Willing and Able: How Technical Communicators with Disabilities Can Succeed in Their Profession: Work Accommodations for People with Emotional or Mental Disabilities

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The AccessAbility Special Interest Group (A-SIG) of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), formed in 2002 as a successor to the Special Needs Committee, focuses on assisting people who have special needs, such as low vision, hearing loss, low mobility, cognitive difficulties, and other challenges by helping to accommodate their disabilities and making information more accessible to them. The A-SIG has been instrumental in helping people cope with barriers that impede the practice of technical communication for those with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

This progression topic addresses some of the coping mechanisms that can be used to help people with emotional or mental disabilities. It's my belief that the most important thing for people to do is to proactive. In general, if people try to make their day-to-day activities as stress-free as possible, dealing with an emotional or mental disability can be easier. By using time management techniques, coping mechanisms, and being flexible, taking control of the day can lessen or possibly eliminate stress.

MANAGE YOUR TIME

Managing your time effectively can help you deal with your disability. In my experience, I've found that if you have some structure in your life, you'll be able to better cope with your disability. Although I've had to deal with depression for a number of years, I think that the following suggestions can help most people with any type of disability:

➢ Take 10 to 15 minutes each day to plan your next day. Depending on your circumstances, do your planning at the end of the workday or just prior to bedtime.

➢ Make a list of the activities that you want to accomplish for the day. Afterwards, prioritize the list by the most important item first or by due date.

➢ Take advantage of your own personal habits. If you're a morning person, schedule the longest or most difficult task first.

➢ Schedule a short (10 to 15 minutes) break each morning and afternoon. Taking a break can actually help you get more done because you return refreshed and your mind is clearer.

USE COPING MECHANISMS

There are several coping mechanisms that you can use to help you with your disability. If you interrupt the activity that is becoming stressful, you can prevent things from getting worse. Here are a few suggestions that I've found helpful:

➢ Humor can be one of the most effective ways to cope. If you can laugh at yourself when you make a mistake, you'll have a better chance of keeping your morale up and your stress down.

➢ Get up and walk around the room or do some stretches at your desk if you are sitting at a computer for any length of time.

➢ Exercise on a regular basis. A simple 20-minute walk three times a week can help you increase your energy level and help keep you in shape.

➢ Eat regularly and sensibly. This is a real basis suggestion. It's best to eat three meals or five small meals daily, which ensures that your body has enough energy for you to get through the day.

BE FLEXIBLE

It's important that you try to be as flexible as possible. You can have the best plan for the day, but then something comes up, and your entire schedule is thrown off. If an unexpected task arises, take a few minutes and reschedule your day. This way you can feel that you have control of your time and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

CONCLUSION

I believe that if you following these suggestions, you can keep your day as stress-free as possible, accomplish your tasks, and lessen or eliminate the impact of your disability on your day-to-day activities.

Note: For more information regarding the AccessAbility SIG, check out our Web site at http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml.

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Helen Marty has over 30 years experience in the technical communication field. After retiring IBM Corporation where she was a technical editor and writer, Marty graduated from the University of Arizona with a B.A in English. She currently works for Misys Healthcare Systems, creating both hard copy and online information for software applications. Marty has been a member of STC for 12 years. She was a founding member of the Southern Arizona (SAZ) chapter and the AccessAbility SIG. She has served as a judge for PAO and newsletter competitions, and has presented at the SAZ chapter and the last two STC annual conferences.