

## *Creating a Career That Works*

It has taken a long time to get to this place—where I really feel like the work I am doing is the work I am supposed to be doing.

Depression or manic depression doesn't have to limit your choice of careers. People who suffer from mood disorders have worked as teachers, psychologists, counselors, caseworkers, accountants, dietitians, doctors, nurses, health care professionals, social workers, custodians, surveyors, tool and die makers, electricians, plumbers, etc. The list goes on. You don't even have to work at a career if your finances permit. You can live a full, active, and rewarding life by getting involved with advocacy, or by volunteering, raising a family, caring for elderly parents or relatives with disabilities, or pursuing a particular interest with a passion.

If you do choose to work, however, you'll be better off choosing work that allows you to fully express your talents, and that works within your limitations. The truth is, you can find fulfilling work that meets your needs. Finding the right job is a process of discovery.

Before you read further, let's face reality. If you struggle with mood disorders, you may want to reconsider your notions about what it means to be successful. I have. So has Tim Field, an energetic advocate in the mental health field. Here is Tim's perspective on career success:

Because of the class structure in the United States, it is nearly essential for everyone to be on a "career path" if they wish to be perceived as "one of us" and not as some kind of a failure or "weirdo." This is really most unfortunate. Having a "successful career" or "good job" is the crux of self-esteem for most people. My experience has induced me to simply reject the career path model with its heavy baggage of failure and guilt.

I accept responsibility at work if I feel I am up to it and want to, but don't allow myself to get into a position where a large project or an entire department is dependent on me. It has worked better for me to find other sources of reward than career advancement, which by nature requires accepting more and more responsibilities, only to have them taken away when I get depressed. This means a different approach to life goals, but I think it's only prudent. Why beat your head against the wall trying to advance to the "top" at some silly job only to be batted down and humiliated every time you get depressed? There are more important things than a good job, and I focus on these as sources for positive strokes for my self-esteem.

The effects of depression have led me to abandon the upwardly mobile "career path" model and to direct my efforts and sources of self-esteem elsewhere. Perhaps this would have happened anyway. What matters most is finding something that *works*, that is rewarding regardless of my opinion of options I no longer have.

## My Path

Before episodes of mania and depression overtook my life, I had several careers. My first was a homemaker, raising five children and caring for a large home. As the children needed less of my time, I went back to college to complete the final two years toward my bachelor's *in* special education. For a number of years I was a special education teacher and directed private school for students with special needs. In the early 1980s I decided a career change was in order. I wanted to focus my energies on a deep, personal passion—environmental issues. I went back to school for a Master of Science in Resource Management and Administration. While in graduate school and for several years thereafter, I worked as a development director in the very stressful position of raising money for several national environmental organizations.

When I was in my mid-forties, the recurring depression and mania that I had successfully controlled with lithium overpowered me and for a time took control of my life. I reluctantly give up my career because I was no longer able to keep up with the performance requirements. I was supported through social security and other entitlement programs.

My psychiatrist referred me to vocational rehabilitation services to find work that I could manage in spite of recurring episodes. My ongoing relationship with vocational rehabilitation has eased me into a new career, well suited to my interests, talents, and abilities, where I am, my own boss, free to do whatever is necessary to keep myself stable. This new career as a health educator has given me accomplishment, satisfaction, and security.

When I first went to vocational rehabilitation I had no idea what I wanted to do or how I wanted to proceed. Mental health education was not my original career goal. Through a process that included a structured evaluation of my education, experience, interests, and talents along with long-term vocational counseling, I discovered that I was interested in finding out how people with a disorder like mine manage their lives and then sharing that information with others.

My first vocational goal was to be a researcher and technical writer. I decided to develop the skills necessary for such a career by studying people who have depression or mania I depression, compiling the collected data, and writing a technical book on the results of my study. I met these goals with ongoing support and assistance from vocational rehabilitation and the financial assistance of the social security program called Plan to Achieve Self-Sufficiency (PASS). The PASS gave me the funds to purchase a computer, develop research materials, and gather data.

As a result of interest in my research, I gave several presentations that were very successful. When I found that people with depression or manic depression expressed interest in a workbook based on my finding, I set up a new goal for myself—to become a public speaker and author. I got another PASS to help me meet these new goals. My career has taken me to new levels of personal and financial achievement, satisfaction, and independence.

My story is not unusual. Many people with depression, manic depression, and other psychiatric disabilities use the skills they have learned in dealing with these disorders to develop careers in mental health education, support, counseling, advocacy, and administration. Our life experience makes us especially effective in these roles. David Hilton, Director of the Office of Consumer Affairs, uses strengths he has learned in dealing with years of manic depression to effectively establish appropriate programs in New Hampshire for others with psychiatric disabilities.

