



# When FM Leads to a Career Change

by Deborah Barnett, PhD, MSW


- When an old friend learned that my academic career was waylaid by chronic pain, he exclaimed, “What a great chance to do something really interesting!”


He turned out to be correct. While mourning my losses, I discovered career options that I otherwise would have missed. So if you can't continue your usual work, take the opportunity to re-examine your situation.


The first step is to accept your current circumstances rather than torturing yourself with comparisons of where you once were or would have liked to be. Consider professional athletes or dancers who, after sustaining injuries, find meaning in work as coaches, personal trainers, sportscasters, teachers, choreographers, costume designers, or consultants.


Acceptance can be liberating. Bear in mind that acceptance does not mean that you have to like the situation; but without acceptance, frustration about what we cannot do can hamper our efforts to find alternate work arrangements. Explore what you have valued in past jobs, whether it was creative expression, connection with others, a sense of purpose, feelings of productivity, organizational affiliation, or having a place outside the house where others valued your contribution. This will steer you toward work you will find fulfilling. ❖

# Try to look for work that is:

 **Meaningful**  
Pick something that holds your attention and feels “worth the pain.” Consider what sparks your enthusiasm. Chronic pain is no fun; look for employment that is. Meaningful, engaging work can offer a valuable distraction. It also provides something to take pride in at the end of the day.

 **Low stress**  
If your pain increases with tension and distress, try to avoid offices that are tense or where discord is high. The ideal environment for people with FM is calm and allows us to pace ourselves. If you are drawn to work that involves bursts of adrenaline, it is important to be able to take breaks and engage in restorative acts.

 **Flexible**  
People with FM feel best when we can vary our position, tasks, and schedule. Fibro-friendly jobs alternate between movement and rest, avoid repetitive tasks, and often deviate from the traditional eight-hour workday. Flexibility can come from part-time or freelance positions, job sharing (in which you divide tasks and salary with another employee), or self-employment. To reap the advantages of flexibility, know the schedule that works best for you. You may discover a three-hour window in which you can concentrate and apply yourself on a fairly consistent basis—and after which you need to lie low. Or you may realize that you get a “second wind” following a lengthy break for meditation, yoga, or other recuperative activity.

 **Comfortable**  
Know what enhances your comfort and assess the relevant factors, such as the temperature, noise level, dress code, furniture, and a place and time for breaks. Consider simple solutions such as strapping a heating pad on your chair back. Or join the growing number of people who work from the comfort of home.

## ENGAGE YOUR IMAGINATION

You may be thinking, “I’ll need imagination to think of anything I can do with this pain.” But your prospects are endless. Cull your hobbies and interests for marketable vocations. Many famous authors penned their first novels after age 50. Who knows? You may discover a hidden talent, revisit a childhood aspiration, or move in an intriguing new direction.

When we feel lousy, it can be hard to imagine engaging in much—yet we often feel better when engaged. As someone with fibromyalgia once shared with me, “I tend to get up and going because when I stop, I want to crawl back under the covers.” The key is to identify things you enjoy and explore related work possibilities. Keep your focus on what you *are* able to do. No matter how you spend your time—and regardless of whether you receive a paycheck—you have 24 hours to get through each day. How do you want to spend those hours? Envision the possibilities.

## GET INPUT

As you investigate employment possibilities, use available resources. Search online. Interview anyone who may have worthwhile advice or leads, starting with friends, family, colleagues, support groups, or other networks. Visit the library. There is an entire industry dedicated to the pursuit of the right job. The classic self-help book, *What Color*

*Is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles, encourages people to discover the type of work they most want to do and then to pursue it with creativity. Bolles’s later book, *Job Hunting for the So-Called Handicapped*, explores the issues involved in finding work while facing constraints and fears. Indeed, it is a hefty enterprise to search for a new career path while contending with pain. If you feel stuck, talk with a professional. Occupational therapists offer creative approaches and adaptive gadgets to assist with specific tasks. Career counselors help evaluate your capabilities and determine job situations that may best suit you. Psychotherapists and life coaches assist you in identifying your long-term goals, and offer support and validation as you consider the work you want to pursue.

## SOME IDEAS TO JUMPSTART YOUR IMAGINATION:


**Consulting.** Teaching what you know can be very fulfilling. Consider what you can share with others, whether your know-how lies in computers, gardening, farming, daycare, genealogy, construction, investment, or cooking. You can market your expertise or experience directly to the public or through an organization.


**Merchandising.** Internet-savvy individuals have ample opportunities for home-based businesses, whether they are marketing their creative wares, engaging in resale, or offering shopping services for busy professionals. Start small, and over time you can explore ways to grow your company.

**Office work.** Thanks to modern technologies, we can engage in a wide variety of office work from home—on our own schedule. “Virtual assistants” are a new category of professionals who offer administrative, clerical, creative, or technical services on a contractual basis via the internet. Or, if your most advanced home office equipment is a telephone, market research offers opportunities.

**Freelance work.** You can hire yourself out and choose which jobs to accept and when. Local internet resources, like Craigslist, offer free advertising. If you have a penchant for planning events, consider arranging professional conferences, family reunions, weddings, or toddler birthday parties. Artistic inclinations can be applied to a wide range of opportunities involving scrapbooking, PowerPoint presentations, interior design, or photography. You can turn a culinary gift into a catering business or meal service—or you may launch the next specialty cookie. The list goes on and on. Unleash your creative juices and make it happen one small step at a time. You may discover an untapped niche and build a substantial company all from the comfort of home.

## RETRAINING

If you can imagine a “dream job,” consider the education or training needed to make it possible. Take a long view. If embarking on a new career requires an investment of time, energy, and money, weigh these costs against the benefits you may reap in the years to come. In my case, I returned to school to become a clinical social worker, a career I now find emotionally satisfying and physically sustainable, leaving time for my writing and the other parts of my life that I value. 

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