

Working with Multiple Sclerosis: Information for Employees



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ACN 008 515 508

Published by MS Australia
www.msaustralia.org.au

ISBN 0-9578229-4-4
August 2006

Adapted from the Australian edition of *Knowledge is Power*, Volume 8, 2004 which was produced, with permission, from the original program published by NMSS USA.

Original author:
Beverly Noyes, PhD
Contributing Author:
Rosalind C. Kalb, PhD

Disclaimer

The information presented is based on published experience and expert opinion, but does not represent individual therapeutic recommendation or prescription. For specific information or medical or legal advice, please consult your doctor, lawyer or union representative.

Contents

Working with multiple sclerosis	2
Things to think about	3
Step one – Review your current situation	4
Step two – Review your benefits and entitlements	6
Step three – Review your rights	8
Step four – Deciding whether to disclose	12
Step five – Consider adjustments to your job	15
Step six – Look into further training	18
Step seven – Plan for the future	18
Step eight – If you decide not to work	19
Step nine – Identify ways to manage stress	23
Step ten – Use available resources and supports	25
Useful Resources & Links	26

Working with multiple sclerosis

Now that you have had some time to react to and reflect on your recent diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS) and to learn a bit about the condition, you may be concerned about how MS might affect your working life in the years ahead. You may already have missed some days of work because of your symptoms and you may be worried about how you will learn to balance the demands of your job with the unpredictability of MS.

Your work activities can take up a significant portion of your day, contribute to your family's support and well-being and provide you with feelings of pride and satisfaction.

Therefore, decisions about your working life should not be made hastily.

Until recently, people diagnosed with MS were often told by well-meaning family and friends – and even by their doctors – that they should leave their jobs and stay home and rest. The unfortunate message was that people with MS could no longer manage the demands of work or make meaningful contributions in their chosen fields.

However, many people with MS do not experience chronic debilitating symptoms. In addition, times have changed. Within the last several years, there have been a number of advances both in the management of MS and in societal attitudes towards individuals who have a disability. A range of medications and practical strategies exist to help people manage their symptoms. Treatments are now available to reduce the number, frequency and severity of exacerbations and to slow disease progression. Most importantly, the attitudes of employers and employees are undergoing a change.

This booklet outlines steps that you can take to maximise your employment options in the years ahead. First, you need to make the decision about whether you wish to keep working. Having made that decision, you may need to be flexible and creative so that you (and perhaps your employer) can adapt the way you do job-related activities or change the type of work you do.

Things to think about

Within the last several years, there have been a number of advances both in the management of MS and in societal attitudes.

- Many people with MS are able to continue working following a diagnosis of MS.
- Becoming educated about the benefits available to you and your rights and responsibilities will help you maximise your options and prepare for the decisions ahead.
- Take responsibility for your own job performance. Don't wait for your employer to do it for you. It is your responsibility to identify and request the accommodations you need to function at an optimal level.
- Be proactive. Don't wait until you are already in a crisis situation to take action. Once your job performance is under review, it can be far more difficult to ask for, and be given, the necessary changes to do your job.
- Learning to manage life's stresses is far more effective and satisfying in the long run than trying to avoid them.
- Use the available resources to help you. There is no need to "go it alone".

Step one – Review your current situation

Deciding whether to work

You may:

- be completing your studies and have not yet entered the workforce; or
- have left your previous job or occupation because you felt your MS was making it difficult for you to continue in that particular job; or
- be currently working, but concerned about how MS will affect you in the future.

Whether you are considering entering, exiting or re-entering the workplace, now is a good time to evaluate how work fits into your life. Work is valued differently by different people. Some people measure their worth by the work they do; others see it as a means to an end; yet others see employment as an intrusion into their lives. Are you interested in a job versus a career? Income versus personal satisfaction? Sedentary versus physically demanding work? These questions may help you to clarify your attitudes and perceptions about employment. If employment is part of your life plan, it is helpful to consider all the options available to you

and maybe to seek assistance in planning to enter or re-enter the workforce. Remember to consider options such as full-time, part-time or casual employment, job sharing, contract work or shift work. Exploring strategies to manage any symptoms you are experiencing would be beneficial before you begin the process.

If you decide to work

A range of different services is available to assist people with MS to make decisions about entering or re-entering employment. There are services to assist you in exploring which type of job or employment you are interested, as well as appropriate training and development of skills.

