



## Mold in the Workplace: Vanessa's Story

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

0:00

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KS

Kendra Seymour

0:28

Hello everyone, and welcome to Your Indoor Air Podcast, brought to you by Change the Air Foundation. My name is Kendra Seymour, and today is one of my favorite kind of episodes because it's a real story of healing and hope. Now – while in the past, a lot of our interviews have focused on people who've gotten sick from hidden mold and water damage in their home – today, my guest Vanessa Johnson shares how it was the place she worked that made her sick and started her down this health journey. Now, while Vanessa is a lawyer, and nothing today should be construed as legal advice, we're also going to talk [about] some tips for navigating mold and water damage in the workplace, including the role of the Americans with Disabilities Act in this situation. And Vanessa, I want to say first of all, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your story. And for allowing this to be an opportunity for people, not only to feel heard, but for maybe for them to gain some insight on, you know, what are their next steps in this journey. So thank you for being here.

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

1:30

You're welcome. I'm happy to be here and happy to help.

KS

Kendra Seymour

1:33

So let's jump right in because it was your exposure at your job that kind of began this journey for you. So can you talk to us about what happened, what changes you saw in your health, how your employer handled it? Because it's already challenging, if it's your own home – where you

have some degree of control – but when you're talking the workplace it's a whole 'nother ballpark. So why don't you kind of start where you know things started to change for you at work?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

2:01

Well, I had just started a new job so the first symptoms that I experienced is fatigue. So, you know, start a new job, you know, new routine. So just, you know, kind of dismissed the fatigue. I also – and I've had this experience when I've entered other places that... where I've had exposures. I started having this pressure in my eyes. And I remember, within the first two weeks of that job going to my optometrist, that she did a bunch of tests and everything came back normal. So dismissed that as well, but I was getting sick pretty often, just, you know, run-of-the-mill sinus infections, which I've always... I always had, like, really bad allergies, so I've done a good job of, you know, kind of managing that, but all of a sudden I was just having recurrent sinus infections, sinus headaches, some of the fatigue came back. And then we moved to a different area within the building, and then everything just snowballed. I started... What really caught my attention, of course – beyond the, you know, kind of flu-like cold-like symptoms, you know, with the sinus and the headaches and congestion – I started getting rashes all over my face and neck and what I noticed is that they'd get better over the weekend. So I finally, kind of connected the two. But I really connected, you know, the workplace with what was causing, you know, the major issues when I took a week off for vacation, and everything cleared up. And as soon as I went back into that setting, you know, back to square one.

KS

Kendra Seymour

3:46

I'm to jump in for a moment. That is not an uncommon thing. Like we see that sometimes a lot with, like, teachers. You know, like, they'll be in the building, and then there'll be, like, a 10-day break or something. Or they'll go home for the summer, and symptoms will improve and then get worse. Because, you know, they're in a job where you're in and you're out. Okay, so you started to connect the dots. How long was that, though, between, like, you know, the first day of work and when you were like, the light bulb is going off, that, "There is something at work that may be causing this."

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

4:19

I started, I think in like September, October. It wasn't until May, June that it was really getting bad. And then that's when I started complaining to my employer, saying, "It's something here at work that's making me sick."

KS

Kendra Seymour

4:35

Now, tell us about the place that you worked. Like, did you see anything? Did you think mold and water damage at this point? Or did you think maybe it was something else? Or were you just even unsure of what it was about the environment that was...

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

4:50

I was completely unsure, because the major symptoms happened when we moved into a different area that had just been newly renovated. So being... Cosmetically, it didn't seem... But it was a very old building, but at that time, I mean, I was just clueless. I didn't know what was causing it. Like I said, I'd had a history of allergies and things like that, but it was just out of control, something that I wasn't able to manage. And then once I started, you know... Of course, when you start getting rashes on your face, you know, you can't hide it, so you want to do something about it. It's one thing to have a sinus headache. It's another thing to have this huge thing, you know, a red mark, red and purple mark on your face and neck.

