

# THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF LEAVING WORK ON DISABILITY

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This may seem like one of those issues that is too basic to spend much time thinking about. Of course, there's an emotional impact on leaving work for disability. Who wouldn't be depressed? However, there is frequently more to it than that, and not being prepared for it can put you in a tailspin that can affect your mental well-being as well as your physical health.

In my years of working with clients, I have found that making the transition from work to disability is a major life event, right up there with getting married or moving, and it can have broad repercussions on feelings and emotions. It can also have a dramatic effect on your ability to make decisions objectively and rationally. Clients who recognize this impact and know to expect such feelings are better prepared to deal with them and minimize them.

## **What will happen?**

Don't worry, you won't "wig out" or "totally lose it." As with medical symptoms the emotional impact will vary from person to person. The emotional repercussions of leaving work on disability often take the form of depression, lack of concentration, inability to focus on a goal and achieve it, as well a general feelings of malaise, helplessness, and fear of the future. There may be other symptoms both emotional and physical. The important thing to remember is that, uncomfortable as these symptoms are, they are a natural part of this change you are making, and they will pass.

## **Why does it happen?**

Part of it is obvious. You are moving from active work to inactive disability; that's major and would upset anyone. There are other factors as well, primarily the sense of loss of control and having to battle lifelong messages.

There is frequently a feeling of loss of control over not only the direction of your life, but loss of control over your very own body. Many people feel that stopping work is "giving in" to the medical condition and that is now in control of their bodies, and all they can do is watch.

Likewise, the medical condition is now dictating your future. You may feel like you no longer have the power to decide what direction to take or what to do next. Such a feeling of helplessness can be devastating emotionally and can create all sorts of symptoms.

Finally, there are all those good work ethic messages you learned growing up and which you were probably playing back during the early stages of your condition. Who wouldn't have emotional issues if, in the background of their mind, they keep thinking things like:

- You're giving up by stopping work. You're a quitter.
- You're surrendering to the disease.
- You're no longer a contributing member of society.
- You're taking a giant step closer to "The End."
- You're "milking the system."
- You're weak, needy, plus many other not-so-nice adjectives.

Of course, none of these are true or even rational, but our emotions don't react rationally.

These "deep" messages may even be communicated by friends and family. People who haven't been disabled do not understand the price you must pay for stopping work. I have heard some refer to their disabled friend as "retired" or "taking it easy." There may even be "jokes" about "how easy your life is."

### What can I do about it?

Fortunately, there's a lot you can do about it, and all of the suggestions below would come under the overall title of "**Take back control of your life.**"

- **Control how and when you leave work** – Make your plans; do your research; create your own timetable for stopping work.
- **Take one step at a time to avoid being overwhelmed** – You can do this by breaking down your tasks into smaller steps. First, leave work, then apply for the employer's disability, then move your health insurance to COBRA, then apply for Social Security, etc. A list or timeline will help you focus your attention on the next small step without being overwhelmed by the entire process.
- **Build, activate and use your support network** – Your family, friends, and caregivers can give you emotional support as well as practical assistance, but you may need to ask for it.
- **Consider short-term therapy** – Perhaps your support network is strong enough that they will give you all the help you need to get through this time. Many clients have also found that a few months with a therapist trained in the emotional issues of the disabled can be of great help as well.
- **Speak up, politely but firmly** – Do not hesitate to tell those who don't understand what you are going through that this is not a vacation and you wish you could return to work.

## **But what will I do once I go on disability?**

Many people worry that after they leave work, they will have nothing to do. Some people have an image of themselves lying in bed, face to the wall, doing nothing but waiting. That's not the way it is. More than one of my clients has worried that they will have too much time on their hands only to return after leaving work to tell me they are so busy, they have no idea how they were able to work full-time.

Initially at least, there's a lot to do, applications and claims to file, health insurance to adjust, government benefits to apply for.

If you are the type of personality that was always busy before, trust me, you will be as busy as you want and are able to be once you go on disability. Depending on how you feel and your interests, there are classes to be taken, family to be enjoyed, other people or agencies that you could volunteer to assist.

The best thing you can do is to expect some emotional upheaval when leaving work. Recognize it as a natural part of the process and don't let it scare you into believing that it is more than just a passing reaction to what's going on with your life at the moment. It will pass; you will move on. Life will continue.