Advice on Managing Your Career with Fibromyalgia

by MARIANNE BROWN

Working with Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a chronic condition that causes widespread pain, fatigue and sleep issues, among other symptoms. As of yet, there is no cure. An integrative treatment plan is recommended, focusing on reducing symptoms usually through a combination of medications, lifestyle changes and alternative treatments.

How Could a Diagnosis Affect My Work?

Constant pain and fatigue can make working with fibromyalgia a challenge, but it is possible to continue working and have a career with Fibromyalgia. I managed this for five years, before two surgeries forced me to leave employment.

Should I Inform My Manager and Colleagues?

This is a very personal decision, as you may be worried about how people will perceive you and whether it could affect your career or job security. But, if your manager and colleagues are aware you have Fibromyalgia, this could reduce your stress levels and you may gain invaluable support.

I notified my company of my diagnosis, to reduce the risk of possible discrimination; I needed more flexibility for time off and modifications to my role and environment.

The real risk is that if your manager and colleagues do not understand how your condition may affect you, your health could affect your performance, and this could lead to unnecessary misconduct meetings.

I found most colleagues were very understanding and were keen to go the extra mile in supporting me to manage my workload.

Recommendations for Balancing Work-Life and Career Choices

I personally found that what you do outside of work can also affect how you feel at work. Here are a few of my recommendations:

Self-Management

Keeping a diary of symptoms enabled me to track my worst ones and what adjustments impacted their severity. Let me share a few examples with you:

Poor sleep hygiene caused my fatigue to increase. I made a few simple changes to reduce this. I went to bed and woke up at the same time every day, took warm baths with magnesium flakes and practiced meditation before bed; these activities all helped with relaxation. I kept my bedroom cool and did not use my cellphone, computers

or TV for 60 minutes before bed. I also implemented a strict no food or drink close to bedtime policy, which was successful in reducing nighttime bathroom breaks. I also kept a notepad to jot down any worries, enabling me to deal with these the next day.

My diet was poor, I skipped meals, ate too much sugar and I drank lots of caffeine. I ate too much fast food, causing my energy levels to slump. I then overhauled my diet, choosing lean protein, vegetables, more water and herbal teas. I found this helped me focus, especially in the afternoons.

I started with light exercise, only minutes per day to start with. This increased my energy levels, reduced muscle pain and increased my positivity. However, be careful not to overdo it and always stick to your limits.

Pacing Activities

I split my workload over a longer period of time, both at home and work. I negotiated deadlines and planned in extra breaks. I learned to delegate, prioritize and keep many to do lists.

Workplace Modifications

I worked with my manager, informing him of the workplace modifications that I needed, from my past experience as an employment law specialist. You do not need to have a degree in law, your HR department will have the necessary knowledge to support you and your manager.

Your company has a legal obligation to make "reasonable accommodations" for people with disabilities, and there are some fantastic free toolkits available to help you and your employers create an inclusive workplace.

I have listed my top five modifications that I used in my home/office-based role:

- Flexible working hours and working from home
- Management of my own diary and setting aside more rest breaks
- Special ergonomic equipment to reduce pain, such as a hydraulic desk, a spinal chair (complete with neck rest) and a hands-free headset.
- More support with job assignments, agreement on written detail and allowing deadline extensions, if necessary.
- Weekly meetings to review workload, talking over concerns and worries.

What if I No Longer Feel I Can Work in My Current Role?

Changing My Current Role/Career

I asked HR to support me in changing roles, in order to reduce my travel. I negotiated professional training to undertake this change of career. Research other careers and speak to others working with Fibromyalgia, you may see something else you would like to do.

Sabbatical/Career Break

You could speak to HR and your manager to discuss applying for a break in work. Sometimes, companies will leave your job open for you to return to. This could prove useful and give you time to completely focus on your health, before making a decision on whether to return to your current role, or apply for a new one, depending on your employment contract.

Leaving Work

This was the hardest decision I have ever had to make, but it was the right one for my health.

Like myself, you may be able to negotiate leaving with a severance package. Speak to your HR department and

discuss your options. You may also be eligible for ill-health retirement.

If you are close to retirement, have a private and/or company pension, it is worth undertaking some research. Speak to a financial specialist, your HR department and your medical professionals, as it may be possible for you to retire and take immediate benefits.

Could I Claim Disability?

The Social Security disability regulations define disability as "the inability to do any substantial gainful activity due to your medical or mental problem."

The general definition of a disability, is that an individual must prove that they have a severe impairment. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not contain medical conditions, which constitute as a disability. It is up to the individual to prove that their condition impairs them, through physicality or mental capacity. This information needs detailing over time, by you and your doctors. I found that keeping a diary of symptoms helped me prove this, along with various medical professional reports, test results, treatments and medications I was currently taking.