



How to Set Yourself Up for Career Success as a Young Adult with Chronic Illness

New to the workforce? These tips will help you establish and maintain a healthy work routine.

By Surayyah Morris, PharmD

FINDING YOUR footing when first entering the workforce as a young adult with a chronic illness or disability is as important as it is challenging. Collegiality and mutual respect are essential for a healthy work environment, but establishing them can be intimidating or overwhelming. Worries about how to handle flare-ups, what others may think about you or your illness, and how to balance your health needs with company expectations can cause excess stress. Establishing open communication with your boss and coworkers from the get-go promotes a supportive, productive work environment for all, and planning ahead for hiccups helps you handle them when they inevitably happen. The following tips can help you establish and maintain a healthy work routine.

Focus on the Goal

First, finding balance between health needs and work demands is tricky, but making your health your priority will naturally help you find balance at work. Compromising your own physical or mental health for a job is never worth it. Employees can be replaced, and jobs can be, too — you, however, cannot. But rest assured: You don't have to sacrifice your health for the sake of your career. In fact, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) gives you a unique set of rights as a disabled person, and employers are required to abide by its provisions. Make sure to get familiar with it so you are prepared to exercise your rights. (Go to [ada.gov](https://www.ada.gov) for more information.)

Of course, this means you will need to inform your employer about your chronic illness (providing only as much detail as you are comfortable sharing). Make sure they are aware of enough detail to understand that your condition may require additional time off due to sickness or doctor appointments. Don't expect favoritism, but do advocate for an individualized plan that accommodates you and satisfies your supervisor. Work together to make a plan for how to handle the day-to-day demands of employment.

Request Reasonable Accommodations

Under the ADA, you may request reasonable accommodations to perform your job. Think about whether you need them to perform your duties well, then communicate those needs to your boss early on, emphasizing your desire to set yourself up for success. Your employer cannot discriminate against you because of your disability and must honor your requests to the best of their ability. However, accommodations will vary from person to person based on individual needs and job descriptions. If your requests cannot be met due to the requirements of your position, you can ask to be transferred to a similar position that will more easily accommodate your needs. An example of a reasonable accommodation includes the use of an anti-fatigue floor mat for jobs requiring you to be on your feet; blue light glasses for jobs that require looking at computer screens; an adaptive headset for jobs that require phone calls; an ergonomic chair or exercise ball to help give your body support; or use of comfort items such as cushions, pillows, fans and heaters. Other reasonable accommodations might include frequent breaks, flexible hours or remote work. Keep your supervisor updated as your needs change.

Create a Comfortable Workspace

Make your workspace a place you feel good about so going there is a pleasant experience. Adjust your workstation to maximize ergonomic benefits; use a footrest, seat cushions or chair massagers; add a space heater or a small fan; use an air purifier or an essential

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oil diffuser; play soft music or soothing sounds; or bring a small blanket or pillow to provide extra comfort and support while at work. Get creative and make your space your own. Don't be afraid to create an environment that allows you to perform your best; just remember to be mindful of and respectful to those around you.

Working from home may be another option, especially for employees who cannot physically get to an office. Explore this as an option, but make sure to find out if a potential employer will supply you with the necessary tools, software and equipment before you accept a position. Then, designate a workspace that will help keep your mind focused on your job while at home.

Dress For Success

If your employer does not have a dress code, then you are at liberty of dressing comfortably at work. You should always strive to look presentable, so stock your closet with a variety of clothes that make you look professional and feel comfortable. Choose items that stretch to allow for easy movement and that are adaptable to temperature changes. Wear comfortable shoes or bring some along with you to change into when your feet are behind your desk or out of sight.

Plan Ahead to Reduce Stress

- *Sick days.* Prepare for sick days well in advance. While you cannot foresee *when* you'll need to take a sick day, you certainly know you *will* need to take one from time to time. Establish a plan for when you will report your absence, to whom and who will cover for you while you are out. Decide ahead of time with your supervisor how your duties



will be affected by your absence, and agree on reasonable modifications to ensure your tasks are completed on time. Your plan should involve a routine that minimizes your stress and provides time for your symptoms to improve.

- *Meals.* Preparing your meals in advance saves a significant amount of time, money and stress. Making breakfast at home and taking it with you to the office gives you more time for other morning tasks. Packing your lunch at night allows you to grab your lunch bag and go in the morning, and helps you save money by not eating out. It also helps keep you from opting for unhealthy foods that could adversely affect your condition or overall health. (For example, bringing your own food to the office is particularly helpful if you have celiac disease or food allergies, as it gives you peace of mind that you will have access to food that is safe for you to eat.) When it comes to dinner, meal planning is beneficial because by the time you get home from work, the last thing you want to do is find the energy to come up with a meal on the fly.

- *Transportation.* Your daily commute can significantly impact work performance. To minimize the stress of commuting, take some time to consider which mode of transportation works best for you. Think about driving your own car, taking public transportation or using rideshare or carpool. Test out each option and pick the one that fits best in your routine. Come up with a plan B ahead of time to prepare for unforeseen car trouble, schedule changes, family emergencies, traffic accidents or weather events.

If you plan to drive to work, map out alternate routes ahead of time just in case you need them. Also, give yourself plenty of travel time. You will be less stressed when you are not rushing. Remember to make your vehicle comfortable, too. Take the time to adjust your seat, steering wheel and mirrors to the position most comfortable for you. Think


about adding features or accessories that make your vehicle more comfortable such as heated or cooled seats, a portable massage cushion, a steering wheel cover or air freshener. It also helps to keep a change of clothes, first-aid kit, nonperishable food items, medicines, a blanket and an umbrella in your vehicle for when you may unexpectedly need them.

Be Indispensable

While there are many wonderful companies with great work environments that prioritize a healthy work-life balance, some jobs might be too much for you anyway. You may even find yourself tempted to push yourself too far to meet expectations that exceed your own personal limit. If this happens and you are unable to perform your job well, your employer may see fit to replace you. (Harsh, but true.) But the truth is a different person might be better-suited for your particular job, and a different job might be better-suited for you, and that's OK! There is no shame in leaving your position and looking for a different one that better meets your needs.

But if you *do* love your job, then do it well — to the absolute best of your ability. And if you need a little extra help now and then, don't be afraid to ask for it. Your boss and coworkers will be more willing to accommodate your needs when they recognize the value you bring to the table.

Reduce Stress and Strive for the Best

The best way to establish and maintain a healthy work routine is to minimize stress as much as possible. Do not overwhelm yourself by trying to be perfect; just do the best you can. Working with a disability will never be simple or easy. Finding a way to work anyway shows resilience. If you are fortunate enough to have a job, remember that it is a blessing to work. And remember: You do not have to figure it out right away or on your own. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Communicate early and often to encourage understanding, establish expectations and cultivate respect. Doing so will help you enter the workforce as a confident chronic illness warrior. 

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