

Archaeology and ME

chronic illness in the workplace

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I was inspired with confidence to write about my experience of working in archaeology with chronic conditions after honest accounts in *The Archaeologist 110* by Amy Talbot and Rosie Loftus as well as the work done by the late Theresa O’Mahony.

In the past, I was fearful of limiting future career opportunities by speaking about my conditions, but I hope that my account will help employers and the rest of the archaeological community to understand the nature of chronic illnesses as well as highlighting the valid contributions we make. I hope that it will also serve to empower others and normalise what may present as ‘invisible’ illnesses.

My conditions started with the onset of glandular fever but worsened after the birth of my first child. For a long time, I managed to continue to work as a commercial archaeologist with the support of my current company, after eventually receiving a diagnosis of ME and disclosing this. Making a disclosure is often nerve-racking, especially if you have had a previous negative experience, but this is where you can start to get support through reasonable adjustments and supportive management. Without disclosure, employers might not notice any issues, but they do need to create a supportive culture to allow issues to be raised.

We were able to work together to make reasonable adjustments relating to travel time, working hours and working patterns. Unfortunately, commercial work is no longer currently possible after I developed a rare pelvic condition. The company have kindly given me desk-based work, mainly in the Historic Environment Record and Heritage Management teams. The current situation with COVID-19 has meant that I have been able to test out working from home and flexibility with working hours when I am having a flare-up. Making reasonable adjustments can help to minimise any time that otherwise may have been lost.

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Desk-based work can be easier with adjustments such as a sit-stand desk and anti-fatigue mat. If your employer needs help supporting you financially with modifications there is a scheme called ‘access to work’ that can help cover costs, including funding disability awareness courses for your workplace. I would also recommend a mental health awareness course as mental health issues are often co-morbid with chronic conditions.

ME, or myalgic encephalomyelitis, is a chronic, fluctuating, neurological illness that affects many systems in the body. The symptoms vary greatly between different people. Fibromyalgia is a condition that causes widespread pain in the body; condensans ilii is sclerosis of the ilium. Unfortunately, as there are no definitive tests for these illnesses and no exact causes known, there is often a lack of treatment and support.

We can and should adapt our practices to be able to be more inclusive and supportive of disabled people in the workplace as anyone can develop a disability at any time in life. Unfortunately, I had a bad experience with one company I previously worked for.

Although enabled archaeology is becoming a prominent topic, we still need to work harder to promote open discussions, disability awareness and look at how we can better make adjustments.



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Useful links

- <https://www.actionforme.org.uk/uploads/pdfs/employers-guide-to-me-booklet-2016.pdf>
- <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>
- <https://www.gov.uk/reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-workers>
- <https://www.sja.org.uk/courses/workplace-mental-health-first-aid/book/adult-mental-health-first-aid-2-days/>