## How To Discover Your "Right" Job

Before you can recognize the "right" job, you must carefully define what you want and what you need. Discovery often occurs as a result of asking the right questions, examining your present situation, and sorting out what works and what doesn't. Scheduling, pressure level, privacy, and the employer's flexibility are all issues to consider. Here are some questions to get you started:

**Is your current work or career satisfactory? Does your work enhance your wellness? What do you like about your work?**

**What would you most like to change? Would you like to pursue a different career, one that matches your special needs, interests, and abilities?**

If you think your work life could stand some improvement, consider the issues that follow.

### *Scheduling*

While most people with depression or manic depression are able to work and do a good job, they often find that their peak performance times do not coincide with those of other workers or with the times an employer would prefer they work. Their performance improved when work was task-related rather than time-related. For instance, rather than work an eight-hour day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day, they did better when they had an assignment or project to complete within broader time-lines. This is difficult in many work settings. However, other people said they work better and prefer a structured schedule.

*I work best when time schedules are flexible.*

*I perform at my optimum when my schedule is structured.*

People with depression and manic depression should avoid changing shifts—for example, working from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. for two weeks, 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. for two weeks, and 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. for two weeks. They also don't do well with the 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. shift, perhaps because of insufficient light through the eyes.

## *Pressure Level*

People with depression and manic depression do not perform well in pressured work environments. Before I resigned from my job because of severe mood instability and several hospitalizations, I was under a lot of pressure. The organization was operating, as it had been for a long time, with income that was barely meeting its expenses. Employees were in fear of being laid off. The success of key programs was dependent on limited accessible funds. I was a fund-raiser. Intense pressure was my daily companion. It was very hard for me to leave my work behind and enjoy other parts of my life. I burned out very quickly.

*I need a low-pressure position or career because:*

## *Private Space*

Having private space, where you can shut the door, be quiet and alone, is important to many of the people in my study. They did not want a job in which they were isolated, but they did want private space available to them on an as-needed basis.

A woman who has been a guidance counselor for over 20 years says she has never taken off more than six weeks during the school year. She makes her job manageable by having her own office with a door she can close to shut out the world.

I live alone and have my office at home. It gives me quiet time to work. When I want people around, I find a friend to go for a walk or I go into town to do errands. People are as close as my phone. My workshops and presentations also give me needed contact with others. My office is separated from the rest of the house; I can close the door and put my work behind me when I need space from it.

*I need accessibility to private space in my work place.*

## *Understanding Employers*

Some people share their mental health history with their employer. Others, hoping that an episode of depression or mania will not become an issue, have chosen not to divulge that information. In either event, understanding employers may be difficult to find, but they are definitely an asset.

Tim Field shares his recent work experience:

For the last few years I have been completely up-front about my problems with depression, side-effects of medication, etc., when talking with my employer. I may not always volunteer everything, but I feel that I have nothing to hide (because there is nothing to be ashamed of). Everybody has problems, and if I have to be Mr. Clean to work for them, it's not the kind of place where I want to work anyway.

In terms of how I handle downtime from the job, I have made an agreement with the owner of the company that if I'm not up to it, I can be absent. I can take vacation or sick leave until they are used up, and then go on leave without pay. This



## Creative Job Development

You may despair about ever finding a job that will meet your needs, particularly if you confine your search to jobs that are currently available. But you don't need to limit yourself in that way. Many people today are discovering the joys of creating their own jobs. I did. Self-employment is often the best way to meet your needs for flexible scheduling, low stress, private space, and creativity.

I developed, over several years, a successful career as a mental health educator, lecturing, presenting workshops, and developing educational resources. When I need a break, I can take one. If I feel like working late into the night, that's all right too. I schedule my work to meet my personal needs. My new career, directed by me, makes good use of my abilities and creativity.

A woman in the study developed a career raising exotic birds after her job as a chef ended due to mania. She feels her work with birds plays an important role in her wellness—their care keeps her going. Initiative was the key! She developed the new career on her own. She reports that a vocational rehabilitation program was somewhat helpful. She said she had a hard time convincing them that she needed to work on her own. She says, "I think they would have been more helpful if I wanted a traditional career, but are supporting my endeavors." She said it's important to let vocational counselors know what you really want and that you want their support in reaching your goal. Think about possibilities of creating your own job. Answer the questions below.

What is your current dream of a new career?

What are the interests, talents, and abilities you want to use in your career?

