What is disfigurement?

People with severe disfigurements may experience little or no difficulty carrying out the tasks required in the workplace because of the way they look. They may, however, still experience discrimination in the same way as people with other disabilities.

Over 1.3 million people in the UK have disfigurements to their hands and body, and over half a million people have a significant facial disfigurement. Living with a disfigurement can be a major challenge for an individual and their family. People who have disfigurements may feel a great deal of anxiety in social situations, which can result in low self-esteem, anxiety and reduced confidence. This may have a particular impact on a candidate’s confidence in applying for a job and throughout the interview process.

While living with disfigurement can be challenging, it need not prevent people from leading full and active lives and possessing qualifications, skills and life experience invaluable to many organisations.

Common adjustments

**Induction and environment**

Induction is an important part of how any individual is welcomed to their new role, colleagues and organisation. An employee with a severe disfigurement may in particular feel anxious about how their new colleagues or external visitors will react to the way that they look.

People with severe disfigurements are deemed to be disabled under the Equality Act 2010. In order to fulfil your legal obligations to make reasonable adjustments for an employee who has a severe disfigurement, you should discuss with the employee their needs and wishes. Many employees are extremely proactive in managing their own condition and may require few if any adjustments to be made.

**Communication**

Effective communication with colleagues, service users and customers is vital in any business. Many people with disfigurements can, however lack confidence when interacting with other people face to face and may be anxious about such interactions at work.

Adjustments that might be needed include:
Disability awareness training for colleagues;
Training for the individual to build their confidence and teach them how to deal with other people’s reactions;
Trying to limit the number or extent of uncomfortable situations if that is something that the individual needs perhaps in the short term

**Workplace behaviour**

Be aware that anxiety and low self-esteem can be misinterpreted as the individual being withdrawn, sullen or poor team players by managers. Managers may need training on disability and disfigurement too and on how to bring out the best from all their staff by making reasonable adjustments for them.

**Harassment and bullying**

Managers may also need to monitor the behaviour of colleagues towards an individual with a disfigurement. Every employee should understand that any form of bullying or harassment including ‘jokes’ about someone’s appearance will not be tolerated and could lead to disciplinary action. Disabled employees must feel that the workplace is a safe environment where they are respected for the contribution they make to the organisation.

**Social situations**

People with severe disfigurements may feel particularly anxious in work related A social situations such as Christmas parties with the wider team, client parties, or even after work drinks.

In some cases, some such apparently social situations will be part of the job. Line managers should talk about how employees are expected to behave in such situations and ask if anyone feels particularly uncomfortable in social settings. Adjustments that might benefit everyone including someone with a severe disfigurement might include.

- Training on effective networking;
- A mentor or buddy to shadow, watch and learn from.

Line managers should also ensure that someone with a disfigurement is not being left out of non-essential work related social situations. They may need to arrange (after discussion with the individual) disability awareness training for colleagues in order to ensure that the individual is treated as part of the team. Colleagues may be unconsciously excluding the individual because they perceive them to be different or they might be assuming that the person doesn’t want to join in. It is also important to make sure the individual is told about and specifically invited to any social events.

**Managing absences**

Many people with disfigurements do not need on-going treatment. However, some may require time off for treatment either on a ‘one off’ basis or from time to time.

In these cases you may need to make reasonable adjustments such as:

- Allowing time off if an employee needs to attend medical appointments (e.g. GP or consultant) during working hours. It is best practice to allow paid time off if your organisation can afford it;
• Changing the regular hours of work. If appointments are needed over a long period of time, and/or the financial viability of the organisation is affected so that the person can attend appointments out of working hours.

Remember to tell employees of any private healthcare provision they may be entitled to access especially those offering therapeutic assessments and support or counselling

Further information

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