# How to Manage Working With Arthritis

by SUSAN CASSIDY

## Working With Arthritis: Coping With OA in the Workplace

Nothing can add more stress to a chronic health condition than figuring out how to manage it within the parameters of your job.

From doctor's appointments to medical procedures, stress can quickly overwhelm anyone suffering from any medical condition. When it's an invisible illness like osteoarthritis, communication is especially important since most symptoms are not readily visible to others.

Since occupations and OA symptoms can differ greatly, we're going to take a look at some generalized ways to help find relief while you are on the job. We'll also look at ways to tackle communication so you can head off conflict before it has a chance to stress you out.

Adapt these suggestions to meet your individual needs, and be sure to talk to your rheumatologist and pain management team for more ways to manage your specific symptoms.

### Be Proactive

Managing a health condition in addition to your regular workload is challenging. Taking some time to reflect on what you need to keep yourself as comfortable as possible while working will serve you well.

This applies to physical modifications, like working on a level in your building without stairs; to emotional ones, like not being harassed for taking sick time.

In some instances, you may need to reconsider the type of work you do. That is much easier said than done, but try to be open-minded and see if you could apply your skill set to another position that would help your symptoms.

### Physical Modifications

Let's address the ways you can make your workplace more comfortable first. Since the root of almost all arthritic pain is inactivity, you want to look at your current position and search for ways to make it more active. Being even just a little more active will keep your joints moving, which is always a good thing!

- If you sit for most of your day, see what you can do to take frequent, short movement breaks. A quick stretch or a walk to the restroom and back can give you some relief.
- Look into using a stability ball or another kind of chair that is most comfortable and supportive for your spine.
- Walking is an aspect of many jobs. It's super important to invest in solid, supportive walking shoes. Yes, it does mean wearing shoes that aren't your prettiest, but you're a work, so you may have to let your fashion flag fly on the weekends.

- Swallow your pride and use assistive technology (if available) or physical assistance devices, like canes or mobility scooters. Your health comes first, and you will thank yourself at the end of the day.
- While most activity is beneficial to keeping you productive, aspects of your job could end up being too much of a strain. For example, walking often strains my back, hips, and knee so at times I have to be careful with how many trips to the copy room I make.

**Emotional Support**

Seeking emotional support on the job can be tricky. You do have the law on your side, so let's start there. The Americans with Disability Act of 1990 outlines the federal regulations for employers regarding employees with disabilities. Be sure to start the line of communication with your immediate supervisor or human resources department and use the website as a resource if needed.

Hopefully, you will be communicating with people who will treat you with respect and empathy. Unfortunately, there are times when that will not be the case.

Remember to keep your cool, stand your ground, and do what you can to leave that stress at work when you leave. You may also have to face the possibility that you can no longer effectively do your job and will need to find another position. These are difficult decisions that you should think through before making anything final, and talk through with a trusted friend or professional counselor.

Until you sort your specific situation out, the following are some suggestions to make it on the job with as little stress as you can.

- Surround yourself with people who are supportive and helpful. If you are in the unfortunate situation of not getting along with even one person you work with, do your job and perhaps expand supports out of work in place.
- Using your time outside of work to prepare healthy meals, participate in any kind of physical activity or therapy, and getting a good night's sleep will go a long way in making your day at work more manageable.
- Listen to yourself when you need to rest. If you find yourself indoors a great deal from a flare up, stay connected with co-workers, friends and family online.
- Find a social group like a church, book group, or craft activity to keep your spirits strong. Becoming too isolated can lead to decreased physical activity, depression, and could also make symptoms of a flare more uncomfortable to manage.

**You Are Your Best Advocate**

There are numerous factors that go into managing a chronic pain condition like arthritis, and being able to continue working comfortably may take trying some new ideas. Keeping track of your symptoms on an app or in a journal can help pinpoint areas you may need to address at your workplace.

Be patient with yourself, and don't make any decisions about your employment when you are under stress. Bounce your symptoms and potential solutions from someone who knows you well and can help navigate.

This can be a time consuming, confusing and potentially very stressful situation. Keep the lines of communication open with your employer as much as you can, and be sure to ask for help if you need it. You may not be aware of all of your options if you don't speak up from time to time.

Everything stems from your health. Do whatever you need to do to make your health a priority and maintain working as long as you can. Be well!