Centrelink is the best place to get information about employment support and referral to an appropriate employment agency (eg Job Network Service Provider or other specialist employment services) and vocational rehabilitation services such as CRS Australia. You will be asked to complete a number of forms to assess your job readiness and work ability.

The following assessments will help you to decide whether you should participate in any specialised programs or obtain further assessment:

- **functional capacity assessment** – evaluates a person’s physical and cognitive abilities in general or for a particular job;
- **vocational assessment** – determines what type of job or work would most suit a person;
- **vocational training** – provides job specific or general skills for employment;
- **work hardening or conditioning** – enables a person to develop or regain specific requirements (usually physical strength and endurance) to be able to carry out the particular tasks of a job;
- **job specific training/re-training** – trains a person in the skills required in a specific job;
- **job search/match program** – an agency assists a person to find employment;
- **work experience** – assesses a person’s suitability for a particular job and allows the person to evaluate his or her own interests.

These assessments may also enable you to reach your employment goals or to overcome any barriers to employment you may be experiencing.

The best way to begin assessing your current job situation is to look at the kind of work you do in relation to the type(s) of MS symptoms you are experiencing. If your job is a very physical one, you might be particularly concerned about symptoms such as fatigue or problems with walking or balance that might interfere with your job performance. However, if you have a desk job that primarily requires a lot of planning and problem-solving skills, you might be more concerned about changes in your thinking, memory or concentration. In other words, some people’s jobs are compromised by their MS symptoms much more quickly or directly than other people’s jobs. Your decisions about the work you do will depend on the ways in which your job responsibilities are affected by your particular symptoms. People whose job performance is consistently affected from the outset will need to begin thinking about accommodations or changes sooner than those whose

symptoms do not interfere with job performance.

It is especially important that you do not make any long term decisions regarding employment during the diagnostic period or during any exacerbation, as symptoms may settle or change.

The best way to begin assessing your current job situation is to look at the kind of work you do in relation to the type(s) of MS symptoms you are experiencing.

If you do not fully understand the conditions of your employment, ask your company's benefits manager for a full explanation.

Step two – Review your benefits and entitlements

If you are currently employed, now is the time to familiarise yourself with the conditions of your employment if you have not done so already, and the benefits to which you are entitled at your current job. Many people take a job without looking carefully at the conditions of their employment. If you cannot find the packet of information you were given as a new employee, ask the Human Resources Department or Personnel Office to send you a new copy. Many employers have such information on their intranet. Since this is a routine request made by many employees, you do not need to worry that asking for this information will alert the company to your MS diagnosis.

In reviewing your benefits, consider the following:

- 1) How much sick leave do you have? How do you accumulate leave and what are the rules for taking it? Can you accumulate sick leave? What are the circumstances in which sick leave may be 'forfeited'? Do you have other

- kinds of leave that you could usefully take? How much unpaid leave is allowable if you have no remaining paid leave entitlement?
- 2) Does your employer have a policy, established practice or any precedent for dealing with employees with a disability which affects their work – eg part-time work arrangements?
 - 3) Do you have a short-term disability insurance policy? How is “short-term disability” defined in your policy? How does the policy work? How long a period of time does it cover? Is your current job guaranteed upon your return? Is a medical certificate required in order for you to return to work? Do you get paid during this leave time and, if so, how much? Is there a delay between when you stop work and when payments commence? Does your spouse have a policy in case he or she acquires a disability?
 - 4) Do you have a long-term disability insurance policy? How is “long-term disability” defined in your policy? The term “disability” is defined differently by different policies, and many long-term policies are for a five-year period and not for the rest of your life. Are you permitted to supplement or improve your policy? Does your spouse have a long-term disability policy?
 - 5) What type of superannuation arrangements do you have in place? Is your employer the only contributor to the fund, or do you also contribute to the fund? What impact will reduction of working hours (eg from full-time to part-time) have on your superannuation entitlement? If you stop work because of MS, can you claim a disability lump sum payment or pension under your superannuation fund? What are the terms and conditions and limitations on accessing these payments?
 - 6) Does your employer provide support for continuing education or re-training?
 - 7) Are you entitled to financial assistance to stay at work, such as a Mobility Allowance?

By fully utilising your workplace benefits, you will give yourself more time to make an informed decision if and when you need to.

