

One Foot Forward

A GIPA Training Toolkit

*Designed by and
for People Living
with HIV/AIDS*

MODULE

7

..... **Is THAT ALL THERE IS?**

CANADIAN
AIDS
SOCIETY



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CANADIENNE
DU SIDA



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Working together for a healthier world™

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In this module, we'll look at options for involvement you might want to consider. People living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHIV/AIDS) are people first, and while we may experience periodic illness, we can continue to explore and live out our hopes and dreams.

We'll talk about workplace accommodation, disability plans, training and educational opportunities and other tools that can assist you in working toward getting more involved.

"Strange as it may seem, my life is based on a true story."

– Ashleigh Brilliant

It's up to you. You aren't tied to the AIDS movement and, at any point in your life, you are allowed to change your mind.

WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

We can't begin to tell you all the options that are open to you. You are the only person who can figure that out, but when you're thinking about the open doors, remember that you need to keep your mind open as well.

"I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."

– Albert Einstein

FEAR

For people living on a pension, disability plan or provincial benefits, there is a very real fear of losing those benefits when considering a return to work.

- What if I get sick and have to stop working?
- What if my employer finds out I'm HIV-positive and fires me?
- What if I get hired and then laid off?
- What if working part-time affects my medical coverage?
- What if...?

We have to be honest with ourselves about our fears and how paid employment will affect our income. If you are considering a return to work, talk with your social worker, disability insurance worker or pension plan representative – then decide what's best for you.

Prepare yourself by getting all the facts first.

Employment and Persons with Disabilities

From community to community, and province to province, the ways in which people with disabilities are encouraged to enter or re-enter employment vary.

For many people with disabilities, full-time work is more than they can manage. A part-time position may be one answer, while self-employment is another option.

Some provinces will allow people living with disabilities and receiving benefits to earn a certain amount of money without deductions. Most provinces will have employment programming that is geared toward people with disabilities, such as training opportunities that build skills and self-esteem, and that offer the tools necessary to plan for employment and all it entails.

Disability Resource Groups

There are also community-based groups that work specifically with people with disabilities to assist them in making informed decisions about employment options, training and education, and voluntary work.

Some larger organizations may have programs for PLWHIV/AIDS, but many may not. You can call a disability resource group and ask about how they would provide services and programs for people with HIV before you get involved.

You can also contact groups if you have a particular disability, such as trouble walking, and find out how groups can assist with specific issues that may affect you.

Look around your community for resources that will help you decide how to approach either paid or volunteer work.

PAID WORK

Sometimes, this seems scary for PLWHIV/AIDS. In the earlier days, people were often told to leave work, make arrangements and prepare to die.

With better medications, that changed dramatically. Now people are re-entering the workforce after years of absence. That alone poses a problem.

How do I explain why I have a long period of unemployment in my resume?

Some people decide to be open and tell potential employers about their HIV status or about their health issues. Other people may say that they took retirement for a period. An employer may wonder why a younger person took retirement and may have concerns in employing a person with health problems.

You also need to consider the amount of income you'll need to get by. A minimum wage job may not be enough to cover your monthly expenses, and if you are receiving benefits or income assistance, you may lose all or part of it. Examine this carefully, but don't let it sway you from doing what you want to do.

Here's a table you can use to add up your monthly costs and figure out how much you need to survive:

Item	Amount
Rent/mortgage	
Food	
Utilities	
Personal items (clothes, hygiene, etc)	
Vehicle (gas, insurance, maintenance)	
Bus fare (bus pass)	
Entertainment	
Medical insurance	
Other medical expenses	
Vitamins and other supplements	
Other	
Total	

This will give you a general idea of your expenses. The total represents the wage you will need to make to meet all of your expenses.

Résumés

When working on your résumé, you need to think about your skills and not your sero-status. Unless you experience recurrent illness, you are as fit to work as the next person.

“Work is a necessary evil to be avoided.”

– Mark Twain

Preparing a résumé is an art. If you know someone who can assist you, by all means, ask for help. Wording on a résumé can help paint a clear picture of your experience and abilities, which will help you sell yourself to an employer.

You can find résumé templates in some word processing programs and online as well.

Letters of Reference

Getting reference letters and having a current list of three people who can provide references is very helpful for you and a potential employer. Even if you are thinking of different volunteer work, you can request a letter of reference about your skills and abilities in your current work. You can ask your immediate supervisor, or another appropriate person, for a letter of reference.

If you want to list people on your résumé, call them first and get their permission, as well as their contact information. Some people will write “references on request” on their résumé. However, many employers would prefer to have reference contacts readily available. It may be wiser to include your references and reference letters with your résumé.

Benefits

Many, but not all, employers may offer benefits packages for workers. However, many insurance companies, through which benefits are offered, will not insure PLWHIV/AIDS.

Those companies that do cover PLWHIV/AIDS may have higher premiums. For an AIDS group, it is essential that all employees be covered by whatever benefits plan they subscribe to. For other employers, it is a matter of capacity to pay premiums. You will need to do your homework on benefits packages and how your HIV status may affect access to those benefits.

Reasonable Accommodation

All employers are expected to provide reasonable accommodation for employees. This means that when an employee has specific needs (e.g., a blind worker requires a braille keyboard), the employer should accommodate that person's need to enable the employee to adequately and efficiently complete their work.

If you are a person with specific physical needs, including reduced hours of work, your employer is responsible for accommodating those needs in a reasonable manner. However, when a person's functioning at work continues to require increasingly complex accommodations, it may not be considered reasonable for the employer.

