

# Employment with Parkinson's Disease: Working It Out



**For many people, one of the first questions after a Parkinson's disease (PD) diagnosis is, "How long will I be able to work?" This question is especially important to people with young-onset PD, who may be far from retirement. A Parkinson's diagnosis does not mean your career is over.**

As with most aspects of Parkinson's, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Factors in the decision-making process include the nature and physical demands of a job, the acceptance and support offered by employers and coworkers, response to medication, financial issues and the rate of disease progression. Some people continue to work for many years after a Parkinson's diagnosis, while others may find that the physical and mental stresses of their job become too challenging, too quickly.

## **To tell or not to tell?**

Deciding when to inform your employer and coworkers about your condition is a decision only you can make. Telling your boss sooner rather than later has its advantages, especially if your symptoms start to get worse and begin to affect your performance. By making your boss aware of your condition, he or she can then work with you to accommodate your needs.

Many newly diagnosed people with Parkinson's avoid telling their employers and coworkers about their condition because they fear they will be unfairly treated. But the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was created, in part, to keep employers from discriminating against people with disabilities or certain health conditions when they are hired, on the job or being fired. Every work setting is different. It is important that you feel comfortable with your choice.

## **Workplace Accommodations**

By law, people with Parkinson's are protected against discrimination in employment practices. The ADA requires employers to make reasonable accommodations for employees, as long as they do not impose an "undue hardship" on the employer's business. A reasonable accommodation is defined as "any modification or adjustment to a job or the work environment that will enable a qualified applicant or employee with a disability to participate in the application process or to perform essential job functions."

Some other examples of workplace accommodations that can be helpful for people with Parkinson's include the provision of adaptive computer equipment, such as an ergonomic work station, voice recognition software or a trackball. Speech amplifiers or mobility devices, such as a scooter or cane, might be requested. Depending on the nature of the job and company, requests for a more flexible work schedule, a part-time arrangement or telecommuting might be options. Accommodations to help deal with cognitive problems could include arranging for a workspace away from noise or other distractions, and the use of memory aids such as schedule planners and written instructions. An Occupational Therapist can help identify different tools and tricks to adapt the work environment to meet your needs as the disease progresses.

One source of information about the workplace is the Job Accommodations Network (JAN) — a free consulting service provided by the U.S. Department of Labor. JAN works to increase the employability of people with disabilities by providing individualized worksite accommodations

solutions; providing technical assistance regarding the ADA and other disability related legislation; and educating callers about self-employment options. Contact JAN at [ASKJAN.org/disabilities/Parkinson-s-Disease.cfm](http://ASKJAN.org/disabilities/Parkinson-s-Disease.cfm) and 1-800-526-7234 for suggestions for accommodations under the ADA.

Written by Linda Herman. Linda is a Librarian at Medaille College and is a Parkinson's advocate who works with New Yorkers for the Advancement of Medical Research. Linda was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 1995 at the age of 45. After 22 years as an academic librarian, 10 of them with PD, she decided to retire.

Call our Helpline for more information at 1-800-4PD-INFO (473-4636).

#### TIPS

### Job Comfort and Safety

- ✓ **Consider all required tasks within your workday. If possible, schedule the most challenging tasks at the time of day you feel most rested and mobile. Schedule breaks as needed.**
- ✓ **Make tasks easier by using technology. Investigate computer hardware/software adaptations. Try a Dictaphone if your handwriting makes writing messages difficult or use a headset on the telephone to improve posture and mobility.**
- ✓ **Seek an ergonomic assessment to make sure your desk or work station is designed to reduce unsafe or inefficient movements. Change position often, taking frequent stretch breaks.**
- ✓ **Use good body mechanics when lifting, carrying, bending and stooping. Use a cart to transport items if carrying things becomes more difficult.**
- ✓ **Delegate or trade more challenging tasks with others when possible.**
- ✓ **Maximize the benefits of your medication. Use a pill timer to make certain you are on time with every dose.**
- ✓ **Intersperse sedentary tasks with more active ones.**
- ✓ **Explore job share or flex time options if available.**