

Enabled: 10 reasons why working for yourself can work for people with long term health conditions.
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Are you considering starting a small business or working freelance? If you have a chronic health problem or disability this is an increasingly desirable option as organizations are squeezed, stress levels increase and there is less support available in workplaces. After working for myself for nearly a year I am surprised just how much healthier it is.

Going out on your own may be seen by others as courageous; in reality it might be the only option left to you after ill-health retirement, redundancy or lack of support make your current employment unsustainable - it may be the only way you can work that supports your health. Apart from the financial need to find a way to work increasing as benefits are cut, meaningful activity is also well known to be a positive influence on mental health which in turn impacts on physical symptoms. So, if you are experienced in a profession that you know has a market, you have the support of family and friends and some start-up money behind you, here are some good reasons to go for it:

1) You can make the working week work for you

Working freelance means you set your working hours, spreading work across the week in a routine that takes account of your health needs. A balanced amount of work each day makes you less likely to crash or fall into a boom and bust pattern. Are you better in the morning, afternoon or evening? You can organize your work to play to your individual strengths and fit in with the demands of your health.

If you are in employment or have recently left a job, you will have some idea of the amount of hours that suit you best for minimal negative impact on your health - it may be a lot less than you have been doing. If you haven't worked for a while you will need to think about how much activity you can reasonably do. Apply the fundamental principle of pacing - not taking on more than 70% of what you think you can do – to allow room for error and fluctuation.

By starting slowly and gradually building up your work over a period of months, which is usually how small businesses start anyway, you will allow yourself to find your natural healthy level. If you have been focussing on income to the exclusion of allowing for your health needs, you may need to reconsider the balance between work and health. If you have a serious health condition and take on too much, you may end up unable to work at all if you relapse, so getting this balance right is vital.

2) Your experience of illness is more relevant than you think

Those who have developed effective ways to manage their long term ill-health are adept at dealing with uncertainty, changeable symptoms and living with distress. Strategies such as pacing, relaxation techniques and mindfulness transfer well to starting a business as there will be times of uncertainty, especially in the beginning. Once you have established some work, there is the continued unpredictability of the absence of a regular pay cheque - at the very least you will be well equipped to living with the uncertainty and natural fluctuation in work that comes with self-employment. How you respond to reading this point will tell you whether you are ready to open yourself up to this - do you feel mostly fearful or excited?

3) You can choose whether you have a supportive boss

If you are the boss you can decide how much attention you pay to your health needs. This is not automatically easy but it is achievable - long held beliefs about work may have driven you to overdo it, and may tempt you to ignore your instincts to turn down work that is too much for you for fear of losing out. Our 'work ethic', something we develop at a young age, can be incompatible with learning to manage a chronic illness - and mean that you are driven to work regardless of impact on symptoms. If this is you, you will have found difficulties prioritizing your health before, if not in a work situation maybe within the family or in a caring role.

As a good manager would do with you, as your own boss it is a good idea to make some rules from the start and regularly review your workload and its impact on your health. If you are really struggling with this you could see a counsellor who specialises in working with people with health problems to help you to separate what you need from what you feel you 'should' be doing. Ask yourself 'why' you want to do this work - it's usually more complex than just money. Is it because that's what is expected by others or 'just what I do?' How will it affect your quality of life? Keep your health on the agenda throughout - in your business plan, reviewing processes and support meetings.

4) You will remove some of the stress

While there is undeniable pressure involved in any new venture, when you are living with long term conditions that are adversely affected by stress, leaving an organisation and going out on your own removes many of the modern strains that we could all do without: pointless meetings; endless paperwork with no relevance to you; erosion of ethical principles by targets; having more work than time; lack of autonomy; unhelpful co-workers; noisy offices - the list is endless.

A realistic assessment of potential new stressors is of course advisable: can you cope with the isolation, financial instability, uncertainty, learning required and responsibility for new things like tax records? Once you have put in place support systems and sought advice and/or training to help you skill up, the control you can take of your work makes working for yourself a very suitable option for many people with chronic illness – autonomy, focus and flexibility are healthy.

