

# Keep Working with Chronic Illness *Workbook*



*Strategies to achieve  
career satisfaction while  
living with chronic health  
challenges*

*4th Edition*

by Rosalind Joffe



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## Introduction

Living with unpredictable and debilitating chronic illness can reduce even the strongest self-esteem. Why? Because it challenges you to take charge where you can and forces you to face limitations you wish you did not live with. Over the past four decades of living with debilitating illness, I have periodically wondered, *What is possible now and in my future?*

From coaching many hundreds of people like you, who live with debilitating illness, I learned that I am not alone with this question. That is why I created this Workbook and why I continue to revise it as I learn and grow. This is the 4th edition.

Popular culture tells us that achieving our goals relies on recognizing and building on our strengths and limitations. But chronic health challenges can tip the scale, overwhelming your strengths and leaving you seeing only your limitations.

This Workbook offers strategies designed to give you the tools you need to take charge where possible, identify the roadblocks ahead, and develop your capacity to achieve your goals.

The Workbook consists of three sections. Each focuses on building skills and knowledge that will help you on your journey to be as successful as possible in whatever way you choose:

- A Daily Practice to increase your capacity for meeting expectations
- Your Personal Profile of you as a worker
- A Blueprint for your job or career search

As you prepare, you might ask, *What do I need to do to get the most out of this experience?* Some things to consider could be, *What pace will work for me? How can I be gentle with myself? What support will I need?* Most important, make this work for you! And please contact me with any questions you have as you move through the work.

*Rosalind*

## Part I: My Daily Practice

Unpredictable chronic illness changes your capacity to meet expectations – your own and others. This is demoralizing and can leave you feeling resourceless and adrift. But there is something you can do. You can take charge where possible with a daily practice that builds your ability to observe your current self: *Take Your Pulse*. And then you can use that information to fulfill your intention: *Set and Fulfill Your Intention*.

### 1. Take Your Pulse

Debilitating symptoms can unpredictably impact your capacity to do even the simplest activities. Because symptoms typically wax and wane, what was easy yesterday can be difficult to impossible today. And because American culture gives a strong message to ignore our body, we are afraid to listen to our body and afraid that if we pay attention it will overwhelm us. But how is that helping the quality of your performance? How does that impact your well-being?

This exercise is designed to support your efforts to be as reliable as possible through intentional noticing. It harnesses your attention on three areas that are central to your ability to perform: your body's sensations, your mental processing, and your mood.

*Take Your Pulse* includes three steps that promote value-neutral, nonjudgmental observation. It gives you the information you need about your current state, so you can prepare for what is ahead. The focus is on *what is* happening, rather than *why it is* happening, which for this purpose only distracts you.

NOTE: It is always best to practice a new technique daily, ideally at the same time, so it becomes muscle memory. But remember, this is a practice, and that is what you are doing – practicing. Once you become familiar with the exercise, try using it in the moment when a situation comes up where you are unsure about your capacity. Play with it, and adapt it to your needs.

For a guided recording, go to my [website](#).

## Instructions

Find a comfortable position where you can be still without interruption.

Start with a short relaxation exercise to harness your focus.

- Take a cleansing breath, drawing your breath in and then gently releasing out.
- You might close your eyes throughout all three steps. Or you might keep them open and fixed on a single point.
- Now, gently guide your awareness to the outside of your body. Notice where your feet are making contact with the floor. Now bring your attention up your legs, your spine, your shoulders, and your skull. Gently guiding your attention around to the front of your face, notice your cheekbones and your mouth.
- Now, notice your breathing as you bring your awareness to the inner areas of your body – your throat, your rib cage, and your belly.

**Arriving within yourself, gently ask the following:**

1. *What does my body want me to know it's experiencing right now?*

NOTES: This question relates to your body. Typically, when we experience a symptom of pain, fatigue, or some signal of your body's distress, we ignore it and soldier on.

Being mindful of these distressed parts gives you the information you need to recognize your limits and your opportunities. You might also experience that such focused noticing allows the unpleasant sensation to grow more expansive and diminish in intensity. Here are some examples: *A sharp pain in my belly. A dull ache in both my thighs.*

2. *What is the quality of my thinking process?*

NOTES: This question relates directly to the nature of your thinking process. Symptoms that create distress signals in our body influence how we process information, and this impacts our performance. You are more likely to be effective when you work within the boundaries of where you are, rather than pushing yourself beyond your capacity.

