yes, I made it.

And then you're like, Oh no, there's so much that I have to figure out and learn and do. And that's kind of where the real work begins. And I think that may be where. You know, a lot of programs and providers are really looking for the most support in is how do I support young adults to be successful in work in school?

So there are a lot of like cool resources, tip sheets and articles and [00:07:00] webinars, you know, that can really speak to how do you stay in there? How do you succeed in work in school? Um, how can you do that? And really be there for as long as you want to be there. And then when you're, when you're feeling done, um, how do you leave?

How do you leave successfully? And I don't think that's something that gets talked about a lot. How to leave a job well, um, in order to have references and to be able to go to the next job feeling like, you know, you've dotted all your I's and crossed all your T's as they used to say, or like put a ribbon on it.

Um, and, you know, in the same with school, actually, to leave school well, whether you're leaving school to go to grad school or to go to work, or if you're leaving school to go to another program, um, or if you're stopping out for a little bit to take care of your [00:08:00] mental health, how do you do those things well? And there are resources in the course that help providers help their young adults, um, to do that. And the resources that are in there are young adult friendly. So they can directly share the course. They can directly share those resources. It's pretty cool. Um, the other thing we have in there is career decision making, um, that we have kind of toward the end of the course.

And that's on purpose. A lot of times young adults aren't coming in saying, what do I want to do in the long term? They're saying, I need a job now. I, I want to be in school now. And if that's their question early on, you can go straight to that section and just grab it. If, um, if the young adult is really thinking about it for a while and like trying out different jobs and trying out different kind of school situations and then later is thinking, all right, all right, [00:09:00] now I have all of this experience behind me.

I need to be able to pull all this together and figure out where it's all going. They can also grab that material then. Um, one of the things that I really like about these courses is that we set them up to be one, you know, self registering. So you just go in there, register yourself and, and, and take the course.

Um, and it's also set up to accommodate anybody at any level of, like, desire for learning this stuff. So you can go in and grab a resource, you can go in and look at it all, um, you can use it in your work with young adults, you can find resources for yourself if you're just interested, for example, in keeping a job, you can go straight to that section and just look at that.

Or you can look at it all. So it's pretty fun. You can also get a certificate, um, [00:10:00] of participation, no matter how much of the course you've participated in. So if that's, um, helpful to you or important to you, you can grab that as well.

**Emily:** Yeah. Yeah. We spent a lot of time and effort making the courses.

Um, and it's exciting too, because the second one, the one about resources, it like just got officially published. Very recently, um, yeah, and we'll definitely put the links to those in, um, the description because yeah, if anyone is interested in checking them out, there's a lot of really great stuff on there.

**Debbie:** Yeah. Well, I'm hope, hoping that it's helpful. And there's also a place to give feedback. We're always looking for people's feedback and thoughts about the course so we can keep making it better and better. Um, so there's a survey at the end of the course that everyone is welcome to take and tell us what they thought about it and give helpful suggestions or topics that they'd like to see in something [00:11:00] new that we have produced.

So let us know what you think about it.

**Mei:** I can tell just hearing you explain everything, Debbie, that everything was so intentional that went into this. Um, and I just love how it's not, it's not it's not really a one size fits all type of program.

**Debbie:** Yeah, I mean, it'll feel less like a program to people because it really is like options for sources.

Yeah. Right.

**Mei:** They can sort of pick and choose what. They resonate with what they think, um, might stick and be most helpful, which I think is great. Um, and then the other piece I was wondering about was, obviously, you know, if you're a young adult with a mental health condition, But and school and work is really important to you.

So you want to, you want to be tackling sort of both those things. Like how do I figure out my school slash career, whatever, you know, thing you're focusing on while also helping [00:12:00] myself out with my mental health condition. So I was wondering what are your thoughts on balancing the coursework while also, you know, managing your mental health condition and how can those two things work in tandem together?

**Debbie:** Hmm. Such an important question, isn't it? I mean, this is what so many young adults are thinking about when they're looking at going to school, like post high school, but maybe even in high school. it's, it's also what families and other supporters are thinking about. Providers are wondering, like, how do I help young adults who are kind of thinking about this?

So, you know, you're really asking about like, how do people manage both? Um, And, you know, this reminds me of a kind of conversation around the resources on campus that can be helpful. And I say on campus, but by campus, I also mean any training program that somebody's [00:13:00] in. Um, you know, we often do a lot of work in, um, college campuses, but it doesn't just refer to that.

