



# Change, challenge and injustice

Experiencing career with a chronic illness

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for Careers Practitioners

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## Careers and chronic illness: what's the context?

- Chronic illness: conditions that last at least one year and that impact on daily living; limiting activity, requiring ongoing medical care, or both (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2021)
- Cohort of millions
- Little existing research from a career development perspective
- Career with a chronic illness can present significant challenges and barriers (Beatty, 2012)



## Careers and chronic illness: why study this?

- How did I end up studying career development and chronic illness?
- Why did I think it mattered?
- How much does practitioner curiosity matter?
- Where is the line between curiosity and bias?
- Did my goals change over the course of my research?
- What impact was I hoping to have?
- How would I know if my research was successful? What was I hoping to achieve?



## Career vs chronic illness?

- Work vs health? (Lev and Goldner, 2020)
- Career interruption (Beatty and Joffe, 2006)
- Career identity and goals (Clarke and James, 2003)
- Invisible identities and disclosure dilemma (Clair, Beatty and MacLean, 2005)
- Planning, decision-making and unpredictability (Dickson, Knussen and Flowers, 2008)
- Bias and stigma (Charmaz, 2019)
- Access to (decent) work (International Labour Organization, 2015)
- Policy background (National Disability Strategy, 2021) and lack of support



# Methodology

- Part of MA Careers Education and Coaching at the University of Derby
- Semi-structured interviews with 5 participants
- Exploring lived experiences of career identity, choice and support, plus perspectives on career and disability
- Analysed using IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis)
- Inductive coding led to the selection of three major themes



## Theme 1. Identity: challenges and changes

“And all of a sudden I went from that to... being a little bit homeless... in my identity... So I remember talking to people in the park when I was transitioning into a new career and... they’d ask me about myself and I’d say, ‘well I used to be a teacher, but now I’m doing this’.”

- Identity disruption
- Complex, challenging and changing
- Changes to goals and priorities
- Pragmatic career choices
- Resolution: reintegration of illness and career identities
- Challenge of invisible identities
- Key area for support



## Theme 2. Autonomy: regaining control

“For me, working from home has become a massive priority... My priorities have changed massively... setting up my own business... having control of my own schedule... I never really thought I would be self-employed... it's very much triggered a domino effect that in turn has impacted my priorities.”

- Emerged as a key priority
- Prompted career changes and guided choices
- Managing illness and unpredictability (controlling what you can)
- Working times, tasks and environment
- Remote working and ‘return to work’
- Overcoming disadvantage



## Theme 3. Carrying the burden: the cost of illness

“You can have it written in law as much as you like, it doesn't mean that it's actually reflected in reality of where we're at in society... I don't think people realise... just how much we can't do, or how much we could do but, god, it's a hell of a battle to do it, and it really doesn't need to be.”

- Burden of illness plus burden of stigma and disadvantage
- Risk management and disclosure dilemma
- Not being seen within careers support
- Able-bodied privilege
- Inclusion and adjustment - by the ill
- Sacrifice health for work
- Illness/disability hierarchy





## What now?

- More research!
- Spreading the word: how to make an impact?
- Implications for practice: Identification (disclosure) and support? Practitioner confidence? Best practice?
- Sector improvements: training, advocacy, accessibility and disadvantage (Robertson, 2014)
- Who expects research to change you personally?

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# Thank you!

Questions? Comments? Digital throwing of fruit?

Want to chat more? Drop me a line: [polly.wiggins@gmail.com](mailto:polly.wiggins@gmail.com)