The answers to these questions will help you plan how to get through an exacerbation or a change in symptoms while continuing with the same employer. If you do not fully understand each benefit after you have reviewed the materials, schedule an appointment with your company's benefits manager and ask for a full explanation.

Unfortunately, many people leave the workplace during a flare-up of symptoms and later, when the symptoms have remitted or become more manageable, wish that they could return to work. They are faced with the need to find new employment or to find meaning and satisfaction (not to mention income) as an unemployed person.

Step three – Review your rights

If you have not done so, it may be a good idea to familiarise yourself with your legal rights in connection with your employment or potential employment. An awareness of your rights may help you to make decisions about how to deal with your employer or any prospective employer in the future.

Protection against disability discrimination

Both Federal and State discrimination legislation make it unlawful to discriminate against an employee on the ground of that employee's disability.

Both direct and indirect discrimination are prohibited.

The definition of disability is very wide and includes multiple sclerosis.

Direct disability discrimination involves less favourable treatment of an employee because of the employee's disability. Whether treatment is less favourable is determined by examining how a person without a disability is or would be treated in similar circumstances.

Indirect discrimination refers to practices which appear to

be neutral (and which may even be intended to be fair) but which are unreasonable in the circumstances and have an unequal and adverse effect on people with a disability.

The effect of the legislation is that it is unlawful for an employer to discriminate against you because you have MS, however, it is not unlawful, in some circumstances, for an employer to discriminate against you if you:

- are unable to carry out the inherent requirements of your position because of your disability; or
- would, in order to carry out those requirements, need services or facilities not required by those without a disability, and the providing of these services or facilities would impose an unjustifiable hardship on your employer. Examples of factors that may be relevant in considering whether there is an 'unjustifiable hardship' are costs to the employer and technical difficulties with implementing the special services or facilities.

Applying for a job

The legislation also prohibits an employer from discriminating against a **prospective** employee

on the ground of that person's disability.

This means that your prospective employer must not structure or conduct interviews in a way that unlawfully discriminates against you because of your MS.

However, an employer can refuse to employ you if you will not be able to perform the inherent requirements of the job and it would cause the employer an unjustifiable hardship to implement special measures which would facilitate your performance of the work.

Some employers may therefore require you to complete a pre-employment medical check and ask you to disclose information about your health or assess you to determine your ability to perform the inherent requirements of the position.

Employers also need to comply with the National Privacy Principles set out in the *Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)* and the Health Privacy Principles set out in the *Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002 (NSW)* or the equivalent in your State in relation to (among other things) the collection, use and handling or disclosure of personal information about prospective employees including health

information. Because of its sensitive nature, a prospective employer cannot collect information about your health without your consent.

At work

Your employer is prohibited from discriminating against you because of your disability at work. This means that, generally, your employer must not (because of your disability):

- provide you with less favourable terms or conditions of employment than the conditions provided to other employees;
- deny or limit your access to opportunities for promotion, transfer or training or to any other employment benefits; or
- subject you to any other detriment.

Generally, you have the right to be trained, promoted and to receive benefits provided to other employees.

You also have the right not to be harassed by your employer or other colleagues about your disability. Unlawful harassment is any form of conduct or behaviour towards you that:

- is unwelcome or uninvited;
- is based on an unlawful

reason (such as your disability); and

- a reasonable person would have anticipated might humiliate, offend or intimidate you.

Your safety at work

Your employer has responsibilities under occupational health and safety legislation to do everything reasonably practical to ensure your health, safety and welfare while you are at work. As an employee, you have a responsibility under current occupational health and safety legislation to take care of your health and safety whilst at work. It is also important to ensure that your activities do not place the health and safety of your co-workers, customers, clients or others at risk.

Privacy at work

The *Privacy Act 1988 (Cth)* and the *Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002 (NSW)* or the equivalent in your State may place specific restrictions on the way in which your personal information can be handled – including how it can be collected, stored, used and disclosed. Generally, the handling of employee records

by an employer is exempt from these restrictions. Employee records are records of your personal information relating to your employment, and may include information relating to engagement, training, discipline, terms and conditions of employment, performance, leave entitlements, taxation and banking or superannuation affairs. However, if you are a contractor or applicant for a job (but not yet an employee), privacy legislation will protect your information. In addition, in some States, health information is protected even when it forms part of employee records.

Staying in your job

Generally, under both disability discrimination legislation and industrial legislation, an employer is prohibited from dismissing you from your employment because of your disability.

