

Should I Work?

INFORMATION FOR
EMPLOYEES LIVING WITH MS

EMPLOYMENT ISSUES



National
Multiple Sclerosis
Society

Should I Work?

Productive work can be part of a satisfying life — and MS does not spell the end of being productive. So the answer is yes. You should work...*if you want to.*

The real question involves how, where, and at what level you will work. Your chapter of the National MS Society has information, referrals and programs to help you find answers.

My symptoms are overwhelming! How can I work at all?

Many people drop out of the work force when they are first diagnosed or experience a major exacerbation. They make decisions while they are in the middle of a crisis.

People with MS have a lifetime to live with a disease that may fluctuate unpredictably, may produce different symptoms at different times, and may never become disabling.

It takes time to discover how symptoms can be managed, and whether they will affect a current job or a planned career. If you are employed and need time to recover from a crisis, investigate sick leave policy, short-term disability insurance coverage, or the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which provides for leave without pay. When the crisis resolves, you can begin exploring your options. It is almost always easier to return to work than to find a new job.

Can people with MS stay in the workforce?

The Society's latest survey indicates that 25% of people with MS are employed after 20 years with the disease. The National MS Society believes this figure can and will improve.

Today, disease-modifying drugs, new technology, better symptom management, and new public attitudes are changing life with MS.

I've recovered from my attack, but I can't do things I used to do.

This is a highly individual problem, but not one you have to face alone. Before talking to your employer about your limitations or special needs, get professional advice.

Call your National MS Society chapter. Ask for referrals to an occupational therapist, a career counselor, or your state vocational rehabilitation office. Your chapter also has information about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and accommodation strategies to help you remain productive and comfortable on the job.

Most employers fall under the ADA guidelines, which is a civil rights law for people with disabilities. It has several key provisions that may help with employment issues:

- An employee must be able to perform the **essential functions** of a job, but unessential functions can and should be assigned to others.
- An employee may request **reasonable accommodations** to perform duties of the job; the **employee** researches and proposes the accommodations.
- An employee may not have to disclose a *specific* medical diagnosis in order to obtain ADA protections initially. However, an employee must disclose a disability in order to ask for accommodations. The employee will need to explain that accommodations will help maintain productivity in spite of a medical condition. The employer may require additional documentation and/or a medical diagnosis.

What are some examples of reasonable accommodations?

Common ones include:

- Flex-time (adjusted work schedule)
- Parking privileges
- Equipment or software that enhances work performance
- Combining short breaks into a longer rest period

Will working increase my stress?

People with MS often hear that they should stop working to control stress. Unemployment may not cure stress — in fact, being unemployed could result in even greater stress! The relationship between employment and stress is complex. Only you can determine if working is appropriate for you.

Having a chronic potentially disabling disease like MS causes stress, but a direct cause and effect relationship between stress and the onset or worsening of MS has not been established despite many research studies.

The National MS Society suggests learning to manage the unavoidable stresses in your life with counseling, support groups, exercise, time management instruction, improved diet, and wellness clinics. Techniques such as yoga, visualization, meditation, and biofeedback can also be effective.

Resources you may need

- JAN (Job Accommodation Network)
800-526-7234, 877-781-9403 (TTY)
www.askjan.org
- ADA&IT Technical Assistance Centers, also known as Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center (DBTAC)
800-949-4232 (V/TTY)
www.adata.org

Ask your chapter for publications; referrals to counselors and therapists; the nearest vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency; and other resources. Also, ask if your chapter sponsors the “Career Crossroads” program.

Call 1-800-344-4867 to be connected to the nearest National MS Society chapter.

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For Information:

1 800 FIGHT MS (1 800 344 4867)