Notice pacing, intensity, clarity, etc., rather than the content of your thoughts. Here are some examples: *My thinking process seems sluggish. My thinking process is rushed. My thinking process seems clear.*

### 3. *What is my experience of my mood?*

NOTES: This question relates directly to your overall emotional state. Mood sets the atmosphere for how we respond to any given stimulus. It is a generalized state of being that can link directly to your physical condition. Here again, the focus is on *what is*, rather than *why it is* so. Notice your mood to take charge of how you respond to what comes up.

Here are some examples: *I am anxious and jittery. I am sad. I am content.*

Next, set an Intention, based on your current capacity, that you believe you can fulfill.

## 2. *Set and Fulfill Your Intention*

In this step, you are creating a space to identify how you want to behave, based on your capacity to achieve your desired outcome. **Set an Intention** for how you want to show up that you believe you have the capacity to fulfill. What makes this different from other intention-setting techniques is that you **Set an Intention** based on information you gained in *Take Your Pulse*. This is particularly valuable when you live with unpredictable symptoms. Developing your ability to set thoughtful, realistic expectations that you believe you can meet are key factors in building confidence and resilience.

NOTE: Do this after you have completed *Take Your Pulse*. Write down your answers to each question to maximize effectiveness.

### **These are the six components of this technique:**

1. **Identify** a meaningful upcoming activity or event.
2. **Identify** one outcome from the event to motivate and guide your actions.
3. **Reflect** on what you learned from *Take Your Pulse*.
4. **Set an Intention** for your behavior based on your capacity and desired outcome.
5. **Consider** the upcoming activity, the desired outcome, and what you have learned to identify what you need to do to *Fulfill Your Intention*.
6. **Reflect** on how this went for you, so you can learn from what happened and apply that learning to future activities.

## Instructions

1. Identify an upcoming event or activity that matters to you. Here are some examples.
  - A work meeting
  - A job interview
  - A class you are taking
  - A personal interaction
2. Reflect, and then write down what you learned from *Take Your Pulse*, including your physical capacity, your capacity to process information, and your mood. Ask yourself, *What result do I want from this?* The outcome you seek should be internal, focusing on what you can do, rather than external factors beyond your control. Here are some examples:
  - *I want to present as strong a case as possible for my proposal.*
  - *I want to do what I can to get to the next step in the interview process.*
  - *I want to be sufficiently focused, so I absorb enough material to pass the test.*
  - *I want to feel guilt free after telling my friend I can't show up for dinner tonight.*
3. Ask yourself, *What is my intention for how I will show up?* Be as specific as is helpful. Here are some examples:
  - *I will convey honest enthusiasm and sound as well informed as I know I am.*
  - *I will be well rested, so I can speak with confidence, and I will share what I know and behave like a team player.*
  - *I will do this work when I am able to be as focused as possible on the material.*
  - *I will acknowledge that I understand this is hard on others and will share my feelings about this.*

4. Keeping in mind steps 3, 4, and 5, ask yourself, *What needs to happen so I can fulfill my intention?* Here are some examples:
  - *Knowing I am in pain when I sit for more than a few minutes today, I will explain simply at the outset that I have to sit/stand during the meeting.*
  - *Knowing I'm having difficulty feeling alert early in the day, I will take a brisk walk that wakes me up but not too long that it tires me before the interview.*
  - *Knowing that my brain feels sluggish and tires quickly, I will do this at the beginning of the day for 15-minute periods.*
  - *I can prepare for the meeting with my boss, so I am confident and not relying on having to wing it, and I can research the role they are hiring me for and ask for the meeting.*
  
5. After the event, reflect and learn. Ask yourself,
  - *What did I do that fulfilled my intention?*
  - *What did I do that got in the way of fulfilling my intention?*
  - *What can I learn from this?*



## Part II: My Personal Profile

Think back to your first job. When you took that job, did you consider whether it was a good fit, if it would lead to something bigger, or if it would fulfill your wants and needs? Most likely none of these questions ever crossed your mind.

But living with debilitating chronic illness requires you to make daily choices and to set and reset your priorities. This is particularly the case when you can no longer work in the same way you once could.

Where do you start when you need to find work you can do, where you can succeed and thrive? Whether you are looking for a new job in the same industry, or you are considering a career transition, there are data points that will allow you to use your energy and resources wisely. These data points are your Personal Profile, a snapshot of what you need to know about yourself to find a job that is the best possible fit.

