

The Way to Wellness in the Workplace

Chase cash or pursue passions? Both paths lead into the workplace, but one's goal is survival, the other's is fulfilment and achievement. Through going down both paths, I've discovered the principles to wellness in the workplace are the same in either, so which route should we choose?

All I ever wanted to do was live my passions. Passions are the things we love doing so much they make life worthwhile, in my case, reading and writing. While still at uni, I'd begun picking up regular freelance writing jobs, but never quite enough to live on, well not with my spending habits! This became such a sticking point with my first partner we broke up. The break up triggered my first mania. Once recovered, rather than return to my passion, I took what seemed a shortcut to attracting a mate: chasing cash. Over the next five years, I took assorted unexciting jobs for money. After the first injection of cash-fuelled freedom into the vein of this junkie, I was addicted. But even well paid work left me craving meaning. Nothing would have blocked me from returning to my passions if I could see how to make money.

Then a get-naked-in-the-stairwell-at-work-and-proclaim-myself-God return of my mania sent me into hospital for a long stay. Afterward, my back-to-work efforts failed. I couldn't drag myself from bed for a meaningless job. Forced onto the pension, the how-to-survive need had arrived. Now guilt-free time could be devoted to pursuing passions. I read as widely and broadly as any person can, books and magazines. My writing ventured beyond non-fiction into short stories, a draft of a novel, a draft of a play, a short film script, and poetry. I've put

together figures for my writing business plan – and conservative as they are –it looks like the second half of the year will see me a self-supporting writer. Pursuing my passions, then, will reward me on the financial level, but also on the deeper level of where how I spend my time is in harmony with what makes my life worthwhile.

Regardless of my motives for working, the core principle for staying well at work is flexibility. Sometimes our trajectory – whether from internal or external tangents – leads us into risky territory and then we need to be self-disciplined and change our course. We expect peaks and valleys with bipolar, flexibility means making decisions about which trail to follow so our peaks aren't too high, and our valleys aren't too deep.

Three corollaries guide us in practicing the principle of flexibility. First: **know thyself**. What things influence you to stay well? Do you need to avoid caffeine? How strict do you need to be with your rising and retiring times? Do you have a strong social support network outside work? How will you cope with the extra stress from work? What exercise and nutrition plan will you follow? How will you relax? Self-awareness allows you to anticipate challenges and solve them before they become unmanageable and overwhelming.

The second corollary: **know thy boss**. Sometimes your solutions mean seeking special consideration at work: unscheduled leave, later starts, time off during standard work hours for medical appointments. Any request you make to your boss may be met with: 'This is a bad time for... (whatever you've asked).' Translated, this means: 'Your request has caught me by surprise. Let me get the data I need to make the best decision.' Anticipate your boss's concerns and suggest solutions when you make the request, and you make it easier for them to say yes.

Besides, when faced with losing you for a few hours to do what's needed to stay well, or having the workplace disrupted with a lengthy absence, your boss will see the benefit of flexibility.

The final corollary is **know thy workmates**. Full-time workers spend more time with their co-workers than anyone else in their lives (awake-time, anyway). The reason to disclose to someone at work is to have an extra set of eyes monitoring your mood, and to support you with any requests you make of your boss. But you can't trust everyone to respect your mental health. Reality check-in: stigma persists. Some people seem supportive while you're well, but vanish when you show symptoms or slip into psychosis. Choose your confidants carefully, accepting that telling one person may mean everyone will know – if they gossip.

When seeking work or starting a new job, should you disclose to your would-be employer? The answer goes back to knowing yourself. If your symptoms affect your ability to function, e.g. you struggle to rise on time and are likely to often be late to work, you need to tell your boss. You can both then plan how to meet your needs and the demands of the job. But if most of the time your mental health is more Lake Placid than a tempest, why tell your boss? In 2007, while at a bookshop for nine months, I never disclosed because of six years of stability. A year later, the owner and I caught up, and I mentioned an article on bipolar I'd written. 'But you don't have bipolar,' he said. He'd never noticed because it never affected my work.

Back when my way was directed toward chasing cash, a key lesson revealed itself about bipolar and the workplace: any limitation can be overcome. I learned this from a self-help book during a depression. In a section on self-limiting beliefs, mine was: 'Because of my bipolar disorder, I can never get a regular job.' The book urged me to rewrite the belief the way I wanted it: 'Because of my bipolar disorder, I have unique skills and talents that will make me

attractive to an employer and enable me to be a competent employee.’ Soon came work in a market research company, which later led to a full-time job at a bank. Any limitation we face – beliefs, skills, or character – someone has already faced and overcome. In many cases, they wrote a book about what they learned, or someone else wrote a book about them. We can learn whatever we need to triumph.

Overcoming limitations in itself, however, fails to satisfy. Despite leaving my limits behind and finding work, I hated the drudgery of my passionless work. The last six months at the bank, my time went to dreaming of a well-paid writing job, perhaps in an advertising agency. Overcoming limitations compares to climbing a ladder, the faster you overcome, the faster you climb. Pursuing passions is making sure the ladder leans against the right wall.

So should we chase cash or pursue passions? Both paths employ the same principles to stay well in the workplace. To chase cash seems more appealing when faced with short-term money pressures. Isn't rapid, certain cash the solution? More, it can seem less risky, free from unnecessary byways and highways, giving us work that never stretches us beyond our comfort level. But chasing cash leads to the soulless existence enjoyed by the ordinary masses. With bipolar, however, we're not ordinary. We either settle for mediocrity or strive for extraordinariness. Exploding myths about the limitations of bipolar disorder is the *extraordinary* part of extraordinary living; pursuing passions is the *living*.

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