

Playing the Hand You're Dealt



Putting your “CFIDS cards” on the table at work can be challenging. Do you disclose your illness, or keep it a secret? Do you ask for **workplace accommodations** to help you get your job done, or struggle along? Here, the author helps you **play a winning hand** at work.

BY ROSALIND JOFFE, GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

When you live with CFIDS, you face a debilitating, invisible illness and the knowledge that there is no known cure for your disease and uncertainty about how you'll feel from week to week. There aren't many positive things about CFIDS, but the fact that it's an invisible illness often allows you to control communication about your health. When you manage this effectively, you can decide the who, what, where, when and how of your message.

Managing this message is especially significant in the workplace where an employee's value is assessed by performance and relationships are based on teamwork and mutual trust. That's why it's critical to carefully consider how you communicate about the impact of CFIDS on your work life.

The pros and cons of disclosure

Sarah, an accountant with a software company for 12 years, has

always received excellent performance reviews. She returned to work immediately after maternity leaves and rarely misses work because of her children. She had never even taken a sick day until she developed CFIDS one year ago. Now, because of fatigue and debilitating headaches, Sarah frequently leaves work early. For the first time in her annual performance review, her boss noted that her work is slipping and said Sarah won't get her normal raise unless she makes specified improvements.

Sarah hasn't discussed her diagnosis or her poor health with her employer, and now she worries she'll be fired. She can't afford to lose her job or her benefits. She is fearful to disclose her CFIDS to her boss because she believes this information will ruin her future prospects at work, even if she doesn't lose her job.

Sarah's fear is real and based upon the prevailing wisdom:

disclose your chronic illness and people will think less of you, and it may even lead to unemployment. Let's face it, some people in the workplace will respond negatively when they learn you have CFIDS. Perhaps they had a previous bad experience with a co-worker who had CFIDS or another chronic illness, or they worry your illness will create an unfair burden on them, or they're simply uncomfortable around people with a disease they don't understand. If you believe revealing that you have CFIDS will hurt your job prospects, promotion possibilities or working conditions, and you can't afford to lose this employment, it's probably best not to disclose.

But operating from fear creates its own set of problems. If having CFIDS is impacting your job performance, you have a better chance to meet expectations when you disclose your chronic illness and put all your cards on the table. Whether

you're currently employed or looking for work, consider some reasons why disclosure may be best:

■ You put yourself out in front of the conversation, rather than being reactive. It gives you an opportunity to control your message and show co-workers you are willing to address the problem. How you handle this difficult situation can even be a way of demonstrating your strengths and professionalism.

■ If your chronic illness affects your performance, odds are that you're going to have to disclose eventually. As Sarah learned, if you're unable to do your job, what people see is that you're not getting the job done. When you disclose, at least you can work toward receiving the help and accommodations you need to deliver an optimal performance. Ask yourself if you'd rather people think you've become lazy or unmotivated than know you are battling a serious illness.

■ If disclosure prevents you from being hired or causes you to lose your job, this job is not a good fit. Of course, there are situations where you need a particular job and you have few choices. But if living with CFIDS impacts your job performance, you want to actively seek an employee-friendly environment.

What should you say?

It's important to spend as much time planning how to disclose your illness and what to say as you would spend planning for any other major life event. It's better not to do it on the spur of the moment or in reaction to a negative comment such as "Leaving work early again?" Remember, this can positively or negatively impact your career, financial stability, job satisfaction and emotional equilibrium. With so much at stake, don't go into it unprepared.

FEEL LIKE YOU'VE BEEN DEALT THE JOKER?

Having CFIDS may seem like some horrible cosmic joke at times. Rosalind Joffe offers individual coaching that can help PWCs who are still in the workforce manage difficult issues and prosper at work. Readers can contact her for a complimentary coaching session and to subscribe to her e-newsletter at www.Clcoach.com.



■ **Keep it simple.** Focus on the facts. You have a chronic disease, which means that it's unlikely to go away, it waxes and wanes, it's unpredictable and it's invisible. You are seeing a doctor and being treated, although the cause and cure are unknown, and treatments are sometimes ineffective. Briefly describe how CFIDS impacts your work.

■ **Keep your plan in front of you.** Go into the meeting prepared with a plan for dealing effectively with the situation. Have different scenarios or proposals ready to present that will prevent your illness from burdening others and ensure your work gets done. Don't just dump the problem on your boss without offering possible solutions that demonstrate your willingness to confront and master the workplace issues created by your illness.

■ **Keep it unemotional.** Skip the sob story. You will minimize confusion and maximize comfort by sticking to an unemotional and brief discussion. Don't go into how CFIDS is affecting your home life, marriage or other relationships. Keep your discussion focused on the workplace.