5) You can build a support network that suits you

More than when you are employed by an organisation, when freelancing actively working on your relationships with other professionals is vital to reduce isolation. The added bonus of being your own boss is that you have a greater say over who you choose to work with, and can surround yourself with understanding, supportive people who share your values and goals. Having support or supervision that isn't linked to your employer is healthy as it provides an independent space to reflect on your work. You can hold meetings at frequencies more suited to you, set up peer supervision groups and will have more choice on who you work with and for.

6) You can give yourself 'partial' sick days when needed

Working while managing a chronic health problem is very different from getting 'flu or an injury that means you can't work for a fixed period. Especially if you are living with a condition where fatigue is a dominant problem, being able to pull back temporarily when needed can prevent a longer term crash. As you will be managing your own sick leave you can create ways of working that fit with your particular health problems. If you wake up one day having a 'bad day', feeling particularly ill, when you are employed you either go to work or call in sick. When you are self-employed a day with different commitments can be managed in a more flexible way: shifting work to another day where possible and resting so that you can meet some demands, especially if your work is a mixture of client facing and computer based. As long as you are actually able to meet the demands of the work you do go ahead with, this is an ethical way to manage your work and makes it more sustainable.

7) You can make your admin systems work for you

If you've been working for any kind of organisation this century you will be familiar with repetitive and seemingly futile administration tasks. When you are your own boss you get to decide (with obvious legal and ethical considerations) what you do to manage the financial and record keeping side of your work. You can also decide when to do this and how, whatever suits your skills, style and health best. For example: if you struggle with looking at a computer screen for long periods there is nothing to stop you keeping written financial records. If you prefer to do a short amount of admin

every day or take advantage of good concentration when it appears, you can set your schedule to allow this.

8) You can make wellbeing part of your working day

In the 9-5 working week of conventional employment there is often little room for rest, exercise and even lunch often gets neglected. Chronic pain and other health problems often benefit from daily stretches, meditation, exercise, good nutrition and regular rest breaks and you can incorporate these into your day from the start. Feel better if you rest for an hour after lunch? - Schedule it - you make the rules.

If you need to travel for your work but know you need rest afterwards, you can factor this in, and say “no” to things which you know will negatively impact on your health. Planning regular short breaks and holidays - even afternoons off - will be more in your control and you can develop a pattern of working that nurtures rather than depletes.

9) You can be more creative

Freelancing allows you to play to your strengths, to develop areas of work that haven't been allowed by an employer, to work on skills that can enhance your business, for example using social media such as Twitter. You might find a more suitable role through developing a new skill.

What you will certainly discover - if you open yourself to possibilities - is how to work alongside your health problem instead of pushing and fighting against it. ‘Reasonable adjustments’ allowed under disability and employment law are changes that help individuals meet the demands of conventional work roles, but these are often not enough for people with serious health problems. If you are the boss you can come up with completely radical ways of working that organisations often can't allow.

10) You can embed flexibility and pacing into your business

If you are clear with yourself from the start about your own limits: stamina levels, vulnerability to particular types of stress and patterns in your symptoms - you can make these part of your planning. If you can only work 10 hours a week but can't find a paid post that fits this, creating your own may be the answer. Or, for example, if you know that you usually struggle more in the winter you can

allow for this, maybe planning less work and more rest for this time of year. How about working 2 hours a day if that's all you can manage? These suggestions may seem shocking, but are they, if the two alternatives are working too many hours and having no quality of life due to impact on your health, or not working at all? When you have a long term condition, the working world is unfortunately sometimes much easier to fit around you than to fit you into it.

It isn't easy to set limits on the amount of hours you work across a week and per day and stick to them, especially once work starts to take off. However, if you don't do this you could find that your health is adversely affected. Also, once you are established you may find that the reduced stress means you can work more than you could within an organisation.

If something challenging happens in your life that adds difficulty to managing your health, such as bereavement, family problems or moving house, or your condition deteriorates, when you work for yourself you can more easily reduce your workload temporarily.

So, if you think you can tolerate the uncertainty, you relish the idea of freedom, you want a new chance to work smarter, healthier and better maybe 2014 will be the year you break out on your own into a world of possibilities. I wish you all the best with it!