Under industrial legislation if you are unfairly or unlawfully dismissed you may have the right to bring a claim before a court or tribunal.

Under discrimination legislation, if you are having difficulties in performing your job, your employer has an obligation to provide you with facilities or services to assist you to perform your job (so that you can remain in employment), provided they do not cause the employer an unjustifiable hardship.

If you think you have been or are being unlawfully discriminated against because of your MS, you can lodge a complaint with either the State Anti-Discrimination Board (or similar body) or the Commonwealth Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. You may also have the right to appeal to a court or tribunal.

Step Four – Deciding whether to disclose

By the time you read this leaflet, you may have already told your employer or colleagues about your diagnosis. Some people who have missed many days of work, or spent considerable time looking for an explanation for their strange and puzzling symptoms, choose to share the new diagnosis as soon as possible with colleagues and friends at work. However, if you have not already disclosed, it may be worth taking some time to consider the possible benefits and consequences of making your diagnosis public. Once you have given out the information, you cannot take it back.

On the positive side, you may get additional support from your employer and colleagues once they have a better understanding of what you have been experiencing. In addition, disclosing your condition may reduce the stresses associated with explaining absences from work or requiring time off from work. Once you have disclosed your condition, it may be a lot easier to request changes to your work conditions to enhance your performance.

The potentially negative consequences of disclosure may be equally compelling. Employers and colleagues may have negative or inaccurate stereotypes about disability that they will not share with you. For example, they may assume that you will be unable to perform on the job, thereby forcing them to do more work or causing them to lose money. They may also be concerned that you will become unreliable and frequently need to take time off. Your employer may assume that you will not want further training or promotions. You may also find that people react to you differently, focusing on your health status rather than your talents and abilities. Given the variability and unpredictability of MS symptoms from one day to another, you may even find that people question your condition or wonder why you have some difficulty even on days when “you look so good”.

Take some time to consider the possible benefits and consequences of making your diagnosis public. Once you have given out the information, you cannot take it back.

In some circumstances, you may not have a choice about whether to disclose your diagnosis. You may have a legal obligation to disclose at least the symptoms of your condition, if not the condition itself. This obligation may be based on statute (for example occupational health and safety legislation) or contract (for example the terms of your contract of employment). This obligation may arise if your symptoms mean that you are unable to perform the inherent requirements of your job, or if your symptoms create a risk to your safety or the safety of others in the course of your work. There may also be other circumstances in which you have an obligation to disclose (for example, if it is a condition of your employment that you hold a driver's licence and you can no longer drive). In any case, it would be a good idea to obtain legal advice about whether, in your particular

circumstances, you have an obligation to disclose your condition to your employer.

Even if there is no legal obligation to disclose, if you currently have visible symptoms that might be confusing to others, or could be misinterpreted as alcohol or drug abuse (eg an unsteady gait, balance problems, or slurred speech), you might choose to let others know your diagnosis even if you do not need any conditions changed at this time.

Talking with family, friends or your doctor may be helpful in evaluating how disclosure might affect your relationship with your employer and your colleagues.

The MS Society is also available to discuss any employment issues with you, guide you in this process and refer you to appropriate resources in your local area. You may also find it helpful to talk through your decision to disclose with a health professional at the MS Society.

If you do decide to disclose, you should be prepared. Make an appointment at a mutually convenient time with your employer. Try to avoid peak work times when your employer may be pre-occupied with other pressing matters.



Arrive early to compose your thoughts and take along any written materials to support you. Rehearse what you would like to say beforehand. Focus on key things your employer needs to know and on your ability to perform your job. Practise speaking confidently and positively about your abilities, your experience and your desire to do your job well.

Disclosing your MS – whenever you decide to do it – will require a lot of public education on your part. Be prepared to explain the visible and invisible symptoms of the disease and the ways in which they can come and go

in an unpredictable way. Since most people have learned to think of an illness as something that gets better once it is treated, many people will have difficulty understanding the unpredictability of MS.

If and when you do decide to disclose your condition to your employer, it is particularly important that you provide enough information to ensure that he or she has an accurate understanding of MS and its effect on you. The MS Society's booklet for employers – "Working together: employing people with multiple sclerosis" – may be a useful start.

