

**There's much more
to all of us than
you might know.**

Open-up.

Case studies about some
of our colleagues with
invisible disabilities



I'm an operations manager, a grandmother of eight and I have chronic fatigue*



Kay Kew

I have worked for Sodexo for 17 years and I am operations manager for Sodexo's FM contract at BAE Systems, Yeovil.

I'm responsible for a team of 12 delivering hard and soft FM services. I live in Poole, Dorset, a 1 hour 20 minutes drive to work at Yeovil. Six years ago, the job was split between Christchurch, Dorset, and Filton, Bristol. I worked one week in Christchurch and alternate weeks based in a hotel at Filton.

I was always a very active person but I woke up one morning in the hotel and felt completely exhausted. I put it down to working away from home and, at first, the medical people said "you are in a high pressure job; it's stress" but I knew my own body and could sense something wasn't right. I had chronic fatigue and widespread pain and I kept forgetting things, and things I'd say didn't come out right; it was a bit slurred. At times my head felt like I was in a fog. You think you are dying.

Eventually, after two years of tests and visits to various doctors, at Wareham Hospital I finally got the diagnosis. The most frustrating part of the whole thing was trying to get the diagnosis.

Sodexo has been good to me and I now work four days a week and one of those is from home. My client is very understanding about my condition and, if I have to have time off work when the condition flares up, will always ring up to check I am OK.

I now have to pace myself. If I didn't do four days a week I would probably have to spend all weekend in bed. As it is, during the week when I'm working I'm invariably in bed by 7-7.15pm otherwise I would suffer the next morning.

If you are under pressure or stressed, the condition tends to be more active. I write myself a list and work through it, but try not to stress about what's on it. I meditate once a week because it totally relaxes your body and helps to make the attacks less frequent. I'm anti tablets, so I try to use more natural ways if possible, although sometimes I have to take them when the pain is so bad.

Understanding of ME and fibromyalgia has come on in leaps and bounds but there are probably other people in Sodexo with it and, hopefully, by talking about my experience they will feel there is someone they can talk to about it.

There is now a support group on Facebook and it's important to have your family's understanding. I have four grown up children and eight grandchildren and while I would like to do more with them I have learnt to say "no". If I don't, I could end up having to use a wheelchair.

I would hate to think I would have to give up work because of it. I have learnt to live with the limitations it places on me and I'd like to think I am proof that you can still have a fulfilling career with this condition.

*ME (myalgic encephalomyelitis) and fibromyalgia

**I'm an HR
business partner,
I advocate for
those with
mental ill health,
and I have
depression**



Kerry Smith

I have been an HR business partner for Service Operations for the past two years and for 10 years previously worked with the independent schools business. I have a long term medical condition that runs alongside my life.

At 17, I was diagnosed with depression. My condition gets me down and I can get quite worried and anxious about things. I was very nervous about being photographed for this campaign but I have a personal crusade to share my story to show other people who may have similar problems that help is available and that your condition does not define you.

My work takes me to London, Stevenage and Abertillery in Wales but I am also able to work from home in Hampshire, and my current line manager, Christine Williams, has been amazing and so supportive. Thankfully, she has known me a long time and she supports and understands me.

There is a general tendency for people to think “if HR aren't coping, what hope is there for the rest of us” – but we're only human and I use my personal circumstances a lot to demonstrate to people that it is OK to be down, and to have a mental health problem.

An independent report conducted by Paul Farmer, the chief executive of the mental health charity Mind, and Lord Stevenson, the former chairman of HBOS (published in October 2017) revealed one in six workers has a mental health condition at any one time.

Considering the number of people Sodexo employs, we would be foolish to ignore the issue, which is why I volunteered to be part of this campaign. Although there is greater awareness and pledges of more resources for it from the Government, there is still a long way to go in terms of understanding.

We as a company want to help. For instance, I use the Sodexo Supports Me helpline and they have been absolutely amazing. I wonder how many employees realise they are able to have up to six free counselling sessions a year?

Depression and anxiety are often the biggest causes of sick leave but sadly I suspect there are few cases of people sitting down with their line manager to talk through their problems.

We talk about diversity and inclusion a lot in Sodexo and campaigns like this are part of ensuring mental health issues are recognised in that journey.

If I could urge you to do one thing to help a colleague who may be experiencing depression and anxiety, it would be to sit down and have a cuppa with them; listen to what they have to say, try to understand – and don't judge.

