

## GO ASK ALICE

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It is incapacitating, excruciating, catches you totally unaware and the only relief is sleep, heavy, "knock-me-out-cuz-I-don't-care" kind of sleep. A famous author and children's photographer is said to have created his "Alice in Wonderland" books while suffering this disease. Jefferson Airplane in the 1960s paraphrased Louis Carroll's writings when they proclaimed "one pill makes your larger and one pill makes you small, but the one that Mother gives you, does nothing at all." Migraine sufferers can relate, finding ourselves going down the same rabbit hole as Alice. We continue to work with the disability, knowing our work will suffer because our sight is blurred and our brain is fogged. Millions of other migraine patients can also make the connection.

Three times more women than men suffer from the disease, mainly in the age group 10-49, according to a Mayo Clinic study. 18% of the female population, compared to 5.6% of the males. Not only are migraine sufferers often discriminated against at work, but within the health care industry. Insurance carriers will often refuse to cover the related costs, calling it a "genetic disorder" or the all-encompassing, "stress-related" illness. It is estimated the total cost to the industry and health care system is \$5 million to \$17 million a year. According to a paper signed by the American Academy of Pain Medicine, approximately 1,200 work hours each year are lost to migraine pain. The unemployment rate among migraine patients is 10%-20% higher than the normal population. In the US, lost productivity due to migraine costs more than \$6.5 billion a year.

Dealing with migraine while working in the construction field is particularly challenging, especially when your position requires field work-come rain or come shine. After walking the jobsite in freezing weather, knowing any minute my brain would probably explode, I returned to an OAC (owner/architect/contractor) meeting, attempting to keep from vomiting from the pain. While holding my head to keep it from erupting and struggling through the brain fog, one architect commented, "Oh, I had a headache once." Had I not felt like dying I would have died laughing! I told him that response was like the prom queen telling the terminal acne patient she had a zit once. At least my supervisor could sympathetically relate, having a wife who suffered migraines and he assured me he *totally* understood. Then proceeded to tell me I must not stay at work but head straight home, insisting on having someone drive me if necessary, but..."This contract we are discussing must go out today, so finish it first."

Many physicians think migraines are often hormonal related, corresponding with fluctuations in a woman's estrogen cycle, whether naturally or chemically produced, making it another "women's disease" our male counterparts cannot totally relate to. Many co-workers and supervisors think of this group of victims as women who simply cannot handle the stress in our life or addicted to prescription drugs, or worse, just plain lazy, looking for an excuse to leave work early. They see the erratic behavior of one trying to focus or leaving a meeting to head to the restroom to vomit from the

nausea it causes as a fragile person, unable to hold up her share of conversation. In truth, migraine is a neurological disease, caused not from psychological factors, but physiological factors. The cause of migraine is generally caused by a biological-based disorder that is different for each person and often unknown.

Perhaps one of the reasons migraines is not taken seriously as a disease that effects millions of women in the workforce is that it is consider episodic, and not life threatening. Even though The New England Journal of Medicine and MAGNUM (Migraine Awareness Group) reported that 27% of strokes by persons under the age 45 were caused by migraine-induced strokes. The Mayo clinic reports 25% of cerebral infarctions attributed to migraine. Migraine is a disease, with the headache only the symptom. It is caused by dilation of the vein in the brain's blood vessels where a simple headache is caused by constriction of the vein. Migraine can produce, seizures, strokes, vomiting, numbness, garbled speech, loss of visions and a host of other symptoms. A migraine can last one day or several weeks. From someone who has suffered several migraine induced strokes and seizures, I can assure your it is life threatening and as scary as any diagnosis of other life-threatening diseases. It is disruptive to your every day life and can leave you incapacitated for hours, days or week. You feel as though you have been robbed of life's precious hours.

How do other women handle their migraine attacks while at work? From other women I have spoken with, they simply try to "hide" it. So as not to be considered "weak" or "faking" they call in sick with other more acceptable symptoms such as the flu, something everyone can relate to. They believe to lay claim to such a disability as a "headache" will cause their supervisors and coworkers to see them as frail, incapable of carrying their share of the workload.

The construction industry and all industries concerned with health and safety issues of their employees need to be educated to this potentially life-threatening disease. The real key is to be open and honest about your condition. Inform your coworkers and supervisors. Because migraines tend to be more prominent in "overachievers", you and they know you will make up for lost time in the quality of your work. If you are lucky, you will find a job that allows for more flexibility and allows you the time you need to recuperate.

I've been incredibly lucky, after years of suffering through migraine attacks in a structured office environment, to now be able to manage a business out of my office home. When a migraine attack prevents me from stepping out of bed, I am able to sleep in the extra hours needed to recuperate. Or if the pain is so excruciating the thought of putting on a clothes and endangering others and myself by trying to operate a vehicle, I can pull on my sweats and work at a schedule that works for me.

For the millions of women who do not have this option, there are many more people than ever before working for you. Organizations such as MAGNUM and congressional representatives are presenting testimonials to the senate of behalf of migraine sufferers and the need for recognition as a viable disease, capable of causing disability. Health care professionals are presenting migraine clinics to educate the physicians as to the real need for awareness and treatment. Less is being done to educate the workplace environment and that is where the individual can be the best help. Don't hide your disease, but discuss it with your supervisor and coworkers. Progress may be slow, but it is happening.