KS

Kendra Seymour

5:31

Yeah, I mean, that's a very like, strong, like, fatigue, right? You can..., "Oh, maybe I'm just getting older. Maybe it's the stress of the new job. Maybe it's a coincidence." But now all of a sudden, you're getting these things, like rashes, and you're like, "Wait a second, like, that wasn't a problem before." Okay, so you went to your employer, tell us about how you approached that and kind of what their response was.

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

5:52

Well, first of all, I was in HR, so, you know, I just... My function was HR, so I just told my boss that I was gonna, you know, go to the doctor (a new allergy doctor) and see what was going on. But it was... I definitely felt that it was something in the workplace. And said, "Can y'all do some air testing, or something like that?" So they did the air testing. Meanwhile, I went to the new allergy doctor, and we did, you know, run-of-the-mill allergy testing. She was like, "Oh, well, you are really stuffy when you come in here." I mean, because I was just completely congested. But every single time I go to the doctor, she'd just give me a new medication to take. Like she really wasn't helping anything. And so they did the air testing. I got my allergy test results, but, you know, it wasn't anything really remarkable in the allergy testing. But they wouldn't give me the results to the air testing. They just kept stalling and stalling and stalling. And so, you know, as I was getting sicker and sicker, I was getting more and more frustrated, so I reached out. I filed a report with OSHA. You read my short article about OSHA, so you know my attitude about that organization, because they just really couldn't help me at all. And started the interactive process, but basically my employer wasn't very cooperative. I asked for... The accommodation I asked for was to just move. Since the major symptoms started when we moved into that area, I wanted to move outside of that area. And I asked to actually sit with the team that I was

supporting as their HR business partner – which was two floors down, I think, two floors down from where we were sitting – but it wouldn't have been with the HR team, and they wouldn't do it.

KS

Kendra Seymour

7:48

They wouldn't do it. Okay, so you filed with OSHA, who wasn't much help. And maybe we can (with your permission), maybe we can link to that article because it was interesting. Can you tell us just high-level why OSHA was unable to help you in your situation, so people understand the role of that agency? And...

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

8:05

Well, basically they said that they couldn't do an investigation because they didn't have mold standards. So, you know, and especially since the mold wasn't visible. I couldn't, like, take pictures of it and send it to them. And later on, after I actually left that job, I found out about NIOSH. But even with NIOSH at that time, it was difficult, because you had to get multiple people to complain. And people... Other people were having issues, but nobody was having as many issues as I was having. And, you know, people are afraid, you know, they started to see some of the retaliation that was happening with me. Because, as I complain, all of a sudden I went from “stellar performer” to, “a problem”.

KS

Kendra Seymour

8:45

Can you talk to us a little bit about that? Like, what... Because I think that's a common thing, like people... I've talked with a lot of people, and they say something to the employer, and they're kind of stonewalled. And then all of a sudden, life becomes a little bit more difficult at work, right? Like you are essentially sounding an alarm where the response (the correct response) is going to cost them money, it's going to cost them time, might impact efficiency. So what things did you start to see those changes in how they treated, you know, you as an employee?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

9:22

Well, I mean, it was just really clear. I thought... I'd been there for less than a year, and I went from getting an early, you know, bonus for the work that I was doing -- because I was actually brought in to do a lot of compliance work, and I was making a whole lot of headway with some of the issues that they were having – that to all of a sudden, just, you know, having bad performance evaluations when it came time for the formal review.

KS

Kendra Seymour

9:53

Yeah, so what did you do next? So you're not...they aren't going to accommodate you, they didn't want to move you to another place. So what options did you feel you had available to you at that point?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