### 1. What are my strengths?

**Purpose:** To identify your core strengths as a worker using three components:

- **The Jobs you have held.**
- **Task** refers to a piece of work to be done.
- **Skill and Competency** refers to your ability to apply your knowledge of how to do something required to complete a task.

### Instructions

Create a folder called **Personal Profile**. Create a document titled **My Strengths**.

1. **List every job you have held.** It is easiest to do this working from a current and complete resume, if you have one. But it is not necessary. Start with the most recent, and work your way back to your first job.
2. **List the tasks in each job.**

3. **List the skills and competencies** it took to do each task in each job.  
Here is an example one client created.

**Job** Instructional Writer and Trainer

**Task** - Update technical manual for 40-person sales team.

**Skills and Competencies**

- MS PowerPoint
- MS Excel
- Collected data and organized instructional information
- Created project management work plan
- Wrote instructional materials at variety of learning levels
- Managed three-person team

**Task** - Train sales force to use instructional manual.

**Skills and Competencies**

- Designed one-hour training programs
- Delivered one-hour training programs
- Put complex information into simple language
- Distilled complex information into a replicable training program

4. **Collate the information** to start your Personal Profile. Start with your most recent job, and list the skills/competencies in step 3. Below is one example.

Skills/Competencies	
Collect and organize instructional information	
Create project management work plan	
Design one-hour training program	
Deliver training program	

## 2. What tasks do I want to continue to do?

**Purpose:** To identify the tasks you want to do and competencies you want to use

*Note:* You are more likely to succeed in working with debilitating illness when you are doing tasks for which you have some skills and that you enjoy.

### Instructions

Create a document in your Personal Profile folder titled **Tasks I want to Continue**

**Doing.** Using your task list, identify the tasks you want to do, the tasks you are willing to do but do not desire to do, and the tasks you do not want to do again. In the example below, I have created a sample rating system.

*Y= want to do    N= do not want to do    M= would do but not a preference*

See below for one example.

Skills/Competencies	
Collect and organize instructional information	M
Create project management work plan	Y
Deliver one-hour training program	N
Design one-hour training program	Y

### **3. What symptoms do I experience, and how do they affect my work performance?**

**Purpose:** To identify symptoms you experience and their impact on what you can do

#### **Instructions**

Create a document in your Personal Profile folder titled **Symptoms and Performance**.

1. **In the left column, list the debilitating symptoms you experience.**
2. **In the right column, note the following:**
  - Put No for symptoms that do not have an impact on your performance.
  - Is the symptom constant or periodic?
  - Is there a work activity you cannot do because of the symptom?
  - If yes to the above, is there a work-around you need to be able to perform that activity?

See below for an example.

<b>Symptom</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Numb fingers	Periodic; can't type quickly; work-arounds – use voice recognition software or type slowly
Burning sensations in upper body	Constant; can't do work that requires me to stand for more than a few minutes; no work-around
Rash on legs and arms	No impact

## ***4. How does a symptom impact my capacity to perform a skill?***

**Purpose:** To identify the skills that are influenced by your symptoms, so you can focus your search on jobs that you have the capacity to do

### **Instructions**

Create a document in your Personal Profile folder titled **Symptoms Impact**. Looking at the Symptoms Impact list and the list of tasks, ask yourself these questions:

- Which tasks (listed as Y or M) can I not do because of continuous symptoms?

- Which tasks (listed as Y or M) can I currently do without any restrictions?

- Which tasks (listed as Y or M) could I do with the proper work-arounds (*adaptations, modifications, or accommodations*)? List the work-arounds.

## Part II

### 5. *What do I value in a good working environment?*

**Purpose:** To identify the criteria within your work environment that are important to you, so you can make effective decisions

*Note:* If you are seeking a new job, career, or path, and you have done the groundwork necessary to create reasonable options, you will inevitably arrive at the decision-making time. You might approach this choice point by going with your gut feeling. Or you can do this from a values-based perspective. In this context, a value is the importance, worth, or usefulness you place on something. Values-based decision-making is one of your reference points for assessment and decisions.