Step five – Consider adjustments to your job

There are a number of measures you can implement on your own as part of managing your MS at work. These include:

- measures to manage your specific symptoms – talk to your general practitioner, neurologist or other health care professional about effective strategies for managing your specific symptoms;
- time management measures – organise your workload, set priorities and pace yourself to conserve energy. Plan to undertake more difficult tasks when you are least fatigued; and
- measures to control your physical working environment – arrange your workspace to allow easy access to equipment and materials to reduce the physical demands of the job.

In addition, you may wish to consider whether you need any special services or facilities at work to accommodate your symptoms. As noted previously, under disability discrimination legislation, an employer will sometimes have obligations to

provide special services and facilities which would enable you to perform the inherent requirements of your job; unless providing these special services and facilities would impose unjustifiable hardship on the employer. (This is sometimes referred to as a ‘reasonable adjustment’ or ‘reasonable accommodation’, but these are not terms used in the law).

If you think you need any special services or facilities, you should consider discussing this with your employer. Do not expect your employer to know what you need without being told. It is not necessarily your employer’s responsibility to identify your changing needs or to offer solutions.

You may also wish to consider your obligations or options to involve other parties (in addition to your employer) in discussions about job adjustment. These people may include a union representative, occupational health and safety officer or rehabilitation co-ordinator.

Before approaching your employer, you should have a

clear idea of the difficulties you are facing and the strategies that would support your efforts to perform at your best. For example, strategies might include a disabled parking space, a desk closer to the bathroom, trolley, using a chair in preference to standing, flexi-time, part-time or reduced hours. Having identified possible adjustments, you should present your request to your employer and explain how these changes could enhance your work efforts.

Review the quality and quantity of your own work before your employer does. Don't wait for a scheduled performance review and don't wait until you are already in a crisis situation.

It might be in your best interest to do some advance research and planning so that you can present some options to your employer at the time of your request. If you do not know about the types of changes that many people with MS have successfully made, contact the MS Society to discuss your symptoms and work requirements.

Staff at the MS Society may refer you to an employment support program with expertise

and resources in this area. Alternatively, occupational therapists, neuropsychologists, physiotherapists, rehabilitation specialists or ergonomists can also be valuable resources in your efforts to identify appropriate changes in your workplace. Following an evaluation of your work environment and job functions, they may suggest strategies and tools for improving your job performance. With these suggestions in mind, you may feel more prepared to present your requests to your employer.

Your doctor or the MS Society may be able to help you access these health professionals.

You should also regularly review your job performance, and approach your employer if you are experiencing difficulties. Don't wait for a scheduled performance review and don't wait until you are already in a crisis situation.

It is important to be aware that, before agreeing to make the job adjustments you have requested, your employer will probably consider whether the job accommodations constitute an 'unjustifiable hardship'.

The following factors may be relevant:

- the costs associated with making the adjustments;
- the degree of technical difficulty associated with making the adjustments; and
- occupational health and safety issues for other employees.

Remember that:

- even with all your effort and the best will from your employer, it may not be physically possible for you to continue in your current position; and
- your employer may not be legally required to accommodate your needs; and
- you may have options other than your current job.

Step six – Look into further training

The next step is to ensure that you are trained to an optimum level in respect of the skills required for your present job. By taking advantage of any employer-provided education or training opportunities, you will be demonstrating your commitment to your work, keeping yourself up-to-date with developments in your field, and you will be giving the message that you are ready for the next career step in the company or organisation.

At the same time that you are working to update your present skills, start to think about your next career move.

Step seven – Plan for the future

At the same time that you are working to update your present skills, start to think about your next career move. This is particularly important if your current job requires a lot of physical activity that may be compromised by a change or worsening of your symptoms, or if you are concerned that your symptoms may some day prevent you from doing your current job.

You should consider whether you want to remain in the same occupation or initiate a complete career change. Changing careers is not unusual in this day and age. Career counsellors report that many Australians change careers several times in their working life. A vocational rehabilitation specialist can help you identify possible career options, as well as the programs and government subsidies or funding options that are available to help you pursue your goals. The MS Society can help you to locate a vocational specialist in your area.

Step eight – If you decide not to work

If you decide that paid work is not viable, you can still maintain a fulfilling and healthy quality of life. Developing a life plan will help you take care of your financial, physical, emotional and intellectual needs.

Meaningful occupation does not exclusively mean paid employment. Other types of *'work'* can also provide satisfaction – for example: volunteer work, homemaking, hobbies or study. Some of these options can also be explored through services that assist with vocational assessment and training (a comprehensive list of such services is described in the section titled **“If you decide to work”** on page 4). You might also contact the MS Society in your State for further information about Lifestyle Services or Specialist Employment Programs to assist you with exploring these options as part of developing a life plan.