Ask about accommodation policies where you work. Accommodation policies apply to both paid and volunteer employees.

If You're Fired

People who are employed have rights. If you have been fired from a position, the employer must state the reasons for the firing. You have the option to challenge a firing, if you believe the reasons are not grounded in the truth.

If you believe you have been fired because of your HIV status, you can fight this under the Human Rights Code. If you believe that you have been fired unjustly, for any reason, you can fight those reasons with Employment Insurance Canada, as well as provincial Human Rights Commissions and Ombudsman offices.

If you are laid off, you have the right to apply for Employment Insurance benefits, as do all workers. Seasonal employment often means a period of lay-off at some point in the year.

Consider your options and understand your rights and responsibilities as an employee, and the responsibilities and rights of your employer.

Online Employment Services

You can also check out employment agencies and employment search engines online for tips and hints, as well as jobs that are posted in your area.

Popular online employment services include: www.servicecanada.ca, Monster.ca, Eluta.ca and Workopolis.ca, but there are others. On these sites you can register, post your résumé, search for work in your area and sometimes submit résumés to a potential employer directly by email.

The Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation (CWGHR: www.hivandrehab.ca) is a group devoted to issues faced by PLWHIV/AIDS who are working, entering or re-entering the work force. They may have information that is useful to you as you make decisions about employment.

Your ASO

You can also keep an eye open for jobs posted at your local ASO or peer agency. While many agencies struggle with low budgets and don't hire often, there may still be opportunities for work.

And remember that while an agency is supportive of PLWHIV/AIDS, they will hire the person who is best for the job and possesses the skills and qualifications they require. You, along with the other candidates, will have to sell your skills and abilities.

Keep looking for what you want to do and keep trying.

Go back to Module Six and review the things you love to do. That may give you a starting point in exploring the type of work that will keep you motivated and interested.

VOLUNTEERING IN THE COMMUNITY

Many cities and some smaller communities may have a volunteer bureau. These are umbrella agencies that offer a service for their member groups to post volunteer jobs. Some have websites on which positions may be posted. Others will have postings in their office.

The community is a vibrant and changing place. Volunteers may work with children, seniors, families and homeless persons, in religious organizations, hospitals, arts organizations, libraries and many other workplaces.

Think again – what do you love to do?

Explore those options with the volunteer agencies in your community. In most cases, you will have to apply to volunteer. You may also be interviewed, screened and trained before beginning the hands-on work. Some types of work may require you to have a police records check. If you have a criminal record from the past, it's a good idea to discuss that with your supervisor. Depending on the severity of the offense, you may be denied work with vulnerable populations.

Increasingly, there are short-term projects requiring volunteers with special skills, such as web design. If you are computer-literate and have email, there are often volunteer jobs you can do from your home. It's always good to meet the people you are working for. Go to the organization and get a sense of the people there – you may make a whole new set of friends.

You can search online for national volunteer websites that post volunteer positions for your area. Volweb.ca is a major volunteer website, as is charityvillage.ca.

WORK AND VOLUNTEERING IN AN ASO – REALITY CHECK!

While we may find an ASO supports our individual needs, working in an ASO is another matter. We need to understand that our role in the agency will change and we have to be comfortable with that change, or we need to reconsider whether we want to do the work.

When you are an employee, anywhere, you are accountable to your supervisor for doing the work outlined in your job description. Relationships change. Where you may have been a peer to others living with HIV, you may now be a worker, responsible for assisting those people. People who once supported you, other paid staff, are now your colleagues.

This isn't a bad thing, it's just different. You might need a period of adjustment to get used to new and different relationships and to the parameters of your work.

Similarly, volunteering means that you are no longer just a person accessing services. Volunteers are employees, just not paid. They have responsibilities and are accountable for their work and their actions.

“Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.”

– Philip K. Dick

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At the same time, volunteers may receive some benefits through events and other kinds of recognition, such as holiday parties and gatherings, and support groups for volunteers.

Volunteers also learn skills. The skills you may learn as a volunteer might lead to a paid position in your agency or elsewhere in the community.

It's all something you need to consider.

GIPA AND TRAINING IN YOUR ASO

If we consider GIPA as a base for how AIDS groups involve PLWHIV/AIDS, the agency is responsible for providing training that will assist a PLWHIV/AIDS in gaining the required skills and in increasing their capacity to do the work.

While budget considerations for training and education programs may limit the amount of training available, the commitment to improve skills for people with HIV should nonetheless be present.

SO, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?

This is the first and last question we ask.

Throughout these modules, we've offered you information to help you assess yourself, your agency, your board and your place in all of it.

But this is still a very small part of the potential you have within you.

You have to decide where you want to go. It's an adventure worth taking – and the first step is completely up to YOU.

It starts by putting one foot forward.

TERMS IN THIS MODULE

Sero-status: Whether or not you develop antibodies for a specific antigen. In this document, your sero-status refers to whether you have HIV or not. If you are sero-positive, you have the virus, whereas, if you are seronegative, you do not.

Computer literate: Being able to use the computer to a competent level.

SELF ASSESSMENT

After completing this module, I learned:

I still need more information about:

My strongest areas right now are:

My weakest areas right now are:

My next steps will be:

I can complete my next steps by: _____

Rate the statements below by circling the number that you think fits.

	Very confident			Need to work on this	
I spent enough time on this module.	1	2	3	4	5
I'm using my energy wisely.	1	2	3	4	5
I know where to find more information.	1	2	3	4	5
I can find a person to help me out.	1	2	3	4	5
I know how to apply what I learned.	1	2	3	4	5