Um, you know, one of the things that I think about is using any and all resources that you can, um, to really make sure that you are not, you know, just feeling like you have to do it alone. Um, oftentimes young adults with mental health conditions kind of feel like they're out on a ship out there by themselves that nobody really understands.

And there are resources on campus that are designed to help. Campuses are very, very aware, especially post COVID, that young adults are often struggling, um, and that the rates of mental health conditions and, and just, you know, Mental health concerns of one kind or another are really high for folks that people got really isolated, [00:14:00] um, traumatized during COVID.

Things just changed a lot. And people are more interested in talking about the symptoms that they have, the experiences that they have, um, and, you know, But may not realize the resources that are there for them. So I want to talk maybe a little bit about the two different kinds of resources, if I can say it that way, um, on campuses and in training programs, they're sort of Mental health condition or disability related ones, and then just sort of generic like everybody can take advantage of them kinds of resources So there are certain resources that attend to very specifically mental health concerns and other Disabilities, and I put that in air quotes.

If anybody's listening and not seeing seeing us. Can anybody see us people? Some people. Okay, so the [00:15:00] air quotes I'm putting around disability. So when I say disability, it's kind of a legal term, um, for conditions that. have a real impact on the way we live, we learn, uh, we work, all of the things that that might have an impact and, um, kind of either stop us or have a negative kind of impact on the ways that we live, learn, work, socialize, all the things.

And, um, There are, uh, for example, I, I think everybody knows on a college campus there's often the counseling center or counseling services and, um, so most people are familiar with that and know that they could go there and those are, um, often kind of centered around short term concerns, but usually have someone who can help you get connected to a longer term group.

You know, um, counselor or therapist if you're interested in [00:16:00] that, if you feel like you want that or need that. Um, so definitely make your way over there and talk to those folks if that's something that, um, you think would be helpful for you. The other thing is, um, disability services. And not everyone with a mental health condition or, um, you know, or, or kind of thinking about their mental health, realize that that could be a resource.

Um, that could be super useful to them and often feel like that resource isn't for me. That's for somebody else. That might be, you know, for somebody who's using a wheelchair or has other kinds of physical disabilities, but that's not necessarily true. Um, those resources are there for any condition that can have a negative effect on somebody's ability to learn.

They're there to provide. equal access to education. And that means that they can look at how the condition [00:17:00] that you have impacts you at school and can also arrange for something called academic accommodations. And this is super cool. We have a couple of tip sheets at our Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research.

And Um, that attend to this that I think are really good. They're, they're also called tools for school, which I love the name of. So those, um, accommodations are meant to level the playing field and to mitigate the effects of the disability. So what that means is so that they're not, Negatively affecting you so much, right? So that the good student in you, as you got into the program, the good student in you can do your thing and the effects of the disability are sort of taken out of the picture or at least minimized.

So an example of, I mean, there are lots and lots of examples of [00:18:00] accommodations in the academic world. But it could be something as simple as, um, getting some assistive technology, like, um, you know, a smart pen or a recorder so that you can, if your disability affects you in, in a way, like you have a hard time hearing information and writing it down, or you have a hard time kind of keeping up with the speed of the professor, you might be able to get a recorder of some kind.

And then some of the new. Uh, assistive technology out there is like amazing. It helps you to take notes, but you can also just sort of note that, hey, I, I, I lost where I was here. Come back here and it'll be recorded for you. Um, and you can just touch your paper at that one spot and hear the recording of what was happening in that one spot.

That's a super cool, easy thing for the university to provide. It's basically university [00:19:00] provided supports. It could be other things, like if anxiety gets in the way of sitting in a class for an hour or three hours, however long your class is, that you might be able to get accommodations to take breaks or to sit by the door so that you can jump out for a minute and catch your breath and then come back in.

Um, you might even be able to, have your professor kind of give you notice that they're going to call on you, if that kind of thing prevents you from participating in a class, just knowing that like, Emily, I'm going to ask you a question next, and then Mei, I'm coming to you, can be enough for you to sort of, you know, Steal yourself or get your thoughts together.

Um, and participate in a way that helps you through. So accommodations are really supports that the university would provide. Um, and the disability services office sometimes called accessibility services. Honestly, they're [00:20:00] called something different at every campus. Um, they will not only approve accommodations like that, but they will help make them happen.

So they'll provide a letter. Um, to the professor and it doesn't say anything about what kind of disability that you have, but rather that you have an accommodation that has been approved and the professor has to provide it. Um, it's a legally mandated thing. So, um, they really help, um, you know, make those accommodations happen.