10:03

Well, I was still complaining, and then, you know, kind of the attorney kicked in. So yeah, that started being really... Because it went from, "Okay, I'm gonna go get this checked out," to, you know, being a little adversarial. So they *finally* gave me the air quality report. And there...on my report, it showed that I had a major allergy to Aspergillus, and it was an extremely elevated amount of Aspergillus. And I'm like, "Well, what?" You know at this point, I'm really, really sick. I'm completely frustrated. You're...they're retaliating against me, and given my health history – I had lung cancer at 10 – I was like, "I gotta get out of here." Like, because at that point, I figured out it had to be something fungal, because I'd gone out of prescription. Think I was having some other dermatitis (like seborrheic dermatitis issue that I've had before) and I went on an anti-fungal and some of the rashes cleared up. And so I found an anti-fungal specialist. I changed doctors because something else that was a complication of the process is that my new allergy doctor didn't understand her role in the process. And didn't understand that I wasn't trying to, like, you know...I don't know what she was thinking. I think she, she just didn't want to fill out the paperwork saying that I had a disability that needed to be accommodated. And without that, you know, the employer...they could have accommodated me without that information, but they refused to, partly because I couldn't get that documentation from her. Like, I provided my medical records. I gave them an opportunity to gather the, you know, clearance to gather the medical records themselves, but they didn't do it. And once I got that report with, you know, the elevated amount of Aspergillus and connected the two, I was just like, "I need to get out of here."

KS

Kendra Seymour

12:08

Yeah, I want to mention something for people listening –because I know the more research you have if they're in this situation – I believe it was the Mayo Clinic, and we'll link to it in the show notes that found that 93% of reoccurring sinus infections are fungal-related. And so yet we keep... You know, you'll go to the doctor the first time and they'll give you an antibiotic, and that's not getting better. And then you go back, "Well, try this antibiotic," and then the third time, and at some point we need to be asking a different question. And so I'll link to that research because it's super interesting. And I'm betting a lot of (unfortunately) allergists and certain specialties aren't even aware of that, and the proof is in the pudding. There you were on an antifungal, and all of a sudden things started getting better. And that's a clue for you and whoever is treating you, like, "We're onto something here finally." So...

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

12:57

Yeah, and it was crazy. I mean, this happened like 12 years ago. She was, I mean, even though she was a fungal specialist, she didn't connect the two, like, I mean, I...and back then, you just really didn't have some of the resources that are available now that I'm definitely grateful for – and probably wouldn't be, you know, in as good of health as I am right now, without the things that have come out since then. I was really figuring it out on my own and making these connections on my own.

KS

Kendra Seymour

13:24

Yeah, and you and I talked about this before that, you know, our story started, God, over a decade ago as well, and there were far fewer resources. And while we still have a long way to go, I am grateful that there are more organizations, more healthcare practitioners, more things being put into place for people because...and the Change the Air Foundation is trying to do that too. We're trying to provide, trying to provide those reliable resources for people so that they can navigate this. So you ultimately (and I don't want to jump too far ahead, so feel free to back up) decided to leave this job, right?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

13:53

Right.

KS

Kendra Seymour

13:54

Okay.

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

13:55

Yeah, I just felt like I had no choice, because I took some time off again. I used my vacation because I was like, "Well, you need to use your vacation before you leave, because use it or lose it." And I was feeling so much better. But meanwhile, you know, I went and had some checks to make sure there wasn't anything *really* seriously wrong with me, because I knew that I was leaving. I hadn't been able to find another job, but I felt like I had to do it for my health. I didn't want to be in a situation where, you know, I got some horrible disease. I'm single, I mean I have my family, but I wouldn't want to burden them. But I was like, "I've just got to get out of here. They're not helping me." I'm just, you know, "I can't get any help from the doctors." They didn't know what was going on. I'm just getting more and more medications, and I'm getting sicker and sicker. So I left.

KS

Kendra Seymour

14:46

And that's such a hard position to be in, and a struggle that a lot of people face. I mean, it's your livelihood, and you have to sometimes make a choice between your health and your livelihood because employers aren't taking the necessary steps to do it. So what did it look like then? You kind of know now that you had... that this indoor air quality, mold, and water damage is impacting you, and so you go to look for another job. Did... did how you approach your next job...was that process a little different now that you're kind of aware of this other health element that you have to take into consideration?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