Professional help is available. There are fact sheets available via the ICAS link which you can find on the Sodexo Supports Me pages on Sodexo_Net and Your_Sodexo, which is a good first step. Externally, ACAS (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) has a good section on www.acas.org.uk about how to deal with mental health problems in the workplace.

I'm an operations director, I lead Sodexo's disability workstream and I have dyslexia



Neil Paterson

I have worked for Sodexo for nearly 10 years and I am operations director for Sodexo's private healthcare contracts in the UK.

Dyslexia entrenches itself in your psyche making you feel you are not the brightest and not the best speller - actually it just means that you don't see and hear letters in the way other people see and hear them.

I don't want Sodexo to miss out on the tremendous amount of potential that might be lost to the organisation if people with dyslexia don't feel they can come forward, be understood and supported in their development.

There is still a lot of work to be done in schools to identify the help youngsters with dyslexia need and deserve rather than them being dismissed as disruptive or bad spellers.

When people with dyslexia move into the workplace, they tend to choose craft-based jobs like carpentry or bricklaying because there is less focus on reading and writing. I know. I chose catering. I became a chef and I enjoyed that and my disability didn't seem to be a hindrance until I wanted to progress into junior and senior management and needed to find ways of handling my condition.

But you have a choice: you either give in or you learn to manage it. Your sixth sense kicks in and you become more articulate with the spoken word and you are less likely to be challenged or judged.

I know there are people out there who won't go on training courses to develop themselves, even though they are perfectly capable of progressing, because they fear doing written work. We can't afford to lose this potential and I would encourage anyone with dyslexia or a similar condition not to let it stand in their way and to speak with their manager or HR to see what support can be provided.

When people are invited to an event, they are invariably asked if they have dietary requirements, and I wish they were also asked if they need any other adjustments.

Sodexo is about creating an inclusive environment for everyone to thrive, and I want to give something back to encourage others to come forward and make the progress they deserve to make. I am really proud to work for a company that gives me the time to support diversity and inclusion and to take a lead with the disability taskforce.

I'm an HR advisor, I do voluntary work with Dublin's homeless and I have hearing difficulties

Justine Riseley

I am one of three HR advisors in Ireland and based in Dublin covering 60 school, university and Corporate Services sites across the Republic of Ireland.

I have been wearing hearing aids for the past eight years, having realised over a period of three years prior to this that my hearing was deteriorating. No-one is entirely sure why it has happened although I have type 1 diabetes, and it might be linked to that, or it could be genetic, because my mother also lost her hearing at a relatively young age. Ninety per cent of the time, it doesn't affect me or my work but there are certain situations when it does.

My line manager, HR director Niamh Cray, has been very supportive of my situation and has helped to instil confidence in me to explain to people why, for instance, I might want to take up a specific seat in a meeting to make it easier for me to hear what is being said.

Wearing hearing aids has enabled me to live mostly a normal life although there are some things I find more difficult and I believe there is an element of stigma around people who wear them. I think back to my childhood and recall if someone had hearing aids it might also have been linked to having learning difficulties as well, and I think some people still draw that conclusion.

There is quite a lot of misunderstanding about hearing aids and how they work; it's not like putting on a pair of glasses which instantly correct your sight. Hearing aids are much more complicated; like mini computers. There are multiple different sound frequencies and, however much they might help, the

hearing aid never completely brings your hearing back to normal.

Sometimes people with ordinary hearing don't understand the difficulties and that my hearing will never be perfect like theirs – a number of situations create problems like background noise indoors or outdoors, and differing acoustics in a room have an impact.

It took me some time to be more confident about hearing aids. I would always be hiding them and be embarrassed to ask people to speak up. I thought people might think I couldn't do my job, and that it affects who you are. It doesn't. I'm not different to anyone else.

Most of the time, people don't even notice but if someone is speaking rather softly I will ask them to talk a little louder.

The main thing I would say to people is to remember to always look at me when they're talking. If they turn to leave and carry on talking, I won't be able to hear what they're saying. Hearing loss isn't the same for everyone and I would suggest asking the person what they need or how you can make things easier for them as it's not a one-size-fits-all situation

Away from work, I have a rescue dog which I take for walks, and I do voluntary work with animal charities and with the homeless community in Dublin.



Sodexo Supports Me

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