#### Instructions

1. Create a document in your Personal Profile folder titled **Workplace Culture**, and list the criteria that you value in making job/career decisions. Some examples might be these (but make these your own!):
  - differences and different styles of working are valued
  - learning and improvement is encouraged and rewarded
  - employee loyalty is rewarded
  - work-life balance is encouraged
2. Rate each criteria based on what matters to you most, now. If you have 6, rate them on a scale of 1-6, and so on. It is fine if two or even three values have equal importance. The key is to recognize your priorities.
3. Is there a key learning or takeaway from this? Write it down.

## Part II

### 6. *What do I need, and what do I want?*

**Purpose:** To clearly identify what you need and want allows you to prioritize based on what will allow you to be as successful as possible

*Note:* A need is nonnegotiable – something you cannot do without. For example, I need to earn at least my most recent salary, or I will lose my home. A want is something that matters, but you could live without for now. For example, I want to earn 20% more than my last job, so I can start a savings account. You might list your wants in order of priority. Differentiating a need from a want gives you a means to evaluate opportunities based on your priorities.

#### Instructions

Create a document in your Personal Profile folder titled **Needs and Wants**, and fill in the list.

**NEEDS** (must have)

**WANTS** (would like to have)

## Part III: My New Path in Job or Career

### 1. Long-term goals and mapping a plan

Making a major change in your job or career can be overwhelming. Job and career changes become more difficult as you take on more responsibilities. They are particularly difficult when you are forced to make a change because of chronically challenging health. Now that you have created your **Personal Profile**, the following information will help you set goals and map a plan. *Note:* This exercise starts with your goal – your destination. Starting at the end point sets you up to focus on what needs to happen and when. The following questions help you think strategically.

#### My long-term goal:

- Ask yourself: *What do I seek for myself, or what do I want to achieve?* These are some examples: find a job I can do with my limitations that allows me to use my skills and strengths; find a career I will enjoy where I can work the way I need to work
- Ask yourself: *When do I want to achieve this?* (e.g., one month, three years?)
- Ask yourself: *What concrete measurements will tell me I have achieved this?* These are some examples: I am earning a good salary. I can work without worrying about being fired. I am developing new skills.

#### My action plan – steps that will help me achieve my goal

- *What do I need to do to reach this goal?* List and order all the tasks necessary to achieve your goal. These are some examples: Get more training in using social media and Excel. Update my resume. Contact the people with whom I've worked in the past five years.
- *What short-term goals are necessary to consider?* These are some examples: Find a job to support me through this. Move to a different state and get residency. Find a roommate and reduce my living costs.
- *When do I want to reach this goal?* Start there and work back. Set realistic start and due dates (or set expected time frames) for each task.
- *What roadblocks might get in my way?* Look at each task and potential bumps or impediments you might encounter. This reduces the likelihood you will get stuck along the way.



## 2. Research

Based on what you wrote in your Personal Profile and your long-term Goal, you are ready to get started with the research required to determine what would be the best fit for you.

Obviously the internet is a tremendous resource for ideas both broad and specific. Another useful way to learn about a new career or a specific organization is to have an informational interview with someone working in the field or in that organization.

An informational interview is usually much more relaxed than a job interview, for people on both sides of the desk. Most people are glad to help and enjoy talking about their career experiences.

Another tactic is to job shadow. You might contact someone doing the kind of job you are considering, and ask about visiting on-site for a day to get a firsthand view of what it looks and feels like to do that job.

Here are some questions to get you started:

1. *What kinds of things do you do daily?*
2. *How did you get started in the field?*
3. *What training or certification is required or recommended?*
4. *Is there anything you would do differently if you were starting over again in this company or in this career?*

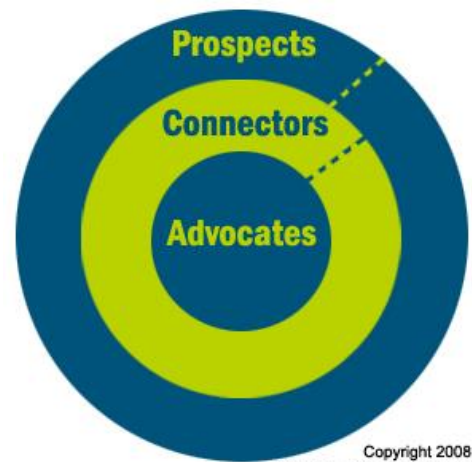
### 3. Networking

#### Overview

The 3 Circles Networking Process builds on your existing relationships to find a workplace where you will thrive. It takes focus and determination, and you might consider enlisting the support of a coach, action partner, or business support group.

