How to talk about health issues at work

Long-term discomfort, doctor's appointments, absenteeism … these things interrupt the flow of our work experience and become so noticeable to our colleagues that we're better off illuminating our situation. Keep these tips in mind:

1. Be intentional. Know the "why" behind the desire to mention your health issue. Is it just to explain away some work difficulties, negotiate for a friendlier deadline … or is there a deeper, more human need behind it? For instance, we may really be looking for sympathy, and there's no shame in that; it's a completely natural desire. If you acknowledge that beforehand, it'll be easier to express yourself.

2. Pick your spots carefully. Mention your problem at a time when you know the listener will be able to give you their full attention, and preferably in a one-on-one situation so they feel less self-conscious. Putting a pall on a meeting or a group situation makes people think too much of their own awkwardness in that moment instead of what you're telling them. Don't wait for pain to strike or a sudden dash from the office to bring things to light; be in control of the message.

3. Attitude is everything. The more factually and dispassionately you discuss your problem, the more logical and empathetic will be the reaction. A positive attitude releases you from "aww, poor you" mode in which you become an object of pity, and it generates admiration. If you can wow them with positivity, they will definitely not forget your plight.

4. Be patient with the response. Advice that misses the mark, personal stories that don't really apply … many people will want to chime in to help, forgetting just how personal this experience is. Just smile sympathetically at anecdotes, and tell everyone you're considering many options (or already have) and smile. They mean well and they just want to feel less helpless.