It's an amazing service to take advantage of. And then there's the non disability related ones that you should also take advantage of, right? Like tutoring services and career services and, um, writing services. There are lots of services on campus and student organizations where you can, you know, get to know people and feel engaged in a part of things.

I just think there's so much going on, especially colleges, [00:21:00] um, that students can take advantage of. I don't know if that's exactly what you were asking me, but that's what I think of.

**Mei:** No, yeah, that was an extremely well put answer. And yeah, I answered my questions beautifully. Um, I do, I have like another question I just thought of, and it's okay, if you don't know the answer, I can just cut this out.

But I thought I would put it out there. Um, because so I had accommodations in undergrad, and the way I was able to secure them was my psychiatrist wrote me a letter, I sent that to disability services. And then you know, that Um, I, I got my accommodations that way, but I'm wondering for those who don't have a mental health care provider, how do they go about, um, receiving accommodations without like a doctor's note or something like that?

I'm just not familiar.

**Debbie:** That's a really good question. Um, So right in order to use disability services or accessibility services, you, you [00:22:00] usually have to prove that you have a condition that kind of warrants that support like they need that documentation to say. We serve this group of people, and this is, this is what we're doing.

And, um, so students often do have to provide some kind of documentation. So that can be from any doctor. It doesn't have to be from a psychiatrist, but it might be from a doctor who maybe has given a diagnosis, maybe is prescribing medications, or whatever. is supporting the person in one way or another around that diagnosis.

It could be any other mental health professional, usually. I suppose it could be a rehabilitation counselor. I'm not sure about that, but it could be any provider who can say this person has a a mental health condition, and it affects them in school in these ways. I think one of [00:23:00] the most important things to do when you're talking to your provider is to really discuss with them, this is how You know, I'm impacted at school.

This is what I know from high school. This is what I know from my experiences in college or at work. These are the ways that I know. Like, for example, if somebody's taking a medication that makes them super sleepy in the morning, um, they might say, I can't get up at seven for an eight o'clock class. I just can't with this medication.

Is there, you know, can you note that? And then oftentimes disability services. Can give priority registration for later classes so that the student who is impacted in that way isn't like failing through the class because they, they literally are just trying to treat their condition. Um, so that's a really good question.

I think the more you can work with your provider around what you know, what your family knows, what, [00:24:00] you know, you, Experience, um, in the classroom and other settings, and the more they can say this is how we see this person being impacted, the better, because then, you know, they have it on authority that, you know, you need this kind of accommodations.

**Mei:** Right, right. And yeah, I think like for those who haven't had that much experience, you know, working or addressing their mental health with a provider, it can feel really scary to be vulnerable. Um, so I don't, I don't blame anyone for not being forthcoming with any information, but yeah. I think over time, the more time you spend with a provider opening up the more you'll realize how helpful vulnerability and honesty can be, at least in my experience.

**Debbie:** Yeah.

**Emily:** Yeah. I agree. And I do think that, cause like you had mentioned earlier, Debbie, like the counseling center, usually college campuses will have a center. And [00:25:00] Um, I mean, I think for the most part, I actually don't know if every school is like this, but I know when I was in undergrad, like, the counseling center that was completely free to us for students.

So, I think that could also be a really great way, like, if someone, you know, doesn't necessarily want to talk to their doctor, or, like, they don't have a therapist outside of school, or, you know, whatever it may be, then that could be a good spot to start and, like, go talk to the counselors on campus. And then.

You know, work with them and then they can also, though they probably work closely with the, you know, disability, um, office anyway, so they could probably be a good, like, in for you if, you know, if you're trying to get accommodations.

**Debbie:** I think that's such a good point like all of these services are paid for when you pay your tuition.

It's like the tuition and fees and it's all wrapped in there that these services are part of that so you're not usually paying anything in addition. There may be certain [00:26:00] services that have additional costs attached to them but disability services is not one of them. And usually counseling services kind of straight up.

Counseling services may not be one of those either, so that's a really good point. And I appreciate what you're saying about the vulnerability of this, Mei. It's so true if you can talk about what you're struggling with, those kinds of things can actually, um, help you. potentially get you supports that can help you kind of get through those struggles and really make it in school and work. Otherwise, it's just, it's just hard.

**Mei:** Right. And just as hard. Well, another thing I'm thinking of too now is let's say you don't have a mental health care provider.

