

Working While Rehabbing

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After experiencing my second episode of schizoaffective disorder, I had difficulty finding meaningful and productive activities to pursue. I spent a great deal of time sitting on the couch watching TV and despairing over having schizoaffective disorder and the state of life it had created for me which was a friendless and lonely place where I had nothing going for me, was lethargic, and lame from inactivity. I had a college degree but I wasn't at the point where I felt I could handle a job with work commensurate to that which I had completed in college. I realized I can't do this for the rest of my life and something needs to change.

Over the years I've noticed when I've spent too much time idling it's caused my self-esteem to drop, my mind has become duller, my social interactions lack luster, I have felt off emotionally, and my body has felt lethargic. Over-idling has also caused me to feel a lack of motivation to pursue any activities that hold any meaning and has made my life feel meaningless as a result. I realized this during my time in the basement and decided I needed any job I could get. I was sitting and thinking too much about everything that had just happened and this was detrimental for a number of reasons. Working helped me to focus outwards and get me outside of my mind because I was interacting and focusing externally instead of being locked in reverie. Simply being forced to interact with others helped me develop socialization skills. It got me moving around again and helped me lose weight. My self-esteem also improved simply from having a paycheck and also from the meaningfulness any respectable occupation tends to provide.

I needed about 6 months after my second episode to get to a point where I could function and socialize effectively enough to work. I still had a great deal of social anxiety and awkward moments but obtaining work helped me get through this. Although I wasn't ready to work in an office or in a more intellectual job, I determined I still needed some sort of work just to feel a little more productive. I still had many issues and I knew it so I wanted to ensure I was n't overwhelmed by a full week of work after having spent the past year or so being unemployed. I looked for a job with 20–30 h per week.

I decided I first need to develop a resume, which I did with the help of my sister who is an HR professional. We listed my college degree and past working experiences and organized it well. I'm always grateful I had her help because I don't think I would have been able to write as good a resume without her assistance. An important part of overcoming mental illness, or just reaching any goals in life, has been using the resources available to me to the best of my ability. My sister was one resource, and for job searches there are others. For people with disabilities there are clubhouses which can be contacted via internet or phone. These are real places where people can go daily to rehabilitate their working and socialization skills. They have programs where you can learn and perform job tasks which help train you to reenter the work force. There are also rehabilitation services and assistance programs for obtaining a degree or job training to start a career in a trade. As far as simpler jobs they usually have connections with local businesses that can directly assist you in obtaining an interview and obtaining entry-level jobs. I didn't use the club house to obtain my first job after college, which was working at K-Mart, but I later found people I had been working with had used the clubhouse to gain employment at my same store.

With a decent resume and basic socialization skills I was able to obtain an interview at K-Mart. An important part of the interviewing process was informing the company that I wanted to move up within their ranks. Another important facet of the interview process was dressing appropriately. I wore a button down shirt with a tie and a black pant but wearing a suit to that interview might have lost me the job. While applying to higher positions a suit worked well but I think the attire needs to match the title of the job and I was applying for store associate. During the interview I was conscientious and sociable but most importantly I was honest. Human Resources managers are fairly smart and most of them are able to determine if you are telling the truth. I using concrete information from past work experiences to support my answers which helped me obtain the job. For example, they asked if I was physically able to complete the work and I did have some strength which was visible,

but I also cited how I had landscaped for 3 years during college which supported my credential. I'll usually put relevant work experience on the resume if applicable but it's also important to reiterate it during the interview process when asked. Prior work experience will almost always be addressed.

Later in the interview, they asked my employment history. I had been unemployed since graduating from college and it was because of schizoaffective disorder. My employer asked if I had been employed the past 6 months and I simply informed her I've been searching for work but just haven't found anything yet. I had been out of school for a year but I withheld the information that I had graduated with schizoaffective disorder and that it was the reason I hadn't been working the prior 6 months.

She asked me where I've been looking and I simply replied I've been searching for entry level work just to get started and I want to move into management eventually. She asked me why I wanted to work in retail, and at the time, the main reasons were that I just needed to start a career and make some money. I told her I wanted to start a career and I also included some of the benefits I saw while applying for the position such as being on my feet and interacting with people. This was an instance where going beyond the response that directly answers the question and adding more to it helped me out.

Because she now knew I was qualified for the position another important part of interviewing is simply being yourself in a professional manner. Unless you're in a job with limited social interaction most human resources professionals are looking for people who are sociable and will interact well and get along with their employees. If they spot any potential problems they probably won't hire you regardless of your qualifications. In my experience using a little humor has been useful. It's also good to be personable while still observing the formality of the interview. Employers want to see you are a personable worker who will get along well with associates and customers and that you are also able to complete the work tasks.

