

Migraine at Work

How to talk to your employer about migraine

It's no secret that a migraine attack can strike at any time, including while you are at work. In America alone, 113 million workdays are lost to migraine each year, costing employers more than 13 billion dollars. And while many people set up action plans to cope with the situation, 90% of those living with migraine agree they are unable to function at the office when their symptoms set in. If you are having trouble performing in the workplace because of migraine, it might be time to have a formal conversation with your employer about your situation. We've outlined a series of steps you can follow to make sure the conversation is a positive experience and results in a solution that works for everyone.



4 Steps to Follow When Talking to Your Employer About Migraine

Know Your Rights

Talking with your boss about migraine support can be intimidating, which is why the first step in doing so is understanding your rights. If your migraine "substantially limits one or more major life activities," you might be covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which protects employees with hidden and episodic disabilities, like migraine. The Department of Labor's Job Accommodation Network describes the ADA and how to request accommodations.

Under Title 1 of the ADA, you can request and get reasonable accommodations at work. For some, this means a quieter room, less exposure to chemical odors, or different lighting. For others, it might mean alternate assignments or flex time. A third option could be to use the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which protects workers who become ill. If you qualify for the FMLA, you can take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for your condition.

Collect Information

Keep track of your migraine attacks and how they affect your work performance for a month before approaching your boss. Write down the time, intensity, and triggers every day, or use a migraine tracking app on your phone. Some apps, like MigraineBuddy or Curelator, let you track triggers and then print out a report. Keeping track of these issues will come in handy when you do sit down with your boss. Not only will you be able to articulate what specific tasks and scenarios trigger your migraine attacks, it will also be easier to work together on a strategy to prevent them. It's also a good idea to read your employee handbook and know your sick leave benefits.



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Know What You Want

Before you set up a meeting, know what you want to ask for, ultimately. With FMLA, you could be asking for leave, while with the ADA, you could be asking for workplace accommodations. Even if you don't qualify for the ADA or FMLA, you could ask for simple changes or adjustments that will make you more productive in the workplace. Ask yourself: What are your biggest problems? Identify the best solution to those problems, but also think about what you need—at a minimum—and what isn't an acceptable solution. If you plan on suggesting accommodations, the Job Accommodation Network lists some reasonable accommodations that support disability employment.

It might be more effective to negotiate separately for different issues. One of the most common complaints people with migraine have is scent. If a coworker wears heavy perfume or cologne, it could be more effective to approach that person directly and tell him/her your doctor has said you need to stop being near perfume. Or, ask someone in HR or upper management to have that conversation on your behalf.

Negotiate with Your Boss

Spend some time reading about how to negotiate with your boss before you meet. Schedule a time for the meeting in advance—don't discuss the issue casually. During the meeting, be respectful and professional, and try not to be emotional. Talk about the problem you are having, tell your boss that you're asking for an accommodation, and then tell him or her what you want. Then, if you notice the changes are working, make sure to mention it to your boss.



It is so important for those living with migraine to advocate for themselves and articulate their needs both personally and professionally. You are not alone, and while an accommodation may seem like a small thing, it could end up changing your work experience drastically, and for the better! Your life—and your career—are worth it. If you would like more guidance and resources for talking to your employer about migraine, contact the American Migraine Foundation.

American Migraine Foundation

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