15:25

It's crazy. I'm aware of it now, but actually, after I got out of that situation, I transitioned into school. That's kind of always my fallback: professional student. So I went back to school and so for basically a year and a half after I left, I wasn't working. But I knew, and I didn't really even connect the two. I knew there was something fungal that was going on in the previous employer that made really sick. When I got out of it, like the rashes went away, but I definitely wasn't completely well. But, you know, all the major symptoms went away. But the law school that I attended, I... For my LLMs – which is the programs that I was enrolled in at the time after I left this job – was the same law school that I got my JD in. So I knew there were some water damage issues with the building following Tropical Storm Allison. So I reacted to the building when I was in the JD program, so I spent less time during the LLM programs in the building because I knew that there was something in the building. But it didn't create any kind of like major, major symptoms like, you know, the former workplace. But so ironically, I went from that environment to what (you know, they're not in that building anymore, they have a brand new law school) but I contend that there's mold in that building, so I kind of have to avoid it. But then my first job out of those programs, it ended up being the same situation. I did, but I had different symptoms. I wasn't having as much of the congestion, but I was noticing cognitive problems. And then it took me probably about 10 months in that job to finally put two and two together. That it was, you know, my mold illness, CIRS, kind of flaring up again. And I was having some symptoms, and finally connected it with the buildings. But this time, I had a wonderful employer, the employer that I'm still with today, and they were able to accommodate me.

KS

Kendra Seymour

17:40

Yeah, I don't want to kind of jump around too much. But for someone listening, the what...what have you found to be helpful accommodations? Like, so that, if somebody is going through this, they can maybe ask for some of these things. Is this a good time to also mention ADA and if and how that plays a role? Can you talk to us a little bit about that.

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

18:01

Yeah, I mean, with both employers, I just said, "I need to engage in the interactive process to

figure out an appropriate accommodation.” And I think those are the words that you need to use and let them understand that you understand your rights, right? A lot of companies were... The first employer...they really, to me...they did not engage in the interactive process. And the law has gone through a change. You have the amendments to the original statute that were meant to address some of the problems that were inherent in the first statute, with the focus on the disability. Now with the amendments, it's really...the employer's supposed to engage in an interactive process and not so much focus on the disability at first. You know you go through the process to figure out, “Okay, what is the disability and what's the best accommodation for that disability?” But the focus shouldn't be the disability itself. The employer has an obligation to engage in an interactive process. So by, you know, using that phrasing of, “I'd like to engage in the interactive process in order to determine the appropriate ADA accommodation,” really kind of signals to them that you know what your rights are and what their obligations are in the process.

KS

Kendra Seymour

19:20

I love that. That is such, like, a gold nugget, a jewel of information that I think can really empower people. So what were some of the accommodations in this interactive processer came up with, that you found to be, you know, helpful?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

19:36

Well, there just... there are a couple buildings on campus I just do not – now that I really recognize the cognitive effects of being exposed.... Because I'm not getting... Sometimes it depends on, you know, what's in the building. You just never know what you're getting exposed to. I'll get the congestion and the headaches and, or my eyes will be bloodshot if I'm in a situation for too long, I'm like reacting to it. But there are other times when I'm not, you know, noticing things like that immediately, but then later on, I'm feeling the more of the cognitive effects. And so I've learned a lot, and actually in the past couple of years, in terms of just, I think, everyday exposures. And during the pandemic, I was wearing a mask, and I started feeling a whole lot better, and I realized that just me going to the grocery store (places like that) I was probably being exposed. I mean, I live in Houston, Texas. Very, very humid, hot area, so I... Who knows? Like it might be, like 95% of the buildings that I'm encountering that are water-damaged. So, I just literally do not. I don't teach in this one building that's probably the oldest... *is* the oldest building on campus. And then there are other buildings that I found that I react to and so I just... They schedule me in the newest building. I have some concerns about that, because I think some of the maintenance hasn't been as good as I've liked it to be, and I'm noticing some water damage, even in the newest building. But I'm sure if it starts bothering me, then I'll just go back to my dean and tell him what... (and department chair)...and tell them what's going on. And they've been great so far. I mean, so... But it's always a fear, especially given what I went through with the first employer.

