What to Do When Migraine Impacts Your Job

by BARBARA LEECH

Working With Migraines

Many people who suffer from migraines find that keeping up with business as usual is an impossible task. Migraines can make it difficult to think clearly or concentrate on the job and even just driving to work (particularly on a bright, sunny day) can prove to be a challenge.

A migraine attack makes me physically ill, so keeping up appearances is something I fail at miserably. But many employers do not understand the depths of pain and illness that a migraine can bring about, so this produces one more thing for those of us with migraines to manage. Do you cancel that meeting? Do you take the day off?

I have been in situations where the general lack of understanding about migraine pain makes me feel like everyone thinks I am making up excuses. After all, saying you have another migraine seems to have become the popular way to say you have a headache; either that, or just about everyone I know gets migraines.

To be clear, I don't think the latter is the case. Perhaps hearing so many people claim they have this condition on such a regular basis has created a lack of empathy for those of us who actually suffer from it and an inability to understand its true severity.

Not every headache is a migraine, but much like the boy who cried wolf, if your employer has heard it over and over again from too many people, it becomes harder to take seriously.

Statistics on Migraines and Work

- 50 percent of migraine sufferers generally have to miss work because of migraines
- 76 percent say they always have to lie down during migraines
- 72 percent have difficulty performing work activities because of their migraines
- 67 percent have to cancel or postpone meetings and appointments
- 15 percent feel that migraines might impact their chances of a promotion at work

(Stats taken from a 1996 study in the UK)

Fear about repercussions on the job do not help your condition either. All that worry can actually exacerbate or trigger another migraine. But, it is hard to find peace between doing what you must for your health and keeping your attendance at work acceptable.

There are also things at work that can make a migraine worse, should you choose to head in and try to muddle your way through your day in pain. Lighting, computers, noise and even how often you are able to take a break or step outside to get some fresh air can make or break your attempt to endure your day at work with a migraine.

So what can you do to put yourself in a better position at work and manage your migraine attacks?

Next Page: ways to put yourself in a better position at work with migraine attacks

Communicate

One practical step to overcome your obstacles on the job is to clearly communicate with your employer about your migraines. Do not try to hide the fact that you get migraines. Calling in sick, showing up in sunglasses and taking medication in front of others could be misinterpreted by your co-workers. It is far better for them to know the truth.

Explain the overall condition you have, back it up with the formal diagnosis in writing from your physician, and discuss how often you tend to get attacks. Some people get migraines often, while others only a few times per year. Be honest about what frequency you experience.

Request Accommodations

If your migraines are severe, your condition may amount to a disability that can be supported by your doctor, in writing, and you could try to request reasonable adjustments to your working environment and daily schedule to reduce the impact of migraines on your ability to complete your work.

This could mean anything from changes in the harsh lighting at work that triggers or exacerbates migraines, to allowing additional breaks or more flexible working hours. In some cases employers might allow suffers to work from home during and after a severe attack.

These are just some suggestions of things to try to negotiate for with your employer. Make it clear you will be able to keep up with your work responsibilities better with just a few adjustments made to your work environment and flexibility in your schedule or location.

Explain Triggers

Emphasize that stress is not the cause of your migraine. If an employer thinks that stress is a trigger, it really limits you as an employee. Explain to your boss that migraines, like epilepsy, are a neurological condition that results in episodic attacks, which can be triggered by things like air pressure, weather patterns, and certain foods, additives and preservatives. Your doctor should be able to back up this statement for you in writing.

Consider a More Flexible Job

You may find that the typical 9 to 5 job is not something you can continue doing if your migraines are severe and frequent. You may require something more flexible or that has a less structured environment.

The ideal is to find a job that allows you to be productive despite your migraines. Look for something with flexible hours or that would allow you to work around your migraine attacks.

Next Page: preventative measures that you can take.

Take Preventative Measures

By far, the best way to prevent a migraine from affecting you on the job is to avoid getting one. If you have not determined what triggers your migraines, it may be time to investigate.

Keep a journal of the foods you eat and beverages you consume each day, as well as activities – indoors and out – and then make note of any patterns that occur before an attack.

Sometimes being outdoors for extended periods of time in damp weather can be a trigger for my migraines, and drinking any type of white wine is almost always guarantees I will have an attack. These are things I would not have discovered without looking closely at my activities and what I consume and tracking the correlation between them and my next migraine.

Consider preventative medication for your migraines. Those who have regular, severe migraine attacks can benefit from taking prescribed prophylactic or preventive medications on a regular basis to prevent attacks or reduce migraine frequency.

These migraine mediations often stop an attack, lessen the severity of the migraine or lesson the frequency of migraine episodes.

Intervene Early

Treat your migraines at the first sign of an attack. This has become second nature for me because I have seen that early intervention with a migraine can often lessen the severity and duration.

This means I am back to work faster or might be able to work productively through one if I can squash it before it fully blossoms into a full blown attack.

Conclusion

Keep in mind that how to best handle migraine issues at work differs with the severity and frequency of your attacks as well as the personalities of the employees, employer, and the sufferer. Your goal is to find a solution that keeps you productive and your employer satisfied.

Working with migraines is an ongoing challenge for me and many like me who suffer with them on a regular basis. By taking a very proactive approach to communication with your employer, perhaps even modifying your work environment or schedule, and taking action to treat and prevent migraine attacks, you hopefully can find methods that help you stay productive and successful on the job.