Financial considerations

If you have never been employed, or are discontinuing full-time employment, you may be eligible for financial assistance through Centrelink.

There are a number of requirements that you must satisfy in order to qualify for this financial assistance. Contact your nearest Centrelink office for more information or Centrelink Customer Relations: FreeCALL™ 1800 050 004.

If you have been employed and are considering stopping work, you will have a superannuation scheme. You may be able to claim a disability lump sum or pension under your superannuation fund. To access funds from these sources, it is generally necessary for you to demonstrate that you are medically unable to re-enter the workforce or unable to perform the duties for which you are trained. Generally, your superannuation fund will require you to provide medical reports confirming your inability to work and you will need to enquire about this process through your own fund.

Depending upon your individual financial circumstances and the amount you receive, you may still be eligible for a part-pension through Centrelink.

Some superannuation funds will allow you to continue your

disability cover after you leave work on condition that you take up the option of paying for cover within one or two months of finishing work. It is important to note that termination of your employment may affect your right to claim from the fund. Once you have left a fund it may not be possible to make a retrospective claim on that policy. In addition, a reduction in working hours (eg full-time to part-time) may also impact on your superannuation entitlement.

If you are offered a departure package upon finishing work, you should carefully consider the terms of your entitlement under your superannuation scheme to ensure that your departure package is, in fact, higher than any disability pay-out under your superannuation fund. You should not accept a departure package until your suitability for a disability pay-out has been assessed.

If appropriate, you may also wish to consider medical retirement. This is where you elect to take early retirement based on medical grounds. This would usually occur once all options for maintaining employment are exhausted. It is important to find out what constitutes medical retirement

in your particular occupation or industry and what medical assessments are needed. It is also important to determine what effect medical retirement will have on entitlements, exclusions or limitations as outlined in your superannuation policy.

It may also be possible for you to make a claim on insurance policies that you may have such as income protection, trauma, life insurance or mortgage protection or consumer credit insurance. Again, it is important to note that leaving work may affect your right to claim on some employer income protection policies.

If you make a claim on your superannuation fund or insurance policy and it is rejected, you can appeal to the courts, to the Superannuation Complaints Tribunal or to an insurance complaints scheme.

It is wise to carefully consider all your options and to seek expert advice in planning your financial future. You may wish to consult an independent accredited financial planner (you may have to pay for this service). If you are currently having financial difficulties, a community financial counsellor may be of assistance. Centrelink, the

Australian Taxation Office and the State and Federal Government Superannuation Authorities also provide advisory services on various aspects of medical retirement from paid employment (see resources list).

The MS Society is developing further partnerships in the corporate sector that could assist people with MS to access superannuation, insurance and legal advice on a pro bono or reduced fee basis.

It is wise to carefully consider all your options and to seek expert advice in planning your financial future.

Maintaining your physical, emotional and intellectual wellbeing

Physical Wellbeing –

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle and routine is particularly important if you are no longer working. It is easy to increase your consumption of food, TV, alcohol and tobacco and to become less active when there is no set daily routine. Now may be a good time to see a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or recreation officer with the MS Society, or to explore the healthy lifestyle programs run through the Department of Health or

Department of Sport and Recreation and the recreation options in your local area. Local Government Community Directories are often good sources of information.

Emotional Wellbeing – Your workplace can often be an important source of social support. Recognising this and making plans to maintain valued friendships and to guard against social isolation can assist greatly with the transition out of paid employment. Explore the availability of community transport and taxi concession vouchers if mobility is a difficulty. An MS Society health professional can often give you information about local community and government services. Joining in with community activities or voluntary work may assist you to maintain your self-esteem by contributing your skills to the community, as well as offering the possibility of new friendships and interests.

It is also important to recognise that your family will be adjusting to the change in your lifestyle. Keep the lines of communication open and seek counselling if you need assistance in this transition process. An MS Society staff member could assist you to access available services.



Intellectual Stimulation – Not being in paid employment may give you the perfect opportunity to pursue those interests, hobbies and courses for which you previously never had time. Make plans to structure your time to ensure that you don't just let the day slip away and avoid letting television become your companion. For example, seek out mutual interest groups in your community or use the Internet to access a vast array of information and distance education. If you do not have a computer at home, it is possible to access the Internet at your local library or at an Internet café.

