

## **Getting Your Career On-Track after Disease or Injury**

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You've been employed for many years and are on track to make it to the top of your career. As you've advanced up the career ladder, so have your breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and experiences. You've worked hard in your profession to be seen as a star performer and major contributor. Work ignites your passion. It defines who you are as a person. Your life and career are evolving just as you planned.

Then the unthinkable happens. You begin to experience muscle weakness periodically throughout the day, and it's causing you to drop simple objects such as a pencil or notebook. You think to yourself, "It's no big deal -- I worked out too hard last night at the gym." After several weeks, you notice other symptoms such as blurred vision and leg stiffness and begin to worry.

As much as you hate going to the doctor, you make an appointment. After several appointments with your doctor and specialists, they confirm your worst fears: you have a disease called multiple sclerosis and will need to begin treatment as soon as possible.

With no known cure, you begin to wonder how this disease will jeopardize your career, life and family. In a matter of months, your state of mind has shifted from thinking about your job as that which gives your life meaning to thinking about it as something you may not be able to do any longer.

### **Turbulence Kicks-in**

When disease strikes and your career is in jeopardy, you, like thousands of people impacted by career-ending illnesses and injuries each year, will experience one of the most turbulent transitions in your life.

The mental anguish caused by your disease or injury will probably be far more devastating and have broad implications for career development than the symptoms themselves. Your self-image and self-esteem will be tested greatly. You will experience strong feelings about giving up your career aspirations, underachieving at work or ending your job. All of these thoughts spawn a self-fulfilling prophecy that reinforces your attitude about not being able to be a competent, valued contributor at work.

Unless your psychological perception is dealt with and "treated", you risk never overcoming your limitations and never discovering how to adapt your situation to achieve long-term career fulfillment.

### **Loss is Inevitable**

I have a first-hand account about the impact that disease and injury can have on one's career and family.

At the age of 30, my father was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He was a working middle-class American who thought it was in his best interest to inform his employer about his condition.

Although he could still perform his duties beyond expectation, he was laid-off within three months.

This single event led him down a path from which he never returned. Not only did he lose his identity as a professional, he lost his role as the breadwinner of the family. He couldn't bare the thought of having to depend on anyone other than himself. The ambiguity of not knowing what the future held for him, with the expectation that one day he would be confined to a wheel chair, left him in a hopeless state until his death at age 50. He lived an isolated life plagued by a depression that isolated him from friends and family.

### **Develop a "Can-Do" Mindset**

You are given two choices when faced with crisis situations that impact your career.

One is to run and hide and hope that everything will get better. This was the choice my father made for himself.

The other is to use your disease or injury as an opportunity to display courage with a "can-do" career development mindset. It's the time to figure out how to overcome career limitations so that you and others can make fulfilling and valued contributions in the work environment.

No one expects you to do this alone. Many career counselors specialize in helping people with injuries, disabilities and disease to make positive and fulfilling career changes.

### **Strategies for Coping with Disease or Injury**

- **Allow yourself to feel.** Your loss of direction is frightening to you and others in your life. Feelings of disorientation, confusion, anger and sadness are emotional states that will haunt you for a long time. The important thing is that you allow yourself to feel these ranges of emotions. Closing yourself off to the world will do you no good.
- **Deal with Reality.** It doesn't matter how much you wish and pray for things to change-- the fact is you can't change reality. It may not seem fair that you have a disease or injury, but it doesn't have to be a career-ending event. Deal with what is in front of you.
- **Set Goals.** On your road to recovery, you may have to rethink your career. If your previous job required strenuous lifting, then perhaps you can no longer work in a manufacturing facility. You will need to identify other occupations that don't have

strict physical requirements. You may be able to use the knowledge you gained in the manufacturing job and apply it to a business role.

Whatever the disease or injury, you need to rediscover your strengths and where those strengths can be applied in the business world. Skills such as persistence, courage, time management, perseverance and the ability to overcome setbacks are value to employers. Set small, achievable goals that will enable you to build up new skills as well as your ability to cope with the changes.

- **Involve Family and Friends.** During this painful transition, fight the urge to hide from the world. Instead, reach out and seek the support of your family and friends. Getting doses of hope from people who care can prevent you from walking back down the "I'm worthless" path. Shutting the door on people who want to help is the worst mistake you can make.
- **Find a Career Counselor.** If you experience roadblocks when thinking about your career, call a career counselor. They are experienced in using creative problem-solving techniques to help you overcome obstacles, stress and a whole host of issues related to your career. Career counselors can help motivate you to discover talents, skills and abilities that you didn't know you had. They can also identify occupations and companies that are "friendly" to people with disabilities and injury.

### **Make a Difference**

Suffering a disease or injury that roadblocks your career is no doubt traumatic. I wrote this article with the glimmer of hope that I can lessen your psychological and emotional pain and encourage you toward the path of rediscovery.

I've worked with many people in your situation who are having success finding work that ignites their passion again. These people no longer define themselves by what they do, but rather by how they make a difference. I challenge you to discover your own path and find it in your heart to make it a collaborative effort with friends and family. You can make a difference.

Linda Ginac is a certified coach and career counselor. With more than 13 years experience in career counseling, marketing and staff development, Ginac owns and directs a private practice, [The Ginac Group, Inc](#) located in Austin, Texas. Ginac offers a variety of career management services to businesses and individuals, including: individual and group coaching, career change and job transition, individual and group assessment and diversity career planning.