It is based on three assumptions:

1. You need a job where your health will not be a limiting factor.
2. Your existing network is limited to your current employment world, so you have to expand this network to think creatively and explore the unknown.
3. You need to stay positive about this job search, even though it was the unfortunate result of your chronic illness.



*Advocates* (the inner circle) are people you trust and know well. *Advocates* should be able to help you brainstorm around what you do not know to help you think about unfamiliar opportunities. They are also a resource for building your network of *Connectors*.

*Connectors* (the center circle) are people who know about the industry, job market, or organization you want to enter. Even if a *Connector* might be in a position to hire you at some point, that is not the reason for this contact. Your purpose is to gather information and to make a good impression, so the *Connector* wants to help you by introducing you to *Prospects*.

*Prospects* are the hiring managers, business owners, and others who are in a position to offer you a job, now or in the near future. This is especially valuable since we know that many jobs never make it to a public posting.

## The Steps in the Process

Form your inner circle of *Advocates* by contacting 3-5 people who meet these criteria.

### Criteria for an *Advocate*:

- Knows you well and respects you for who you are
- Can think creatively about career/job opportunities for you
- Knows that you live with a chronic illness, and you can talk openly about it together
- Knows about several sectors of the work world and has connections there
- Is willing to help you

**Schedule a meeting** by email or phone call.

- Identify the purpose and explain the scope of your current job transition. (e.g., I'm making a transition in my career. I'm considering what kinds of jobs might be open to me. I'm thinking about working in a different industry.)
- Make it clear that you are not asking if they know of a specific jobs but rather for help in brainstorming new possibilities.

**Prepare for each meeting** by reviewing the meeting "script." Additionally, think about how you would respond to questions such as these:

- Why are you doing this now? (e.g., I'm working with a coach. I can't do my job any longer. I'm ready to reenter the workplace.)
- Why did you choose to speak with them? (e.g., They know you well. They know your skill set.)

### The meeting "script"

1. Briefly give an overview of the 3 Circles Networking Process®.
2. Establish the purpose of the meeting – to brainstorm about potential jobs and/or career choices. It is not to discuss specific job openings.
3. Clarify how chronic illness symptoms impact your ability to do your job, and be prepared to answer any questions about this. Your *Advocate* will be better able to help when you put your cards on the table.

4. Briefly recap your job history (a resume is useful).
5. Share what you have learned from your self-assessment process and what ideal factors you are looking for in your next job.
6. Begin the brainstorming. Encourage new ideas and explore all possible suggestions without censorship.
7. Take notes. This will help you remember the suggestions and will show the *Advocate* that you respect their ideas.
8. When you think you have gotten as far as you can with the brainstorming part of the meeting, ask if they know of any people with deep knowledge about the industries or jobs you have discussed. Ideally they would be knowledgeable and be people who want to help you get connected.
9. These are *Connectors*. Ideally try to get three names, and ask the *Advocate* to make the first contact on your behalf. You might offer suggestions for what your *Advocate* might say to a *Connector* about you.
10. Determine the time frame, so you can follow up with the *Connector*.
11. Send a thank-you note immediately, and follow up again within two weeks with an update of your progress.

**To form your center circle of *Connectors*, contact 6–15 people who meet the following criteria.** They may be referred by your *Advocates*, or you may know them already.

**Criteria for a *Connector*:**

1. Knows people within the job sphere or industries you are exploring
2. Is willing to speak with you
3. Is not currently in a position to offer you a job but could be in the future

**Purpose of the meeting:**

- Gather information about an industry or business.
- Learn about other networking opportunities in the field you are exploring.
- Increase the depth and breadth of your knowledge about jobs or an industry.
- Make a positive contact with the *Connector*, so they want to help you find a job.

### Steps for contacting and meeting your *Connectors*:

1. **Contact the *Connector*** once the *Advocate* has made a successful contact. If you are communicating in writing, proofread! Briefly explain the following:
  - The *Advocate* suggested you contact them (put the *Advocate's* name in the subject line of an email).
  - Why you are asking for a meeting.
  - Where possible, ask for a face-to-face meeting rather than a phone call.
  