Support and financial assistance for costs and equipment may be available through educational organisations (eg TAFE), if you would like to pursue further study or general interest courses. Contact the disability officer or career counsellor at the organisation in your area.

Step nine – Identify ways to manage stress

Coping with a chronic illness and identifying ways to manage the demands of work, family and social commitments around variable and unpredictable symptoms can be highly stressful.

Many people diagnosed with MS believe they should stop working in order to minimise any stresses that might hasten disease progression. However, research has not identified any causal link between stress and either the onset or worsening of MS symptoms.

Given that modern-day life is filled with stress whether one is working or not, the most reasonable approach is probably to continue working as long as you find it necessary and/or satisfying to do so. After all, finding yourself without the economic, social, and emotional benefits of employment can also be highly stressful.

Stress is an integral part of our lives, our work and relationships. Efforts to avoid stress will never be entirely successful. People who try to avoid stress by gradually removing themselves

from any and all situations that are challenging or difficult might also find that life has lost much of its interest and satisfaction. This, in turn, may become an additional stress.

While you may not be able to remove all of the stress from your life, you can learn better ways to manage stress.

Now is a good time to consider how you deal with stress. Review your usual stress management techniques and invite your family members to do the same. Identify effective methods to assist you to relax and manage symptoms of stress at work and home. Many people take breaks from their everyday pressures and tensions by engaging in hobbies, sports activities, or simple distractions like TV or music. Stress management techniques can be very effective as long as your chosen activities are not affected by your MS symptoms.

If you can no longer find the same relaxation or enjoyment because your symptoms are getting in the way, now is a good time to explore new

options for stress management. For example, people who have always used competitive sports as a way to relax and “blow off steam” may be frustrated by their inability to play as well as they could in the past. They may be uncomfortable with the temporary worsening of symptoms that can result when they get overheated while exercising. Swimming, water aerobics, yoga, or T'ai Chi may be satisfying substitutes. Other stress management techniques you may want to explore include meditation, art projects or music, to name just a few.

You should also keep in mind that maintaining a healthy, balanced lifestyle, paying attention to diet, rest and regular exercise will all help to maintain an optimal level of stamina and fitness.

Review your usual stress management techniques and invite family members to do the same.

Step ten – Use available resources and supports

This crucial step is as much a first step as it is the last. Employment decisions and career planning are not simple and there is no need for any individual to “go it alone”. Vocational specialists, career counsellors, social workers and psychologists, a peer with MS or a supportive mentor can all provide helpful information and guidance as you work to explore and maximise your employment options.

The MS Society can provide you with employment-related educational materials as well as referrals to a variety of specialists in this area depending on your individual situation. Try to make use of all the available resources and be informed of your rights and responsibilities.

Your employer may also provide some type of employee assistance program (often including counselling and/or advice) which might be useful.



Useful Resources & Links

General Information about MS

Please contact your local MS Society to discuss your specific information needs on

1800 287 367

Up-to-date information and resources about multiple sclerosis are available from the MS Society for anyone with a question about MS and the many related issues.

Resources are provided in a number of formats and may include the loan of a book, up-to-date published articles, in-house handouts, a video or a link to online information. The resources can be collected in person, sent in the post or emailed as suitable.

Booklets

MS The Mystery Disease

Australia. MS Australia.

Revised 7th edition January 2005.

What Everyone Should Know About MS

Australia. MS Australia.

Revised 4th edition June 2005.

To obtain these or any other information and resources about multiple sclerosis please contact the MS Society on

1800 287 367

MS Websites

MS Australia and the National Resource Centre (MS ARC)

Including links to local State Services and Programs.

www.msaustralia.org.au

WorkCover

WorkCover promotes workplace health and safety, and provides a workers compensation system for the employers and workers.

www.workcover.nsw.gov.au

www.workcover.act.gov.au

www.workcover.vic.gov.au

www.workcover.tas.gov.au

www.workcover.qld.gov.au

www.worksafe.nt.gov.au

www.workcover.com (SA)

Use the telephone directories & the Internet to find:

Australian Taxation Office Superannuation Helpline

13 10 20

Comsuper (Commonwealth Superannuation)

13 23 66

Financial Planning Association of Australia Ltd

1800 626 393

Vocational guidance and career counselling services
& Disability officers

- also available through educational institutions
eg universities, TAFE, OTEN

(Open Training and Education Network – distance education).