KS



Kendra Seymour

21:23

Yeah, and, and it's juggling a lot. Like I am so grateful that you're here today – not just to share your story, but because this is such an aspect that we haven't as a foundation touched upon yet – but I know is impacting so many people. And we have teachers who reach out, and people in other fields. And it really is a challenge to find those solutions, especially because you touched on it, the prevalence of water-damaged buildings and mold and other microbial growth is alarmingly high, right? There are some studies that suggest that up to, you know, 50% of buildings have ongoing problems with leaks and water damage. We know realistically that number is a little bit higher. There is the American Healthy Home Survey II data that speaks to the prevalence in our homes as well. So this really is something that your university buildings, your grocery store, your place... Like, something we need to be thinking about as a country and as a whole. So let's touch for a little bit. Obviously, you are very aware of your surroundings and trying to minimize your exposure. You said the one antifungal. Is there any other treatments that you... or anything you want to mention in that regard that you found helpful, that listeners might you know, want to think about?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

22:40

I've done a little bit of everything, I think.

KS

Kendra Seymour

22:44

That's a very familiar... It's a very familiar thing we hear from people. I know in our journey too, a little bit of everything, right?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

22:51

But I think number one, the most important thing is get out of the environment, stop the exposure, if you can. I know that it can be a challenge. I was really lucky in that I had a supportive family that I could kind of lean on for the two – basically two or three years – that it basically took me to recover financially from it. Because, you know, I transitioned into school, I was there, I wasn't working, and then, you know, finally landed a job and was able to go back on my own. But I actually lived with my mother during the second year of those LLM programs as a result of, you know, having to leave the job without finding another one and figure out a way to transition. So I know that can be really difficult, but it's really key in terms of healing. Also changed my diet, like diet pre-, you know, pre-health crisis, post-health crisis, totally different. Learned a lot. I read the book *The Autoimmune Solution* by Doctor Amy Myers. It really explains, you know, the science behind why you need to change the diet. So, really, since then, I've, you know, had a more of an anti-inflammatory diet. You know, it's hard to stick with those really strict diets all the time, but I've definitely completely changed the way I eat, in terms of, you know, trying to avoid foods with toxins or the... you know, [that] create issues for me. So

changed my diet, that was really important. Like I said, during the pandemic, I realized that, you know, wearing a mask was something that helped, was helping me, you know, recover. And so even though I'm looking like the crazy lady who's still afraid of COVID, I pretty much wear a mask everywhere... If it's an environment that I don't know anything about, I'm wearing a mask. So that's something that I've been doing that's helping my health. And probably not everybody wants to do that, because it does make you seem, feel a little weird. Well, I mean everybody's wearing masks anymore, and then people assume that it's because of COVID. But I like, you know, I've been at school the past... this past year and let my classmates know, "You know, this is not really about COVID (even though COVID is not over in my mind) but I'm protecting myself because of this environment."

KS

Kendra Seymour

25:13

Yeah, and that's a common thing too. Like it does, and we can pivot there for a moment. Because most people who have gone through this journey because of what happened to them, it does change how they live going forward, and you find a new normal. You never quite go back to what you were before, but you find a new normal. And there's some silver linings there, living healthier. But how (let's pivot there for just a second). So how has this experience kind of shaped your day-to-day life?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

25:41

It's almost hard to like articulate, because it's so much my new normal that I don't think I even recognize anymore. I mean, diet definitely, the mask wearing now, is a change. I still take a ton of different supplements. In terms of recovery, some things I've done differently, just in hindsight, is that the chronic fatigue was really, really bad. And once I started getting better, I realized really, if I focused earlier on doing... taking supplements to support my mitochondrial health, some of that probably would have lifted earlier. And, you know, I think a lot of the fatigue is related to the neuro inflammation that I was experiencing. So addressing those things I think early on, are really key, because it can help you get the energy to do some of the other things that you need to do. So some of... You know, some of my go-to supplements as far as those are CoQ10, PQQ, things like that. You know, I follow Dr. Jill Carnahan, so I've used some of those products that she curated with Quicksilver Scientific. So, products like that. But also something for me that's been a game changer – which can be a little controversial – but I use ozone I've gone through several ozone therapies. Like I've done the 10 pass treatment several times. I actually bought my own ozone therapy equipment to do insufflations, and that has really, really helped with my recovery.