2. **Prepare for the meeting**
  - Summarize in writing what you have learned from your self-assessment (e.g., the top three values that are important in your next job). Be specific.
  - Write down highlights from your Advocate meetings to explain why you think this Connector might be helpful to you.
  - Using bullet points, “script” what you want to cover in the meeting, including your job goals and your purpose for asking for this meeting (e.g., new ideas for jobs you could do or industries to explore).
  - Decide if and how you want to discuss your symptoms.
  - Learn what you can about the person with whom you are meeting.
  - Bring a copy of your resume with you (even if you sent one in advance).
  - Bring a paper and pen to take notes.
  
3. **The meeting**
  - Refer to your script, especially if you are feeling nervous.
  - Be specific and detailed, so the person understands your strengths and needs.
  - Take notes.
  - Ask for the names of other potential *Connectors*, if that is relevant.
  - Ask if they know of 2-3 *Prospects* who are in a position to hire you.
  - Ask the *Connector* if they would call them on your behalf and, if asked, offer suggestions for what your *Connector* might say to a *Prospect*.
  - Discuss when they will make the calls so you can follow up with the *Prospect* accordingly.
  
4. **Follow up.** Send a thank-you note immediately, keep this person updated as to your progress, and find ways to stay in touch.

**To form your outer circle of *Prospects*, contact 12–30 people who meet the criteria.**

They will come from your *Advocates* and *Connectors* and other sources as well.

**Criteria for a *Prospect*:**

1. You have been referred to this person by a *Connector* or another credible source.
2. This person is in a position to hire you in the job/industry you want.

**Purpose of the meeting:**

1. Sell yourself. No matter what happens in this first meeting, this person could also help you in the future or connect you to others.
2. Learn about this job, the organization, and the organizational culture. You are always trying to assess the job fit while selling yourself. Remember that seeking employment does not have to put you in a passive position.

**Steps for contacting and meeting your *Prospects*:**

1. **Initial contact**
  - Find out from the *Connector* the best way to contact a *Prospect*.
  - If you call, be prepared if they answer, or leave a voice-mail message.
2. **Prep for interview** (see “Interviewing” section for more details)
  - Once you have an interview, contact the *Connector* with your appreciation.
  - Ask your *Connector* for suggestions on how to prepare.
  - Learn about the organization, so you can ask useful questions.
  - Write down your strengths, particularly how they would apply to this job.
  - Write down your limitations (they may ask) framed in a positive light.
  - Prepare for questions, such as why you are looking for a job or career transition now.
  - Decide whether you will disclose your chronic illness and your symptoms.
3. **The interview**
  - Sell yourself to get a job offer, regardless of whether you decide to take it.
  - Learn as much as you can by asking good questions.
  - Present your strengths and how they apply to this job.
4. **Follow up** immediately with a written thank-you note. If you do not get the job, follow up to learn why (if possible), so you can learn from this.

## Next Steps

Congratulations on the work you have done to get here. I wrote my book, *Women, Work, and Autoimmune Disease: Keep Working, Girlfriend!* to give you the strategies and inspiration you need to get started on the road to a more fulfilling work life. This workbook will help you develop the tools to help you put ideas into action.

I hope you will incorporate the exercises in this book into YOUR tool kit. Try them, play with them, and make them yours. They will be there when you need them as you encounter new life challenges. *Above all, I hope that you are able to keep working in the way and to the degree that you choose.*



## About the Author

**Rosalind Joffe, MEd, ACC**

For most of her adult life, Rosalind has made decisions from a unique perspective: *living with chronic illness can include living a full life and enjoying workplace success.*

Rosalind is passionate about giving people who live with a debilitating chronic health condition the tools they need to thrive at work. She founded the coaching firm, [ciCoach](#), building on her experience in living with chronic illnesses (multiple sclerosis, ulcerative colitis, and chronic pain) for almost 40 years. Rosalind coauthored the book, [Women, Work, and Autoimmune Disease: Keep Working, Girlfriend!](#), (Springer Publishing). She is a sought-after speaker by organizations including Mayo Clinic Conference for Employers and Insurers, National Multiple Sclerosis Society, and Association of Career Professionals. She has been quoted in national and regional media outlets, including *The Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *More magazine*, and *Fast Company* as well as numerous disease organization and health journals. A patient advocate, Rosalind sits on the Board of Directors of Massachusetts Health Quality Partners and chair of Consumer Health Council.

For more information about coaching, products, and services, please visit [ciCoach.com](#).

To read more on the subject of working and chronic illness, visit and sign up for her blog: [Working With Chronic Illness](#).