■ **Keep your guilty feelings to yourself.** Most PWCs do feel guilty about what they can no longer do, but don't make yourself an emotional burden in the workplace.

When should you disclose?

Obviously there are many variables, but do it on *your* schedule. When interviewing for a job, this is not the first thing people need to know about you. Having CFIDS is a health issue and should be treated as any other factor that impacts your life. The negotiating phase is a good time to discuss your illness, after you've already sold yourself and your qualifications and you know you want the job.

If you're not looking for a new job, and your current employer is unaware you have CFIDS even though it has become a problem at work, *now* is the time to disclose. Don't wait until your performance suffers even more, others are frustrated with you and there is less incentive to accommodate your needs. When you hide your chronic illness as Sarah did, you are in a defensive position, making it more difficult to get the help you need.

As you communicate about your health issues, you'll need to decide who needs to know before a crisis (major or minor) arises. Be as public as you need to be and as private as you want to be. You're not obliged to tell all your co-workers or make a big announcement. Include only those people who rely on you to get their work done, and make it clear that this is on a need-to-know basis; it's not "water

cooler” gossip. Good supervisors will respect your privacy.

How do you enlist help to get your job done?

Lisa, a division manager in a financial services firm, has lived with CFIDS for five years. A top performer, she regularly credits her management team and staff for their teamwork. Recently, however, she has had severe fatigue and trouble understanding and absorbing information because of cognitive difficulties. At her doctor’s suggestion, she attends only essential meetings, leaves the office early and works after she has rested and her children are in bed.

Lisa has not kept her CFIDS a secret at work, but she hasn’t discussed how severely the illness is affecting her. She is surprised that people seem frustrated and angry by her absence and that her staff is not meeting deadlines. The executive team has started to bypass her when they don’t get a quick enough response, and she was recently passed over for a key assignment.

Lisa thinks people don’t want to hear the details of her illness, and she doesn’t want to be a complainer. But she knows she could lose her job if this continues.

Once you have disclosed that you live with CFIDS, it still can be a challenge to take stock of what you need from others and to ask for it. Although Lisa is a successful manager and team leader, she is not applying her skills to managing her life with CFIDS. People, aware that she has CFIDS, are unaware how this factors into her work. In addition to feeling horrible, she is not managing her job effectively. Lisa has to discuss with others how her health can vary from week to week and put compensatory measures into place.

If you consistently can no longer perform key job tasks or meet many expectations, you’re probably at the point where you need to ask for accommodations in the workplace. This can be a tricky process and requires you to do an honest and realistic self-audit. Make a list of things you need to do your job effectively. Don’t get carried away; this is not a wish list, it’s a needs list.

For instance, would it be possible for you to work in the office three days a week and work out of your home office the other two? If you are currently attending many in-house meetings that exhaust you, can you name one or two each week that you could skip and just get briefed on? Is travel the thing that is making you so exhausted you can’t keep up with your workload? If so, can you teleconference in some cases, or can someone else on staff go to out-of-town conferences and meetings in your stead?

Focus on the two or three biggest requests for accommodation instead of entering into a discussion with your boss armed with a long list that may suggest you’re going to be so hard to accommodate and your needs so extensive that you’ve become a liability instead of an asset.

Although CFIDS is now recognized as a disability, it’s best not to make your initial discussion about accommodations an adversarial one or to insist on “your rights” under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Once you start demanding workplace accommodations under the law, you change the dynamics. [Editor’s note: There will be an article in the *Chronicle* about this topic later in 2004.]

Working with CFIDS

When you live with a chronic illness, it’s easy to feel like you’re

not playing with a full deck. And playing the hand you’ve been dealt when it’s so unfair can be a painful process. When you are still in the workplace and want to remain there, you can become overwhelmed with managing your illness and your job. It’s not always easy, but employing the strategies in this article can help PWCs continue working—and enjoying the workplace.

Just remember, as in cards, you have a better chance of being a winner by playing your hand thoughtfully, maximizing your advantages and maintaining control of the messages—both verbal and nonverbal—that you send to other players. ■

Rosalind Joffe is the founder of Clcoach.com, a Boston area firm that offers coaching to people with chronic illness to help them thrive in the workplace. Joffe publishes a monthly on-line newsletter, Out in Front, which offers practical tips on working with illnesses such as CFIDS and fibromyalgia. As a coach, she applies the lessons learned since she became ill with MS more than two decades ago.

This is the first in a series of articles on working with CFIDS that will be published in the *Chronicle* in 2004. Look for information about how to transition to a new job with your same employer, or to a new part-time job or home business. We’ll also cover key disability issues, workplace accommodations and other related topics.