Local government and community directories can be good sources of information and contact details for organisations such as evening and community colleges, community centres, activity groups and organisations.

Employment Websites

Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission

HREOC has responsibilities for inquiring into alleged infringements under current legislation.

www.hreoc.gov.au

Tel: 1300 369 711

TTY: 1800 620 241

CRS Australia

CRS Australia delivers vocational rehabilitation services to Australian citizens or residents who have an injury, disability or health condition.

www.crsrehab.gov.au

Tel: 1800 624 824

TTY: 02 9242 4872

Centrelink

Centrelink is a government agency delivering a range of Commonwealth services to the Australian community.

www.centrelink.gov.au

Tel: 13 1021

TTY: 13 3677

The Association of Competitive Employment

ACE is the peak body for Open Employment Services to people with disabilities across Australia.

www.acenational.org.au

Tel: 0425 725 137

Employers Making a Difference (EMAD)

The Australian Employers' Network on Disability

Employers Making a Difference is a not for profit organisation funded by its members to operate as a strategic business partner with companies, organisations and governments employing people with a disability.

www.emad.asn.au

Tel: 02 9261 3922

Job Able

Job Able aims to be a relevant, useful and informative guide for Job Network employment consultants working with job seekers with a disability, for job seekers with a disability and for employers or potential employers.

www.jobable.gov.au/employer.asp

Job Network

Job Network is a national network of private and community organisations dedicated to finding jobs for unemployed people, particularly the long term unemployed. Whether you are a job seeker or employer, this site provides information about how Job Network members can help you.

www.jobnetwork.gov.au

Tel: 13 17 15

Multiple Solutions Employment Specialists

MSES is committed to providing high quality employment services to people with neurological and physical disabilities.

www.msaustralia.org.au/ms_sa/multiplesolutions

Tel: 08 8360 0845

MS Australia

ABN 51 008 515 508
PO Box 210, Lidcombe
New South Wales 1825
www.msaustralia.org.au

Multiple Sclerosis NSW/VIC

ABN 66 004 942 287

MS Studdy Centre

Joseph Street, Lidcombe
New South Wales 2141
Tel: (02) 9646 0600
Fax: (02) 9643 1486
Email: msconnect@msnsw.org.au
MS Connect: 1800 042 138

The Nerve Centre

54 Railway Road, Blackburn
Victoria 3130
Tel: (03) 9845 2700
Fax: (03) 9845 2777
Email: infoline@mssociety.com.au
MS Information Line: 1800 287 367

Multiple Sclerosis Society of Tasmania

ABN 95 009 484 093
15 Princes Street, Sandy Bay
Tasmania 7005
Tel: (03) 6224 4111
Fax: (03) 6224 4222
Email: aboutus@mstas.org.au
MS Information Line: 1800 676 721

Multiple Sclerosis Society of Queensland

ABN 56 731 473 412
286 Gladstone Road, Dutton Park
Queensland 4102
Tel: (07) 3840 0888
Fax: (07) 3840 0813
Email: info@msqld.org.au
MS Information Line: 1800 177 591

Multiple Sclerosis Society of SA & NT

ABN 85 662 359 859
274 North East Road, Klemzig
South Australia 5087
Tel: (08) 8360 0800
Fax: (08) 8360 0899
Email: ms@ms.asn.au
Toll Free: 1800 812 311

Multiple Sclerosis Society of WA

ABN 75 638 080 972
29 Parkhill Way, Wilson
Western Australia 6107
Tel: (08) 9365 4888
Fax: (08) 9451 4453
Email: multiple@multiple-wa.asn.au
MS Information Line: 1800 287 367

Multiple Sclerosis Society of ACT

ABN 64 967 612 796
Gloria McKerrow House
117 Denison Street, Deakin
Australian Capital Territory 2600
Tel: (02) 6285 2999
Fax: (02) 6281 0817
Email: info@ms.org.au
MS Information Line: 1800 356 354

Multiple Sclerosis Research Australia (MSRA)

ABN 34 008 581 431
293 Mowbray Rd, Chatswood
New South Wales 2067
Tel: (02) 9411 4522
Fax: (02) 9411 7456
Email: info@msra.org.au
Web: www.msra.org.au



Seeking the Cure. Providing the Care.