How to Continue Working With COPD

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

Working With COPD

Is your chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) slowing you down? Are you considering giving up work? We all know how hard it is to live without a regular income, so it is important to make sure we exhaust all avenues before deciding to try to claim government benefits. Keep on reading to find some valuable advice and tips on how to continue working with COPD.

How Working With COPD Can Be Like Running a Marathon

When I was first diagnosed with COPD, I would work long hours without sleep. This cycle of wanting to work, but not being able to overcome the exhaustion brought about by the symptoms of COPD, can lead to depression.

This vicious cycle is one many of us have to deal with and applies whether we are working or just going about our daily routine.

Like many others with COPD, walking up stairs, pollutants and other triggers made working difficult. With my job being manual, and often outdoors, it was hard to avoid many of my triggers.

Dealing with COPD and summer heat is particularly bad for me and I become more short of breath during this season — which is long here in Australia. I was only 45 when diagnosed with COPD, so not working was not an option — I just had to figure out how I could do it.

Does this sound like you or someone you know? Like many people with respiratory disease, much of our lives revolve around avoiding situations that will affect our condition.

We can choose to hide away, or we can be proactive and limit our exposure by thinking and planning ahead. So how do we apply that to our work environment?

Talk to Your Employer About Working With COPD

Being shy about your disease will not help you, your work colleges, or your friends. Be upfront and open with your boss: tell them about your disease, how it affects you, and what you need to happen to make your work life more productive.

Sell the fact that if you are happy at work and measures have been put in place to help you cope, you are more likely to be productive and a valued part of the company you work for.

In this day and age, it is rare (and illegal in many countries) for an employer to not provide you with a suitable work environment. If your employer is being difficult and not wanting to accommodate your needs, then maybe it is time to change your employer.

It's important to identify what triggers your symptoms in the workplace and suggest ways in which change can be made in a cooperative manner. Moving smoking areas away from entry and exit points of your workplace is just one example of a positive change that can be easily made.

Building Our Work Capacity

Those of you who have read my previous articles know how much I bang on about exercise and nutrition, and this applies to building our work capacity. Rather than devoting the rest of this article to exercise and nutrition, let's just put it as rule number one to getting yourself into shape for your job.

Remember, a fit, well-nourished body will help you control your breathing better, which will help you deal with flare-ups better. What worked for me is taking some time out to stabilize my disease. If you are able, take some vacation time to allow your body to just relax.

Spend this time thinking about your environment and how you can make it work better for you. Identify what affects you most — triggers, tiredness or simply overdoing things.

If there are certain triggers at work, think about how you can make change to limit their impact.

Are you getting good quality sleep at night or are you arriving at work tired? Do you have stairs to negotiate in your workplace? Can your work area be relocated to make work life easier?

These are all things to work on that can make your work life less taxing and more enjoyable. Cutting back your hours of work can be an option — this could be a temporary measure or a long-term solution.

For me, cutting back my hours and getting fit for work was the answer. As I became stronger I was able to work more hours. Nowadays I work up to six days a week and between eight and 12 hours per day.

Finding the Right Career

You may find a change of career is a better proposition, as you can look for a job that will be COPD-friendly. With that I mean a workplace that does not have the problems you have had to deal with in the past — no stairs, smoke-free, flexible hours, and/or closer to home.

Many workplaces these days are allowing and encouraging employees to work from home a few days a week.

There are also many jobs that can be home-based and you may only have to go into an office once a week. A home-based work environment allows you to have far more control over your work life and tailor it for your needs.

Changing careers later in your work life may seem quite stressful, but remember you can take your time and gradually transition into your new job — it does not have to happen tomorrow. Positive change is better than no change, regardless of how long it takes.

If you are newly diagnosed or in the early stages of COPD, this can be a good time to look to the future. If you think your job may become an obstacle for you in the future, then start to plan what sort of career would be best suited for you in the years to come.

Your boss might be able to direct your job into a more suitable environment if they have time to plan for your future needs.

Indeed, talking to your employer at an early stage of your disease may well be the most important decision you make in your work life.

My working with COPD secret so far has been more about common sense — avoiding triggers, resting when my body tells me to, keeping fit, and well nourished. In saying that, I have also looked into career changes that will be

more beneficial to my work life as I get older, and plan to follow this path. I plan to work forever in some capacity, otherwise, I will drive my wife nuts!