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## Disability Insurance

(PPS-119)

## SSR 85-15

## SSR 85-15: TITLES II AND XVI: CAPABILITY TO DO OTHER WORK — THE MEDICAL-VOCATIONAL RULES AS A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING SOLELY NONEXERTIONAL IMPAIRMENTS

This supersedes Program Policy Statement No. 116 (SSR 85-7) with the same title (which superseded Program Policy Statement No. 104 (SSR 83-13) and is in accord with an order of the U.S. District Court for the District of Minnesota.

**PURPOSE:** The original purpose of SSR 83-13 was to clarify how the regulations and the exertionally based numbered decisional rules in Appendix 2, Subpart P, Regulations No. 4, provide a framework for decisions concerning persons who have only a nonexertional limitation(s) of function or an environmental restriction(s). The purpose of this revision to SSR 83-13 and SSR 85-7 is to emphasize, in the sections relating to mental impairments: (1) that the potential job base for mentally ill claimants without adverse vocational factors is not necessarily large even for individuals who have no other impairments, unless their remaining mental capacities are sufficient to meet the intellectual and emotional demands of at least unskilled, competitive, remunerative work on a sustained basis; and (2) that a finding of disability can be appropriate for an individual who has a severe mental impairment which does not meet or equal the Listing of Impairments, even where he or she does not have adversities in age, education, or work experience.

**CITATIONS (AUTHORITY):** Sections 223(d)(2)(A) and 1614(a)(3)(E) of the Social Security Act; Regulations No. 4, Subpart P, sections 404.1505(a), 404.1520(f)(1), 404.1521(b), 404.1545, and 404.1560 through 404.1569; Appendix 2 of Subpart P, sections 200.00(c), 200.00(e)(1), and 204.00; and Regulations No. 16, Subpart 1, sections 416.905(a), 416.920(f)(1), 416.921(b), 416.945, and 416.960 through 416.969.

**PERTINENT HISTORY:** If a person has a severe medically determinable impairment which, though not meeting or equaling the criteria in the Listing of Impairments, prevents the person from doing past relevant work, it must be determined whether the person can do other work. This involves consideration of the person's RFC and the vocational factors of age, education, and work experience.

The Medical-Vocational Guidelines (Regulations No. 4, Subpart P, Appendix 2) discuss the relative adjudicative weights which are assigned to a person's age, education, and work experience. Three tables in Appendix 2 illustrate the interaction of these vocational factors with his or her RFC. RFC is expressed in terms of sedentary, light, and medium work exertion. The tables rules reflect the potential occupational base of unskilled jobs for individuals who have severe impairments which limit their exertional capacities: approximately 2,500 medium, light, and sedentary occupations; 1,600 light and sedentary occupations; and 200 sedentary occupations — each occupation representing numerous jobs in the national economy. (See the text and glossary in [SSR 83-10](#), PPS-101, Determining Capability to Do Other Work — the Medical-Vocational Rules of Appendix 2.) Where individuals also have nonexertional limitations of function or environmental restrictions, the table rules provide a framework for consideration of how much the individual's work capability is further diminished in terms of any types of jobs within these exertional ranges with would be contraindicated by the additional limitations or restrictions. However, where a person has solely a nonexertional impairment(s), the tables rules do not direct conclusions of disabled or not disabled. Conclusions must, instead, be based on the principles in the appropriate sections of the regulations, giving consideration to the rules for specific case situations in Appendix 2.

This PPS clarifies policies applicable in cases involving the evaluation of solely nonexertional impairments.

**POLICY STATEMENT:** Given that no medically determinable impairment limits exertion, the RFC reflecting the severity of the particular nonexertional impairment(s) with its limiting effects on the broad world of work is the first issue. The individual's relative advantages or adversities in terms of age, education, and work experience is the second. Section 204.00 of Appendix 2 provides an example of one type of nonexertional impairment — environmental restrictions — and states that environmental restrictions ordinarily would not significantly affect the range of work existing in the national economy for individuals with the physical capability for heavy work (or very heavy work); i.e., with no medically determinable impairment which limits exertion. However, numerous environmental restrictions might lead to a different conclusion, as might one or more severe

losses of nonexertional functional capacities. The medical and vocational factors of the individual case determine whether exclusion of particular occupation or kinds of work so reduces the person's vocational opportunity that a work adjustment could not be made.