KS

Kendra Seymour

27:22

Yeah, and I know you and I... we had talked, you know, prior to this about, you know, finding that knowledgeable healthcare practitioner. It can be hard, right? That's step one. And then

financially, it takes a toll, because many of these practitioners are, you know, don't accept insurance. And so I want to just take a moment to like honor that this, it's a challenge, and it's not always accessible. And, you know, hopefully we can change that with more and more doctors and mainstream medicine accepting the role that our indoor air and mold and water damage has on our health. Now for those listening, I do just want to point you towards a resource. If you go to [ChangeTheAirFoundation.org](http://ChangeTheAirFoundation.org), we have a number of interviews with doctors and healthcare practitioners under our resource section. You can also summit... check out our summit, because Vanessa was saying it over and over, this is more than an allergy, right? This is not, "Oh, I have just the sniffles," and it impacts, you know, system-wide effects. And so, you know, one of the things too, that I just want to reiterate with the chronic fatigue, is I feel like that is one that is so easily dismissed, especially as you get older. You throw in having, you know, a stressful job, or maybe kids, and we tend to put it off, and until you – I know, at least for me – once you connect the dots, once you get to that healthier home, and the thing you and your energy comes back, you realize just how much it was impacting you. And it wasn't because you were in your 40s now, or you have kids, and so we want you to live your best life. And for me, it was just a very powerful to feel the difference, and I know for you as well. So I know we're running a little over on time, but if... I'm wondering if there is a message that you could give someone who's out there listening, who might be in the middle of this overwhelming process, maybe it's at work, maybe it's at home, what would you say to them?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

29:30

You can recover. Like, I...you know, I left that job because I thought, literally thought it was going to kill me. And I think if I stayed there, it would have. So you have to prioritize your health, educate yourself. Because often it's going to be, you know, sort of a battle sometimes with the healthcare practitioners. Especially if you're going the conventional route. Try to find a functional medicine practitioner, somebody who's mold literate. Because that can really help with the process and make it less frustrating, because some of the conventional methods actually can make you worse, make the battle even harder. But, gotta keep hope alive. You can recover. There are a lot more resources out there thanks to, you know, organizations like Change the Air Foundation and some of the functional medicine practitioners that are, you know, really helping to educate people about CIRS and mold illness and water-damaged buildings and really the effects.

KS

Kendra Seymour

30:32

Yeah. Thank you so much for again, like, sharing your story and joining us. And, you know, for people listening, it's not...mold and water damage in the workplace, there are options out there for you. There are solutions that hopefully don't involve you needing to leave you know your place of employment. Although, we recognize in Vanessa's situation, sometimes that really is the only and the best option, even with how hard it is. But we hope to provide more resources and, Vanessa, I'm gonna... I may be leaning on you more in the future.

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

31:04

Oh, absolutely.

KS

Kendra Seymour

31:05

Help us out. I know I talked to you about maybe writing an article or two for us because it...you bring just this wonderful – between your HR perspective and your legal mind, and then what happened to you – you have just such a wonderful perspective for people. And so is there anything else you want to say that we forgot to cover, or did we get to it all?

VJ

Vanessa Johnson

31:29

No, not really. I mean, just thank you for the opportunity to tell about my story. I really want to help. I'm...you know, I've been intending to try to help, but, you know, it's been a long recovery period. I didn't realize some of the cognitive effects that it was having. And now that I'm kind of other side of those things, I'm absolutely happy to help, so.

KS

Kendra Seymour

31:51

It's a marathon, for sure, but it's one worth running and you can get to the other side, we promise. We've both been there. For everyone listening, thank you so much. If you are watching this on Facebook, do me a favor, hit "Like" and "Follow" or "Share". If you are watching on YouTube, subscribe. And really the best way to continue to get great information like this is to head on over to our website, [ChangeTheAirFoundaton.org](http://ChangeTheAirFoundaton.org), and sign up for our newsletter, because you'll get a weekly email from me with wonderful interviews and tips and resources. Thank you everyone, and we'll see you next time.

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