In what ways will this career meet your requirements for scheduling, low stress, understanding employers, and creativity?

Which criteria will be difficult to meet?

Using your creative problem-solving abilities, describe how you can effectively deal with the criteria that are more difficult to meet:

What is the first step you need to take to begin the process of creative job development?

List intermediate goals such as education, training, or equipment purchases necessary to your career choice.

### *Traditional Versus Self-Employment*

If you have never been self-employed, but are considering that option, do as much research as you can so you can have a solid plan in place. There are now many books available for people who are making the transition. You'll want to familiarize yourself with the potential pitfalls, make a careful estimate of the money and other resources you'll need to stay afloat, and create a business plan. You will also want to take full advantage of the many free sources of help available to you. Several of them are listed at the end of this section.

### *Training for Career Success*

Whether you choose to work for an employer or to build your own business, you may find it helpful to consider vocational rehabilitation, the PASS Plan, or private education. Your local library can also be a wonderful source of information and it's probably the place you should start.

**Libraries.** Libraries are an excellent source of information to use in the job development process. They are a great way to find educational facilities and programs, career ideas, organizations, corporations, how-to references, etc.

*I am going to the library to look up information on:*

**Vocational rehabilitation.** The federal government, in cooperation with state governments, has set up a nationwide system of vocational rehabilitation services. Vocational rehabilitation services provide various kinds of vocational assistance and support to people with disabilities. If you have lost your job because of depression or manic depression, or because of the mood instability, your job is not appropriate to your special needs. Contact your local or state office of vocational rehabilitation. To receive services, you may need to present medical documents or a statement from your physician to verify your condition.

Don't wait until you know exactly what you want to do. If careers are an issue for you, establish your connection with vocational rehabilitation services right away. They have a wide variety of resources available to guide and assist in all phases of your career development and can help you develop a step-by-step approach to achieving your goals. Check with your Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment and Training Services for information on other programs with services that may be useful.

Which vocational rehabilitation services have you contacted? What assistance did they provide?

*I am going to contact vocational rehabilitation services and ask them to help me with the following:*

PASS. PASS is the acronym for the Plan to Achieve Self-Sufficiency, a social security program. If you have a work history and you receive Social Security Disability Insurance, you may be eligible for funds that would allow you to meet vocational goals that will enable you to resume employment or start your own business. PASS will pay for almost anything that will help you reach your work goal, as long as the total does not exceed the amount of your current benefit. This includes:

- Supplies to start a business
- Tuition, fees, books, and supplies needed for school or training
- Supported-employment services
- Attendant or child care expenses
- Equipment and tools to do the job
- Transportation to and from work
- Uniforms, special clothing, and safety equipment

You can get assistance to set up PASS from a vocational rehabilitation counselor, an employer, or the social security office. For more information, call your social security office and request SSA Publication No. 05-11017, August 1991.

The plan, submitted in writing to the Social Security Administration office for approval, includes:

1. A work goal—a job that you are interested in doing and that you will be able to do at the end of your plan.
2. The length of time it will take to reach your goal. If you need special training that takes two years, for instance, the length of time would be two years.
3. The things you will need to reach your goal—education, equipment, supplies, services, and so on.
4. The cost of the things you need to reach your goal.

5. A determination of how much money you will need to set aside each month to meet your goal.
6. A plan to keep track of the money, such as a separate bank account or record-keeping system.

*I am going to find out more about Social Security PASS Plans.*

*A Social Security PASS plan sounds as if it would work for me. I am going to develop and submit a PASS plan with help and support from:*

Formal education and training. To meet your career goal, you may also need additional training or education. Doing so can actually enhance your sense of well-being. In fact, a study by the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation at Boston University on supported education for people with psychiatric disorders showed that students who attend regularly, complete their course of study, and go on to maintain employment had lower rates of hospitalization and higher levels of self-esteem.

While traditional educational programs may be well suited to your needs, you may find it useful to explore enrolling in an alternative program designed for students with special needs. Community colleges and adult education programs offer a wide variety of education and training options. Vocational rehabilitation and employment and training services will have information on these programs.

I got my Master's degree in Resource Management and Administration in a program that met my scheduling needs for evening and weekend classes. I was also able to get credit for documented life experience. Since my Master's in a counseling psychology program was self-directed, I developed a comprehensive plan for studies, papers, projects, and presentations to meet program requirements. I worked on my own with support and advice from faculty advisers. Each semester, I attended one all-day seminar.