You have like a PCP or someone that you'd go to, and then you want to bring up, um, Your mental health struggles that you're experiencing. A lot of the time, I feel like at least at my annual physicals, my doctor never takes a lot of time asking me about my mental health. There's like a couple of questions maybe, but I feel like [00:27:00] you'd really have to advocate for yourself to carve out that time during your appointment.

Which I don't know. I feel like most doctors are kind of on a rush. In my experience, at least. But I feel like it can definitely be a challenge to get your doctor to listen to those mental health concerns and spend time on it, um, and really, like, take those things seriously to the point where they'd be like, okay, let's think about how we can address these things and not just, like, fill a prescription for you for some Zoloft or something and send you on your way.

I might be projecting here, but,

**Debbie:** um, yeah, I mean, I think that's a real issue, right? Everybody is fighting for time for, you know, effort and, you know, the disability services office. And if you're in a training program, it might be a person, right? Who handles this, but they'll often have a form or an example.

A form that a provider might fill [00:28:00] out. And that might be the opportunity that you take as a student to say, to send it to the office and say, you know, I'd like a quick consult, even if it's by phone, you know, telehealth is suddenly more available because of COVID, right? So I'd, I'd really like to have a quick consult around filling out this form in a way that helps me get through school.

And. Um, you know, that might be the opportunity is filling out that form or whatever paperwork that disability services is asking for. Or even if it's a list of things, they're going to want to know how does it affect this person's life. functioning, right? Like, how does it affect them in school? And the young adult might not know right away, but it's helpful to start to think about, like, what have I struggled with in school?

What do I struggle with at work or at home? Is focus and concentration something that I really struggle with? Am I [00:29:00] not getting things done on time? Do I get so anxious that it's hard for me to participate or stay in, um, in class or wherever? Um, You know, what are the things that I've noticed that I struggle with?

And to really start to talk about those so that the doctor has an idea, because the doctor or mental health provider also has never been to school with you. Um, so they may not know, they might have kind of some ideas about how it might affect you and you might have talked about those things in the past, but if you haven't, now's a good time to think about like, what is it like for me at school?

And, um, You know, what is it like for me in other parts of my life? How do I think this might be affecting me? It's, it's often you don't think, you know, it's like a fish. It doesn't know it's in water, right? You don't really think about it as being like attached to the mental health condition. But you might think about, what do I struggle with?

What's hard for me? And talk about those [00:30:00] things and then they might help you put those pieces together.

**Mei:** Yeah, that's a really great point. I like the analogy of like, you are climbing your own mountain, and a lot of the times you can see someone else climbing their own mountain a lot more easily than you can see your own mountain.

I love, I love putting it that way. You only see the rocks

**Debbie:** in front of you, right? Yeah, so that's a good point. That's a really good point.

**Emily:** I think they're also kind of touching on something that, um, something else that we wanted to talk about, which it, it relates to like your, you actually have like a new tip sheet that came out recently called, um, accommodations at work.

What do I need to know? Which we can also put a link to in the description. Um, but I think, um, You know, with work, but also with school, um, I think a lot of the times people have, you know, they struggle to figure out whether or not their mental health condition is, you know, like, quote, unquote, serious enough.

Um, so [00:31:00] I was wondering, like, if you had any advice for someone who's going through that and who, you know, they know that they're struggling with some things, but maybe they're not quite to that level where they think that they can or like, you know. Are able to get services. Um, like, do you have any, you know, tips for people who are going through that?

**Debbie:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. That tip sheet is was sort of a labor of love. I really wanted to kind of have another piece kind of the other side of things, we have the accommodations at school, those tools for school, and then I really, um, realized we needed one for accommodations at work. And the same kind of principle applies.

I mean, a lot of this comes under the Americans with Disabilities Act, um, that protects people with disabilities from discrimination at the workplace, and lots of. Of places that we interact with, [00:32:00] um, including schools. Um, and I thought, you know, not enough of us really know about the possibilities for getting accommodations in the workplace.

And it's a tricky thing. You know, there's no office of, you know, disability, you know, students with disabilities, uh, kind of thing at the office. So you're in a very different position, but you still have protection under the law. Um, and as I said, the law protects you from discrimination. It doesn't protect people from getting fired, um, even if they have a disability.

So one of the things that the law says is that you have to be able to do the job. with or without an accommodation, which is really interesting. So one, you have to be qualified to do the job. So if you're not qualified or you really can't do the job, even with an accommodation, you can still get fired for not being able to do the job.

[00:33:00] But this allows for something called reasonable accommodations that, again, kind of helps with the impacts of the disability and levels out, I'm making this hand gesture, uh, levels out the playing field a bit, kind of takes into consideration, like, the impacts of the disability and really tries to mitigate those or minimize those, um, so that you can be the best worker that you can be.

