

The Cane in the Room



Here's a unique question: Because of my multiple sclerosis, I walk with a cane. Next week, I'm going to have a face-to-face interview for a job I really want - paralegal in a public interest law firm.

I'm pretty sure my potential employer cannot ask me why I use a cane, but it's something that I am not embarrassed about, and I don't want to shy away from talking about it. Also, I'm concerned that it might be the "elephant in the room," and I would just as soon be the one to break the tension. Most of all, I want to assure them that this would not affect my ability to do a great job. But I'm not naïve and I realize that my "openness" could backfire badly. Any suggestions on how to find a middle ground?

As someone who lives with MS and is well versed in disability law, here's what I think:

The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** has transformed the traditional job interview. Many of us are old enough to remember when employers routinely asked whether we had any health problems or had ever filed a workers' compensation claim. But since 1990, those questions are unlawful for most employers.

Of course, employers can still ask job-related questions. If you were applying for a job as a delivery driver and were required to carry packages all day, the employer could certainly ask about your ability to perform those tasks – as long as all other applicants were asked the same question. And in your case, since your physical limitation is apparent, the employer could also ask you to describe or demonstrate how you would perform that function. It's the same with this job – although it's probable that most of your efforts would come from your

brain and not your brawn.

But those are the employer's requirements, not yours. You certainly have the right to bring up your MS in the interview. The question is whether you should do so, and that one is a lot more complicated.

It's admirable that you want to be open about your MS. In doing so, you may educate your interviewers and maybe dispel any mistaken notions about this disease. And you would certainly be showing them that you are an honest and upfront person who does not shy away from difficult discussions.

That's how **you** are, but you should also consider a much harder question – is that how **they** are? We don't like to think of others as being prejudiced or wanting to shy away from people with disabilities, but this reality is why the ADA was written.

You should therefore think long and hard (and perhaps even get some legal advice) before you ring a bell that cannot be unrung. Although it might be a feel better in the moment to share the fact of your disease, you run the risk of not being hired because of it. Yes, that would be unlawful. But as a former civil rights investigator, I know how difficult it is to prove those cases.

You can also consider not disclosing unless and until you are in the job and you need a reasonable accommodation of some sort (like an altered schedule or time off during an exacerbation).

Perhaps there is a middle ground: Ask yourself what you hope to gain by disclosing your disability and if there are other ways to do it. For example, if you want to show that you do not shy away from challenges, is there some accomplishment at your last job that you can work into the conversation?

If you want to make the point that you are flexible and can adjust to change, think about some incidents in your life where you had to throw out the rulebook and figure it out as you went along.

If you are ready with these anecdotes as you walk into the interview, discussing them will be much easier and more natural. And if you decide that you are going to mention your MS, think beforehand about how you will frame it and how much you want to say. That's **your** prerogative.

And good luck!

Editor's Note: Read more on [the National Multiple Sclerosis Society website](#) and the [ADA website](#).