



# The Group Solutions Sit-Down

## Workplace Disability Prevention Mini-Series: Migraines

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

migraines, disability, employers, workplace, employees, work, headaches, ergonomics, life, triggers, symptoms, accommodation, severity, strain, noise, workplace injuries, computer, staring, people.

### SPEAKERS

Cassie Mills, Kristen Osburn

#### **Kristen 00:07**

Workplace injuries happen every day. From sprains, strains, and tears to migraines and chronic pain, workers in all occupations and industries are exposed to a broad range of injury risks. And each year, these risks leave millions of workers unable to do their jobs on a short-term or long-term basis. In fact, according to the National Safety Council, there were 105,000,000 days lost due to work-related injuries in 2019. Which cost businesses \$53.9 billion in wage and productivity losses alone. The good news is that through workplace disability prevention and identifying at-risk employees before a disability occurs, we can help prevent disabilities or reduce their severity and shorten the duration of an absence. I'm Kristen Osburn, a marketing strategist with New York Life Group Benefit Solutions. In this five part mini-series, I sit down with Cassie Mills, a certified rehabilitation counselor and ergonomic specialist with New York Life Group Benefit Solutions, to discuss workplace disability prevention and the key steps that employers can take to help their employees stay healthy and productive at work. In this episode, we'll be focusing on Migraines.

Cassie, as always, it's great to have you on the show.

#### **Cassie 01:35**

Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be back!

#### **Kristen 01:38**

Cassie, I imagine that most people listening have probably experienced a headache at some point in their life. And oftentimes, I actually hear people refer to a really bad headache as a migraine. But I'm guessing that not all headaches are migraines and probably not all migraines are just headaches, is that right?

### **Cassie 01:58**

You are correct. So a migraine is actually a medical condition that involves severe reoccurring headaches as well as other symptoms. These other symptoms can range from different triggers severity frequency. People with migraines may develop symptoms such as headaches, noise sensitivity, pain, photo sensitivity, and stress intolerance, but seldom do people develop all of the symptoms. And since the symptoms can vary so widely and frequently from person to person, not all employees will be affected while working. However, workplaces are filled with potential triggers for those who do experience migraines. Triggers at the workplace can be from strong odors, such as perfumes, candles, or even air fresheners, to fluorescent lights, loud noises and long shift work. For those that are affected while at work, an accommodation might help them be able to stay at work and be more productive.

### **Kristen 02:57**

Which touches on our accommodation episode that we have as part of this series as well. And I actually have personally struggled with migraines, Cassie. So I remember as a teenager I had migraines, and they were so severe that actually they would cause a nerve in my brain to get pinched. And I would black out. And then later in life I developed ocular migraines during one of my pregnancies. And I actually remember the first time I had an ocular migraine, I was at work and I remember looking at my computer screen thinking for a minute that I was going blind or something because I just slowly wasn't able to see my computer screen. It kind of went from these jagged flashes to blacking out in one eye and then I got this enormous headache that felt like I had been hit by a truck or something and I actually did have to leave work to go to my doctor and they had to check my retina and then I was out for a day or two with just the severity of the pain. So I really do know how intense and difficult migraines can be.

### **Cassie 04:02**

Absolutely. Wow. Kristen, thank you for sharing. Yeah, that's really intense. So, as you know, according to the American Migraine Foundation, migraines are the third most common disorder in the whole world, affecting 37 million Americans and resulting in over 113 million lost workdays each year. And on top of that, Woman's Midlife Health Foundation in 2020 found that migraines are three times more common in women than in men and are the fourth leading cause of disability in women. So your personal experience, Kristen, is actually not all that uncommon. And as I mentioned before, there are a lot of factors that can lead to migraines. But frequent ones we see associated with workplace conditions might look like a computer programmer experiencing migraines that might be triggered by noise levels in his cubicle, overhead fluorescent lighting and staring at your computer for long periods of time... which seems like we've all been doing that for a lot longer than we used to. Or somebody working in the field who's on their feet all day under high stress and then is not taking very many breaks for water as they should. And migraines might last, like you said, when you're doing your experience, talking about that, they could be a day to a week and can keep people bedridden, which is when you start to see that increase in workplace absences and loss productivity, especially if they are environmental factors that are impacting multiple people.

### **Kristen 05:40**

Wow. Okay, so Cassie, what then can employers do to modify workspaces and really support their employees who might be experiencing migraines currently or even prone to them?

### **Cassie 0605:54**

Absolutely. So employers can work on potentially changing out the fluorescent lights within the workspace. Another important thing is ergonomics, making sure the employees do proper ergonomics, such as when you're staring at a screen all day, and then you're also staring at your smartphone, it's going to be a lot of eyestrain. So it'll be really, really important to do what we call the 20-20-20 rule. So every 20 minutes, look away from the screen, 20 feet away, for 20 seconds. And what that does is it helps reduce eye strain. And really, believe it or not, that's part of ergonomics. Also, making sure that your neck and ears and everything

are in alignment over your shoulders, so you're not putting extra strain on your upper back and neck. Also, employers can talk to employees about what might help them with their migraines. Employees might be using things outside of work, such as blue light blocker glasses. And what that does is all of our computers emit a blue light, and that puts more strain on our eyes. So kind of back in the day before these types of glasses were made, this is very similar to a screen filter that you would put on front of your monitor to help filter out the screen. And then employers could also work with their disability or health insurance carrier for resources to help them help their employees that have these types of migraines.

### **Kristen 07:22**

Wow. Well, incredibly helpful. Thank you again, Cassie. I especially love the 20-20-20 rule. And I think that has grown in importance, as we've seen a lot of the workforce move to work at home, again, a lot of people sitting in front of a computer that might not always have had to look at one for a long period of time and even with, you know, kids who've moved to distance learning and so just taking that time away from the screen to rest the eyes. Really helpful. And once again, you've given me so much to think about and start implementing in my own life. I know our employer audience thanks you as well. So thank you, Cassie.

### **Cassie 08:05**

I'm happy to be here.

### **Kristen 08:06**

Great, well listeners, make sure you also tune into the other four parts of our Workplace Disability Prevention Series where Cassie connects the dots on a lot of important disability issues that employees and employers are facing, such as musculoskeletal disorders, ergonomics, which she mentioned here, accommodations, also mentioned and we go deeper into that on another episode, and mental health, which are all part of our larger discussion on helping employees stay healthy and productive at work.

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