Um, so that's kind of the big idea there. And workers can, I'm going to pull up in front of me, um, uh, and I won't, uh, pull it up onto the screen unless you want me to, but, you know, there are lots of things that an employer can do that often cost them nothing or very little. Um, like, what's your guess as to what the typical accommodation for a mental health condition might cost an [00:34:00] employer?

I know I just said something.

**Emily:** I mean, I guess nothing, probably.

**Debbie:** Right. So even nothing. Some people might think, oh, it might be like 500 or 1, 000. And maybe it's a lot of money. But typically it's zero to 100. Oftentimes, it's just changing the ways that things are done. And that's what accommodations really means.

It's a modification to the environment. And that means that it is, you know, for someone with a physical disability, it might be modifying the way that you come up to your desk or the height of your desk or the ways that you can enter a room or use the restroom. Um, for mental health condition, it might look different than that, but it still is an environmental modification.

And usually it's about the ways in which things are done. So I'll give you some [00:35:00] examples. So it could be things like, um, the ways that you have flexibility in your job. So it might be, um, working remotely working from home. Where that may or may not be a usual thing at the workplace, but for you with your particular condition, like it might help you be the best worker that you can be to work remotely or to work in a quieter area.

As I mentioned in school, if you're taking a medication that like gets in the way of getting up early, super sleepy in the mornings, it might be switching your hours from Eight to four to 10 to six. Um, you're still working the hours, but maybe you're shifting those a little bit, might be taking more breaks.

It might be all, I mean, there's all kinds of things. Our tip sheet has lots of examples of the kinds of accommodations that you might ask for. Um, usually, [00:36:00] um, here you would go to either HR or a manager. And say, Hey, listen, I have a disability and I, you know, I'm really loving my job and I'm really good at these things, but I'm struggling with these things over here and I think that's because of my disability.

I think that this kind of accommodation and modification could help me. Could we talk about making that happen? And so you're really negotiating with the employer a modification to the ways things are usually done so that you can really be the good worker that you are.

**Mei:** Right. Yeah. Thank you for those illustrations of, uh, different accommodations you can get in the workplace.

I just have the suspicion that, like, a lot of those with mental health conditions, sort of, to steal Michelle Mullen's term, white knuckle it until they just can't take it anymore and, like, ultimately, I don't know, need to go on a [00:37:00] medical leave when, if they had had a certain accommodation to begin with.

Maybe it would have made their job more bearable, um, preventing them from going on a leave or whatever it, it be. Um, but I, I feel like I just don't understand why it's so hard to ask for the things we need. I know, I know.

**Emily:** Emily, were you gonna add? I was just gonna agree that I think it's also like a lot more, well, I don't know if it's a lot more intimidating, but like, For me, like, that also feels really intimidating, um, I mean, it could just be, like, an anxiety thing, honestly, which, you know, that's just, like, a self fulfilling cycle right there, if you think about it, but.

**Debbie:** Yeah, it can be, but, you know, let's be real for a second. Stigma and discrimination really exist, and that kind of being vulnerable around, like, I have a thing, um, that, that prevents [00:38:00] me from, is a really scary thing to say. It makes us feel like, am I saying that I'm not a good worker, that I don't deserve this job, that I can't do it, you know, all of those concerns.

And, and I think those concerns are real. Um, you know, discrimination does exist. People are people in workplaces, but if you need an accommodation or pretty confident that that would help you to be a good worker, it may really be worth asking for what you need in order to be able to like, do your thing.

And I think of, you know, someone I know who works in a very noisy office and they work at the front desk and you know they even they like they can't just put a wall up there at the front desk, but they have been able to get their desk turned a little bit. So that they're not just focused on all of the traffic going back and forth, but can focus on tasks that they need [00:39:00] to because their desk was turned enough that they can now focus on what's on their computer and not just get distracted all the time.

And those kinds of things, you know, can happen through a good relationship with a manager you know, doing good work, , everywhere that you can and saying, you know, this thing can help me to do my job better. Um, oftentimes the things that we need, everybody needs, , you know, that might be good design for everybody.

Um, And might make really good sense to the employer. , you know, it's interesting, I, I worked with a guy one time, and he, , was in a position where he was, like, at an office, uh, or like, , an assistant, um, administrative assistant. I was struggling to come up with the word. And he had a really hard time.

