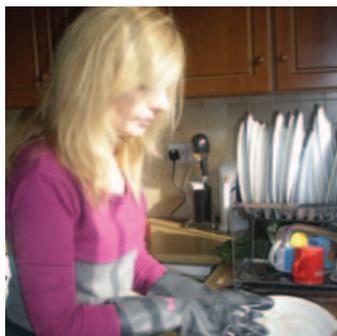
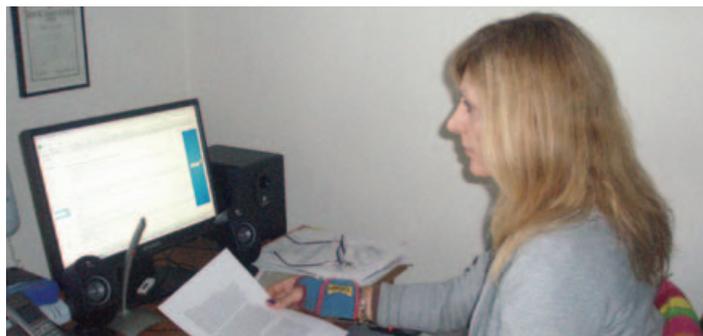


Irene



Working at home



At my workplace



**Irene Pitsillidou
Cyprus**

My name is Irene, I am 56 years old.

I am married with three children and live in the capital of Cyprus, Nicosia. I work as a private secretary and learned about the Stene Prize from the organisation I am actively involved with, the Cyprus League Against Rheumatism. For me it is important that people understand how a person with a rheumatic disease lives, works and survives with all the difficulties linked to this disease. I hope that my experience will also help others, many of whom may face similar problems, and offer them some solutions.

Work and rheumatic disease – my daily life

My telephone rang ten minutes ago, but when I ended the call, I took the opportunity to have another little nap. Now it's ten past six. Time to get up, Roulla, if you want to get everything done. But a slight feeling of numbness in the fingers and shoulders reminds me that I need to gradually get my circulation going and take my medication.

I get up, stretching my limbs, and begin to prepare breakfast for my children and my husband. I get dressed, get myself ready, pick up my folders, invoices, receipts, and finally check my diary to see what I have to do and whether I need to take them all with me. I remember that today is the day for my hydrotherapy and exercise. My bag has been ready since last night, with towels, soap and everything. I take my medication, because without it, the numbness and prickling in my hands gets very annoying, especially when I am

driving or typing in the office.

For no particular reason, I start thinking about 1994. The year the clock stopped forever, as far as my health was concerned. Rheumatic disease in my hands damaged the muscles and nerves, leaving me disabled. I remember the endless pain, numbness, the hot sensation, the prickling, the inability to lift a weight, to cook, to type on the computer, to do the cleaning or even open a bottle just to mention a few things. It spread to my left leg, making walking and driving difficult for a long time. I remember the endless nights when I didn't sleep a wink because of the pain, until finally I couldn't stand it any more and took the initiative of asking my doctor for medication to help me sleep. After some months of treatment and medication, I began to be in a more bearable state and went to work (working for a public service organisation), stubbornly determined to fight my problems and come out victorious. But at work I was faced with endless trials and tribulations, it was a living hell. I went to the trouble of getting doctor's certificates, only to find that my work still doubted me and refused to change my duties, even though I could not work on the computer. I went through so much, a daily

martyrdom, physical and mental stress, with many tears, threats and dismissal letters, rejection by old "friends" and colleagues. I dug in my heels and fought against my illness on the one hand and my work environment on the other. Three children and life as a displaced person did not leave me much scope for giving up without a fight. I achieved some better days at work and in my everyday life thanks to a lot of physiotherapy, some medication, and by gathering what hope and strength I could find within me to survive and live while 'self-managing' my illness.

"Mum, what's happening today; aren't you going to work? Dad's waiting for you to go to the laboratory."

I jump, startled. So many years have passed. Sixteen whole years, and many times – like a nightmare which you drive away only to see it return and come to life again – my mind has been haunted by the pain of rheumatic disease in all its misery, until I come to my senses, frightened, and say to myself, Roulla, you must be strong, rheumatic disease will follow you wherever you go, so accept it and keep going.



Me and my beautiful daughters

In the laboratory, I discuss work with my husband, and begin by catching up with outstanding office tasks before turning to external work. I don't type anything on the computer because that is impossible for me; the only thing I can do is update myself on business matters. Today I have to go to two banks on business and, on the way, pick up some small parts and collect payments from various customers. I finish all my work and my fingers are complaining about the driving, in addition to the numbness which I usually have on other days. In spite of this, I enjoy every day and consider myself blessed to be able to do all the things I do. I work, deliver, and I'm paid. At 12.30 I have an appointment for hydrotherapy and exercise. I have to go at least three times a week, so that my condition, as far as possible, is tolerably good, with less pain and less medication.

"In spite of this, I enjoy every day and consider myself blessed to be able to do all the things I do. I work, deliver, and I'm paid."

At my physiotherapy sessions I convince myself that it doesn't matter that for many hours of my life, whether I like it or not, whether it's hot or cold, I have to go. I'm convinced that rheumatic disease and physiotherapy go together, rheumatic disease and doctors go together. At physiotherapy I say hello to people, talk and have a great time with my friends and the physiotherapists; I talk about my pain and my problems and I hear about theirs. It's my second home, my second family. Instead of being indignant and getting irritated about my rheumatic disease, I tell myself that I am lucky to enjoy doing exercises and getting to know other people with the same problem. Time goes by very quickly up until lunchtime. At 2 o'clock the children come back and my husband and I are already at home and I am cooking. Today I am cooking beans, but it's difficult for me to shell them – so, the night before I have to plan things like a good housewife, I set my daughters the task of shelling the beans for me, so with the help of the family I can enjoy the food.

My husband goes out and the children and I put the plates in the dishwasher, make the beds and do a little tidying. Now it's time to hang up the clothes. The girls take on this job, because it's a very laborious task for me. I just hope my children will stay healthy, because they have always helped me since they were little. I remember the little

one who knelt on the chair to help me make pizza. Rheumatic disease can't be beaten without the help of my family working as a team. Even my son, I remember, helped me many times with the dishes and washing the clothes, and my husband cooked or helped with scrubbing the pans.

But now it's evening and we have to do the ironing. Once again, I can't help. It's the worst job for me, it literally wears me out. The girls share the ironing while I prepare a meal or do the business accounts and organise the folders and receipts for the next day. Feeling very tired in my body, with a lot of aches and pains and numbness in my hands, I sit down to rest for a while. I put on some soothing cream or take a painkiller and sit with my family to talk and relax.

"But now it's evening and we have to do the ironing. Once again, I can't help. It's the worst job for me, it literally wears me out."

For me, another day has passed. I am happy and pleased that I have been able to work, complete my physiotherapy and, for one more day, I have done the best I can for my family. But my rheumatic disease, my problem, is still there. Rheumatic disease and I, like two friends who cannot part, have got through another day.

Translated by Verbalis GmbH