



Time2Work

Module 2:

Support materials for people who are already employed when they develop a rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease

Talking to employers and managers

If your rheumatic and musculoskeletal disease (RMD) has reached a point where you are simply no longer able to manage your current job, you may have to talk to your employer or manager.

Before you approach your employer or manager consider their perspective. They will have financial goals. All businesses and organisations must cover their running costs, which include your wages or salary, and set aside money for maintenance and investment for the future. Businesses and organisations in the private sector also need to make a profit for their shareholders.

Larger companies usually tend to be more profitable and will have more money to invest in people, improving their workplace and taking on people with special needs. But even large corporations can go through hard times when they will need to look for ways to reduce their overheads – their running costs. Smaller companies may run on very limited profit margins, so will need to look at how they spend their money very carefully. Every area of a company or organisation will be given goals and targets and many of these will relate to contributing to the profitability of the company or financial viability of an organisation.

However much your employer or manager may like working with you, they are going to have to work out how they can accommodate your health needs with their business or department goals. In general, this will usually be easier for larger companies and organisations than for smaller ones.

Your needs

First, consider your needs. What are your health problems and how are these affecting your work? For example:

- Unpredictable flares and invisible symptoms such as fatigue, may mean you cannot always plan for when you are going to need to take time off work
- If you live in a rural area and have to travel to hospital appointments and tests this may mean taking several days off work
- Physical deterioration may mean that you are no longer able to do manual tasks, or need specially adapted equipment (*see also fact sheets on Adapting the Workplace and in Module 3 on Retraining and Building Confidence*)

How will these affect your employer or manager?

Whether you are involved in office or manual work, your employer or manager may have production targets, financial goals, deadlines or other targets to meet. They may also be responsible for work schedules, delegating tasks and ensuring that people have manageable workloads. Some businesses will have busy times of year when people may be asked to work overtime. Absenteeism and presenteeism could make it difficult for your employer or manager to manage workloads at busy times.

What solutions could you offer and what language could you use to frame your discussion?

Approaching your employer or manager

If you have not already told your employer / manager that you have a RMD you will need to consider how you are going to approach this (*see To Disclose or not to disclose*). If you have not already done so, you might consider talking to a trusted co-worker before you talk to your employer or manager. If you have supportive co-workers or a co-worker in a similar situation, this could help your case (*see Talking to co-workers*). The Human Resources department may also be able to help you. However, news can spread fast, so it is important to ensure that you are the first person to inform your boss about your situation.

Before you approach your employer or manager take some time to consider what you are going to say. Keep information about your RMD simple, do not use medical terms and only tell your employer or manager what they need to know about your condition and how this affects your work. Try not to become emotional and stick to the facts.

Use terminology that will reflect your employer or manager's perspective. Tell your him/her that you understand their situation, but that you would like to discuss some options with them that would help minimise disruption to their work schedule and could mean you can still cover all or most of your tasks.

Being positive in your approach, showing that you understand your employer or manager's perspective and offering solutions for their consideration will demonstrate that you take your work seriously and really want to continue with your employment as far as possible.

Addressing problems with solutions

When you talk to your employer or manager, discuss what you CAN do rather than what you cannot do. Below are some problems you may have as a result of your condition and some potential solutions you can offer.

| Problem | Solution/s |
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| <p>Absenteeism – for medical appointments or related to your condition flaring up</p> <p>Job disruptions - e.g., presenteeism, arriving late/leaving early, unable to attend meetings, unable to take on extra responsibilities or apply for a promotion, difficulties with co-workers or supervisor</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If you know when your appointments are or can anticipate when you will have to be away from work, tell your manager as early as possible and find out how you can best manage your workload ▪ Find out what meetings you have – could you potentially dial into calls from your home? Or try to participate or stay in touch with the group in some other way, such as through having regular catch-ups with team members or a co-worker ▪ Find out what activities or responsibilities are required in your job or what your employer/manager would like you to start doing. If you need support with these, such as adaptations made to your workplace, or help from a co-worker, discuss the options with your employer/manager and work out the best option/s ▪ Your healthcare professionals or local RMD support group may have some advice or information you could take with you to discuss with your employer/manager |
| <p>Reduced work hours</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If you do not think you will be able to work full time, discuss this early on with your employer/manager and work out the options available, such as job sharing or limiting your work to particular projects ▪ If you are only working certain hours each week, make sure everyone around you is aware of your timetable, when you will be at work. ▪ Make sure that everyone is aware of your responsibilities, what you have done, what needs to be done whilst you are away and whose responsibility it is |
| <p>Cannot take on particular activities or responsibilities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Find out what activities or responsibilities are required in your job or what your employer/manager would like you to start doing. If you need support with these, such as adaptations made to your workplace, help from a co-worker or you need gadgets or other assistive devices, discuss the options |

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| | <p>with your employer/manager and work out the best solutions. You may even just be able to perform the activity differently. Your healthcare professionals or local RMD support group may have some advice or information you could take with you to discuss with your employer/manager</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Perhaps you need to rethink what other activities and responsibilities you CAN do which are not part of your current job description. You could suggest that you take on different responsibilities / activities to ensure you are supporting your co-workers and fulfilling your role |
| <p>Anticipatory coping</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Take measures to prevent the problem from happening, such as pacing activity and energy or taking regular stretching breaks ▪ If you think an issue may arise in the future which affects your ability to perform your job, raise it as soon as possible and always be prepared to explore and offer solutions |