He had a learning disability as well as a mental health condition. He had a really hard time taking notes. And I knew this because he had taken a class I had taught. [00:40:00] And, um, was in the position of taking minutes at meetings and, um, had asked without saying, like, I have a disability, et cetera, but had asked, like, can I record these meetings?

And the employer was like, uh, no, no, you cannot. And not really knowing why. And so when he called me and said, don't they have to let me do that? We had this whole discussion about, well, they need to know that you have a disability and kind of like why you're asking and do they know? And he said, no, I got to go.

And he hung up the phone and went and talked to his manager and said, this is why I'm asking. And they said, Oh, we have you in the wrong job. And got him into a job where he would just, he would be talking to people all the time, he's sort of a liaison. He did so well in that job. Now this is kind of an extreme example, right?

But like, the [00:41:00] employer recognized, like, this is not your strength. Your strength is talking to people. We love you. Why don't we get you into a position where you're talking to people and then he was full time in that job for at least 10 years the last time I had seen him. So accommodations can really work for both parties and that's the thing to keep in mind.

They get to keep a good employee and you get to keep your job and feel like I've got this now. With this modification I have this.

**Emily:** Wow, yeah, I love that example. And I think that you, you brought up a lot of really good points in there with like, um, well, one at the beginning of what you were saying, you talked about how, with that anxiety that we were talking about, like, a lot of that is just taboo.

And as a society, like, we're slowly making Progress to be more, you know, accepting and like understanding of mental health conditions, but we're not like completely there yet. And it is still intimidating, even if it's like, [00:42:00] you know, especially with like younger generations, like, we're more open about it with each other.

But like, you know, if your boss is a couple generations older than you, like, it might still be intimidating. But I think that's a good, um, Thing to point out as well is like, it's not just you like, this is like the system that we're in. Um, but also like you were mentioning how, even something as simple as like, turning your desk a little bit like that could be an example of an accommodation.

And that's one of those things where like. At first, like, maybe you don't even have to disclose to your employer that this is because of a mental health condition, like, maybe you do just kind of, like, bring it up in a more nonchalant way and, like, maybe that's a little bit easier. And then, like, if they do need more information, then you can go into it, but it doesn't have to be, like, as big of a thing as anything.

We're kind of, like, feeling like it is, you know?

**Debbie:** Yeah, Emily, I think that's a really good point.

And you know, you all have talked to Michelle Mullen, um, from HYPE, Helping Youth on the Path to Employment. And one of the [00:43:00] things that we talk about in HYPE is that there's a couple of different, um, ways to think about accommodations and the one that I was talking about under the law and you know, talking to your HR or your manager, that's more of a formal accommodation where you're saying like, I, I need for this thing to happen, a modification to the environment itself.

But there are informal modifications like. like, hey, do you mind if I turn my desk a little to the side so that I can focus? And without a whole, like, I have a disability and I need this, that would be more of an informal accommodation. It doesn't have that same protection under the law, but it might be an easy one to just Um, and then there's also kind of self accommodations.

And again, I put it in air quotes there, but self accommodations might be like, I can't function if I don't have snacks through the day that keep [00:44:00] my blood sugar up, whatever it is. Um, and packing your lunch and packing snacks might be the self accommodation. for your attention. Depending on the kind of job you have, you still might need to ask for breaks in order to eat that those snacks in that lunch.

But, um, and that might be the formal accommodation piece, but there's self accommodations to like being able to wear, you know, headphones, if it's not disallowed, if you're allowed to wear them. Wearing those just to keep the noise level down at your station might be something you can do for yourself. So you're, you're right, Emily, there are levels to this, um, that can help you kind of be successful in the job.

Yeah. Yeah.

**Emily:** Oh, thank you so much, Debbie. I think this was all like really great information and I feel like overall a very like hopeful, um, episode, which is really nice.

**Debbie:** it is a

hopeful scenario. I feel very hopeful for people.

**Emily:** Yeah, [00:45:00] me too.

**Debbie:** Yeah. Well, thank you for having me.

**Mei:** It was really lovely to just have an hour to chat with you about some things that I can tell you're really, really passionate about.

It really comes through. Um, so it's, it's just been such a treat to learn, um, all these things from you.

**Debbie:** Oh, thanks. Well, I think the treat was mine because this was just a joy. I, I love working with both of you and thank you for having me. This was super fun to talk about.

**Emily:** If you would like to contact us, you can email us at staytuned at umassmed. edu and check out the TransitionsACR website at umassmed. edu slash TransitionsACR. Thanks for being here and be sure to stay tuned for next time.