Many schools have an Office of Disability Support Services (ODSS). Let that office know you have a psychiatric disability. You may need documentation, such as a medical report of your disability, to present to the ODSS so that it can provide you with special accommodations. Just remember that your treatment history is confidential and you do not need to disclose it unless you so choose.

Returning to post-secondary education can be exciting and challenging. Take responsibility for your own wellness and develop a program to manage your symptoms. A good support network, both personal and professional, will increase your chances of a successful educational experience. These other guidelines can also help:

- Take a reduced number of classes the first several semesters until you get acclimated to the new environment and lifestyle.
- Become familiar with the resources on your campus. There may be a learning center or its equivalent that will assist you in sharpening your study skills and that provides tutoring services. Some counseling centers provide support groups for students returning to campus after an absence.
- Before you return to school, contact the college's financial aid officer for information on financial awards available, such as Pell Grants. When all other resources have been used, you may be eligible for financial assistance from the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. This assistance could help you finance your education.

- If disability prevents repayment of student loans, contact the lender immediately and request a medical deferment. Note that granting deferment of your payments is not automatic. You must continue to make payments until you are notified that the deferment has been processed and approved. If you do not, you may be in default. Once your loan is in default, it can be difficult to change that status.
- If you have to leave school, be sure to withdraw officially so that you do not fail your classes by default. In some cases you may be able to have the designation "Incomplete" recorded, thereby earning the right to complete the requirements later.

### *Resources To Help You Secure a Better Job*

You may find the following programs useful if you'd like to upgrade your skills, and intend to work for an employer. Sometimes, the best way to equip yourself to run your own business is to learn what you need to learn while someone else pays you.

Employment and training services. States are federally mandated to provide individuals with free employment and training services such as aptitude testing, job screening, job referrals and placements, and vocational counseling. These offices have comprehensive listings of area employment opportunities.

*I am going to contact Employment and Training Services regarding the following services*

**Job Partnership Training.** Job Partnership Training (JPT) is another federally mandated program. In some states it is administered by Employment and Training Services, and in others by private agencies. JPT provides on-the-job placement services, job training and education, and some expenses such as for equipment and licensing fees needed to get into the job force. JPT is dependent on a yearly funding cycle.

*I am going to contact the Job Partnership Training program in my area to request the following assistance*

## *Resources for the Self-Employed*

These organizations will help give you a great start if you intend to build your own business:

**SCORE.** SCORE is an acronym for Service Corps of Retired Executives. This is a program of volunteer retired executives who give free assistance to people who are starting businesses. Depending on their experience, they will help develop business plans, set up bookkeeping systems, fill out loan applications, develop marketing plans and strategies, etc.

*I am going to contact SCORE and request the following assistance:*

**Small Business Administration.** The Small Business Administration guarantees business loans to people in the labor force. Check the phone book for a branch office near you.

**Small Business Development Centers.** Each state has federal- and state-funded Small Business Centers which provide in-depth counseling assistance at no cost to people starting new businesses or expanding existing ones. Services include a comprehensive resource referral library, and workshops on a variety of business-related topics. Phone 1-800-SBDC for more information.

**Office of Economic Development.** Many larger towns and regions have offices of economic development that provide a range of services to businesses. Check the phone book to find such offices in your area.

**Women's Support Networks.** Gender-related issues often are obstacles to women who want to start their own business or develop a career. Through Women's Support Networks, women can get information on business assistance programs specifically for women. The State Governor's Hotline should have information on these programs.

## **References**

Bolles, R. (1983) *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

*This is an excellent reference you can use on your own to help you find the career most appropriate to your needs and talents.*

Maze, M., and D. Mayall (1991) *The Enhanced Guide for Occupational Exploration.* Indianapolis: JIST Works.

*This is a major career reference tool for job seekers. It contains 2,500 of the most important jobs based on information from the United States Department of Labor and other sources. It is available in the reference section of your local library. For more information phone (317) 264-3720*

Self-Employment Learning Project (1992) *Directory of Micro-Enterprise Programs.* Queenstown, MD: ASPEN Institute.

*This very valuable resource is available from ASPEN Institute, PO Box 2222, Queenstown, MD, 21658.*

Unger, K. *Tips for Students.* Washington, DC: Health Resource Center.

*Your successful return to educational or training programs can be helped by this guide originally prepared at Boston University. To obtain a copy, write or call the Heath Resource Center: A program of the American Council on Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20036-1193, (202) 939-9320.*

U.S. Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (1992-1993)  
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Whitmyer, C., S. Rasberry, and M. Phillips. (1989) *Running a One-Person Business*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press. *This book covers every thing from time management to emotional support systems.*