

Employment and Parkinson's

Parkinson's is a progressive neurological condition, characterised by both motor (movement) and non-motor symptoms.

Whilst the average age of diagnosis is 65, Parkinson's can affect adults of any age. It is estimated that one in five

people living with Parkinson's are of working age, often referred to as Young Onset Parkinson's.

In addition to rigidity and tremor, visible symptoms that may affect employment include decreased facial expression, microphonia (quiet voice) and micrographia (small handwriting). Other less visible symptoms include slower thinking and challenges with problem solving.

The impact an individual's Parkinson's has on their employment will depend on the nature of the work and symptoms experienced. Mild symptoms, such as a slight tremor may not affect employment at all.

Many people diagnosed with Parkinson's will be keen to remain in the workforce. In addition to the financial benefit of employment, work is often strongly associated with an individual's sense of identity, independence, self-esteem and social connection.

With medication and support following diagnosis, together with understanding and adjustments from colleagues and employers, productive and rewarding employment can be possible.

Disclosure

Individuals with Parkinson's may face the dilemma of whether to disclose their diagnosis to their current or prospective employer. Generally speaking, there is no legal obligation to disclose your diagnosis.

If you are requested to complete a pre-employment health questionnaire or medical examination, you do not have to disclose your condition unless it is relevant to the job. It is important to disclose your condition if your ability to perform your duties is affected and is especially critical if your symptoms have the potential to create an unsafe workplace for you or others.

For some, disclosing a diagnosis may be a positive step. It may explain visible problems, reduce stress levels arising from attempting to disguise symptoms and enable simple changes to assist with productivity and safety.

Parkinson's and employment discrimination

It is illegal for your employer to discriminate on the grounds of a Parkinson's diagnosis and employers should take reasonable steps to support you. Examples of reasonable steps may include changes to your work environment, greater flexibility with work hours or allowing more breaks. If you are requesting some workplace modifications, you will need to disclose your diagnosis with your employer.

In addition to Federal legislation, each State and Territory have specific rulings to address the needs of both the employer and employee in cases where disability impacts employment. Individual advice should be sought from the relevant authority. Workers' compensation legislation may apply in some circumstances.

Disability Employment Services

Disability Employment Services (DES) is a government-funded employment service that may support people with Parkinson's in seeking or maintaining employment, including funding towards necessary workplace modifications (Employment Assistance Fund) and developing practices that support both employees and employers.

Employees or employers can explore these options through the national website; Job Access; www.jobaccess.gov.au or by calling 1800 464 800.

Managing symptoms at work

- **Incorporate regular breaks:** Pace yourself as fatigue can impact both work and leisure time. Scheduling regular breaks may help focus your attention and improve productivity.
 - **Manage stress and anxiety:** Recognise the causes of stress and the parts of the day when you feel anxious. Seeing a psychologist or counsellor may help or you may consider trying some relaxation strategies.
 - **Allow sufficient time:** Bradykinesia, characterised by slowness of movement, may mean you require more time and effort to complete tasks, leading to fatigue. To manage this, consider adjusting your schedule and allowing extra time for tasks.
- Open communication with your employer about your needs can be highly beneficial in maintaining deadlines and schedules.
- **Consider the environment:** Some work environments can involve lots of distractions which can be challenging for individuals whose ability to multi-task is impaired. Completing one task before starting another, minimising distractions and maintaining an uncluttered work environment can assist.
 - **Consider how you work:** Changes in mobility and hand function, sustained body positions, repetitive tasks, pain and fatigue may all contribute to challenges with managing work duties. An occupational therapist may be able to suggest workplace modifications, assistive technology or strategies to help. Reduced speech volume and vocal changes may impact telephone and office dialogue. Speech therapy may be beneficial in maintaining optimum communication.
 - **Perform complex tasks when at your best:** Consider scheduling important tasks when you feel your best and your medication is working well. Plan by allowing more time to complete tasks or by breaking them down so they seem more manageable.

Seeking professional guidance and support

Some individuals will benefit from more customised strategies and therapies to help them maintain, improve or adjust work-related skills, duties and roles. Allied Health may be particularly useful for addressing concerns relating to communication, mobility, mood, productivity and safety.

If an individual is under 65 years and eligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), they may be able to pursue funded therapies, assistance or work-place modifications to help them achieve their work-related goals. These supports are generally greater than what may be provided by an employer or by the DES.

As an alternative, individuals may be able to pursue other, government-subsidised supports and therapies or access privately funded therapy options.

Planning

Initially, symptoms may be mild and major lifestyle changes may be avoided. This can allow for a period of adjustment and to plan with realistic expectations.

You should seek professional legal and/or financial advice before making any changes to your working hours, considering premature retirement or taking a voluntary redundancy. It's important to know that hasty decisions to reduce your hours or terminate your employment may affect access to certain employment benefits, insurances or superannuation entitlements.

Further Information

Job Access: www.jobaccess.gov.au or call 1800 464 800

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS): www.ndis.gov.au or call 1800 800 110

Fight Parkinson's is a leading source of specialised health information and advice services. Through research, education and support, we strive to improve the lives of people living with Parkinson's, PSP, MSA and CBS.

Any medial information provided is for general information purposes only. You should always talk to your treating doctor and qualified healthcare providers for personal medical and health-related instructions.

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