Working at K-Mart after my second episode was important for me because it was a stepping stone. I knew I had a college degree and this wasn't the final destination but working a job where I was underemployed in a low stress environment helped me immensely. I hadn't worked for the previous year or so dating back to the beginning of my second episode and was still recovering from that second episode and I needed a job with simpler tasks and more socialization which K-Mart provided for me. During this first job, I learned how to reintegrate into society and how to interact with people in a work environment which helped me immensely in later jobs. I was also making some money and it boosted my self-esteem to know I was spending my time productively. I worked hard and felt good at the end of the day even though I felt I was underemployed. Two months later I applied for a job at Marriott International and was hired by someone

I grew up with. Having connections is always helpful in job searching and if you can network I strongly recommend it. Some people consider it nepotism, but I think if you are doing a good job after being hired then there's nothing to be ashamed of. Almost everyone catches a break from networking while advancing their career.

One of the most important things about obtaining a job is being able to say you have been working. To hiring managers, being employed tells them you are punctual, work well enough to hold a job, you're able to interact with others, and shows you are willing to work. When I applied from K-Mart to Marriott, having the K-Mart employment on my resume helped me. Unfortunately, I had to say I was underemployed, but I was able to inform them I took the job because I wanted to make money while searching for a different job instead of not working at all. If they think you're lazy the chances of getting hired are very slim.

In the past 5 years I've obtained 11 jobs and countless other interviews and have not been fired from any of those jobs. I was only asked to leave one of these jobs and it was a result of experiencing symptoms of my illness and having difficulty completing the work. I am fairly high functioning now but during the application process of many of those jobs I had a great deal of social anxiety. I still didn't disclose I have schizoaffective disorder and I still won't to this day. Most people won't make the assumption you have any disorders if you don't directly disclose this to them. They simply aren't aware of the way someone with schizophrenia or other mental disorders interact and they aren't capable of labeling the person as someone with something of this nature. This happens because they don't have the empirical knowledge to connect your behaviors to a diagnosis. Most people envision someone with a psychotic disorder the same way people are stigmatically portrayed in movies, so a little anxiety or awkwardness is almost never an indication of any mental disorders. If they see nervousness they usually assume it's because of the interviewing process, which does tend to create tension and a little anxiety at times for most people, including those who haven't had a mental illness. This means if you detect they see nervousness it probably still means they are completely unaware you have any sort of diagnosis. Knowing this has kept me calm during interviews.

While being employed there have been times I've needed scheduling arrangements to attend doctor's appointments. I scheduled my doctor's appointments later in the day so I could still work a full day before them. There was an instance where a spreadsheet asking for schedule arrangements was sent out, and I mistook this as something only the administrator could read when it was available to everyone. Luckily, I put "I have doctor's appointments" and didn't elaborate and no one asked any questions.

I recommend going directly to the supervisor and just informing them you have doctor's appointments.

When I've done this I haven't been asked the reason and HIPPA regulations stipulate the employee isn't required to disclose their illness. If you're asked the reason for the appointments you can just provide a doctor's note. I've never been asked to disclose an illness directly, but sometimes it's asked indirectly and you still don't need to state it and can't be fired or disciplined at all for not doing so.

As I mentioned, I moved around in employment a great deal. In college, I worked for a grounds crew and that made my day easier because I was around people who had similar interests as me, and I was doing work which appealed to my nature. Being around baseball during college summers was a lot of fun because I love the game.

After working at K-Mart I worked for Marriott, an Insurance Company, I landscaped, worked more hospitality, worked for a pharmaceutical company, a customer service company, a bank, and several other places. I spent a lot of time searching for the right place to work and just wasn't able to find something I was satisfied with. After leaving the Insurance Company, I went to grad school shortly but decided against teaching English. I still knew I loved English and was unemployed and out of school. Instead of spending the money I had saved and idling away, I used my unemployment time wisely and I went to the library and studied writing 5 days a week and read good literature for countless hours to improve my literacy and writing ability. The unemployment lasted 5-6 months and I worked towards becoming a writer the entire time.

I enrolled in a writing class and was invited to a writing group which I still attend to this day.

To pursue writing I needed a job that was less intellectual so I could come home from work and be mentally able to read and write. Previously, I returned home from administrative work and my mind was too exhausted to read or write much of anything. I knew I was going to be sacrificing money for happiness but the point of having money is to be happy. I am working my way through the ranks to become a butcher and/or manager at the shop and I currently work full time and I have been pursuing writing in my spare time. I have felt good about working at the butcher shop because I enjoy the work and the high volume of social interaction. Although I haven't had as much money I've been extremely happy with my decision.

The decision was important because it has allowed me to do what I want with my life. I've had a Theodore Roosevelt quote on my door for some time stating it's important to dare greatly because "... At best (those who dare) know the triumph of high achievement, but at worst if they fail, they do so while daring greatly, so they'll never be amongst those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat." This quote has resonated strongly with me and I decided I can't look back on my life and ask myself, "What would my life have been like if I decided to pursue writing?" Every day I write I feel satisfied with the decision I made and the effort I've expended toward pursuing my goals.