



LIVING WITH ARTHRITIS

Journalist and author Juliette Wills has lived with inflammatory spinal arthritis for 18 years. In part four of a six-part series, she meets other people living with arthritis to challenge misconceptions and reveal the true impact of a condition that affects over 10 million people in the UK

It's hard work, working with arthritis

Here's a shocking statistic: only 60% of people with musculoskeletal conditions are in work. Keeping your job when you've got arthritis is so important - when your health is spiralling out of control, it brings balance, a sense of self-worth and, of course, financial stability. With good support from employers and minor adjustments, many people will be able to carry on working, but those with severe symptoms may have no choice but to give up work - pain can limit a person's ability to commute, sit or stand for long periods, lift tools or boxes, or type. Severe arthritis is so unpredictable that a person's ability to do their job or even get out of bed unaided can change from day to day.

A third of people with rheumatoid arthritis will stop working within two years of diagnosis and 43% of working-age people with arthritis say their condition impacts on their

working life. For 25% of patients with ankylosing spondylitis (AS), complete fusion of the spine occurs, leading to substantial disability and an increased risk of spinal fractures. I was a freelance sports journalist before AS hit me 17 years ago; unable to walk due to the crippling pain, I lost my entire career overnight and have been in a state of sheer exhaustion and fluctuating pain ever since.

Sadly, many people with arthritis don't feel confident discussing their health issues with their employer, fearing demotion or dismissal if they admit that they are struggling. This needs to change, and fast. Arthritis Research UK is working closely with the government in tackling the impact of arthritis in the workplace. With the right support system in place, many employees with arthritis will be able to carry on working. Those who can't need to feel that they, too, are getting the support they need.

Rebecca's story

Rebecca North, 29, lives in Aberdeen. She was diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis and osteoarthritis last year

My first symptom was a fairly innocuous swollen toe on my left foot, but that swollen toe started to bend, and it's now fused in a permanently bent position, along with two toes on my left foot. On top of the pain this causes me physically, I'm in emotional distress. My life has changed dramatically in the past year, and I'm finding it very difficult to cope.

I'm not the same person as I was pre-diagnosis. I may never be that person again. I can't go out on a Friday night because I have to take strong medication. I can't do anything on a Saturday because I'm too tired from the same medication, and I can't do much on a Sunday either. My boyfriend, Jack, is incredibly patient and puts up with a lot; it's one thing to have to manage at home, but another to deal with arthritis at work.

I work in the oil and gas industry and, thankfully, my employers are incredibly supportive. I see the company doctor every three months for an occupational health review, updating him on how I feel - not just physically, but emotionally, too - and what's going on with my medication. I've adjusted the way I work, starting later, and they've put a disabled parking bay in for me, so I can come and go to appointments and know I'll be able to park right by the door when I get back. This has been a lifesaver for me.

I'm very honest with my team; they've seen me at my worst, tears

and all. My absences started to increase because I lack the energy to go into the office every day, so I now work from home on Mondays. If I want to take time off for hospital appointments or even just need a rest day, I can. No justification needed. If I want to go part-time, I know they will accommodate me.

I've worried about being unreliable and letting people down, but being honest and open has worked for me, and I'm lucky in that respect. Allowing me flexibility and taking the time to understand my condition has meant that I can carry on working. If I wasn't working, my mental state would be even more affected. Everyone benefits from me remaining in work - me and my employers.

To find out how arthritis affects us all and why Arthritis Research UK is raising awareness visit: theguardian.com/nations-joint-problem

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