#### *Nonexertional Impairments Contrasted with Exertional Impairments*

The term "exertional" has the same meaning in the regulations as it has in the U.S. Department of Labor's classifications of occupations by strength levels. (See [SSR 83-10](#), PPS-101, Determining Capability to Do Other Work — The Medical-Vocational Rules of Appendix 2.) Any job requirement which is not exertional is considered to be nonexertional. A nonexertional impairment is one which is medically determinable and causes a nonexertional limitation of function or an environmental restriction. Nonexertional impairments may or may not affect a person's capacity to carry out the primary strength requirements of jobs, and they may or may not significantly narrow the range of work a person can do.

Nonexertional limitations can affect the abilities to reach; to seize, hold, grasp, or turn an object (handle); to bend the legs alone (kneel); to bend the spine alone (stoop) or bend both the spine and legs (crouch). Fine movements of small objects, such as done in much sedentary work and in certain types of more demanding work (e.g., surgery), require use of the fingers to pick, pinch, etc. Impairments of vision, speech, and hearing are nonexertional. Mental impairments are generally considered to be nonexertional, but depressions and conversion disorders may limit exertion. Although some impairments may cause both exertional limitations and environmental restriction (e.g., a respiratory impairment may limit a person to light work exertion as well as contraindicate exposure to excessive dust or fumes), other impairments may result in only environmental restrictions (e.g., skin allergies may only contraindicate contact with certain liquids). What is a nonexertional and extremely rare factor in one range of work (e.g., crawling in sedentary work) may become an important element in arduous work like coal mining.

Where a person's exertional capacity is compromised by a nonexertional impairment(s), see [SSR 83-14](#), PPS-105, Capability to Do Other Work — The Medical-Vocational Rules as a Framework for Evaluating a Combination of Exertional and Nonexertional Impairments.

Jobs which can possibly be performed by persons with solely nonexertional impairments are not limited to the approximately 2,500 unskilled sedentary, light and medium occupations which pertain to the table rules in Appendix 2. The occupational base cuts across exertional categories through heavy (and very heavy) work and will include occupations above the unskilled level if a person has skills transferable to skilled and semiskilled occupations within his or her RFC. (Note the examples in item 4.b of [SSR 82-41](#), PPS-67, Work Skills and Their Transferability as Intended by the Expanded Vocational Factors Regulations effective February 26, 1979, where medical factors prevent not only the performance of past work but also the transferability of skills.)

Given no medically determinable impairment which limits exertion, the first issue is how much the person's occupational base — the entire exertional span from sedentary work through heavy (or very heavy) work — is reduced by the effects of the nonexertional impairment(s). This may range from very little to very much, depending on the nature and extent of the impairment(s). In many cases, a decisionmaker will need to consult a vocational resource.

The publications listed in sections 404.1566 and 416.966 of the regulations will be sufficient vocational resources for relatively simple issues. In more complex cases, a person or persons with specialized knowledge would be helpful. State agencies may use personnel termed vocational consultants or specialist, or they may purchase the services of vocational evaluation workshops. Vocational experts may testify for this purpose at the hearing and appeals levels. In this PPS, the term vocational specialist (VS) describes all vocational resource personnel.

The second issue is whether the person can be expected to make a vocational adjustment considering the interaction of his or her remaining occupational base with his or her age, education, and work experience. A decisionmaker must consider sections 404.1562-404.1568 and 416.962-416.968 of the regulations, section 204.00 of Appendix 2, and the table rules for specific case situations in Appendix 2. If, despite the nonexertional impairment(s), an individual has a large potential occupational base, he or she would ordinarily not be found disabled in the absence of extreme adversities in age, education, and work experience. (This principle is illustrated in rule 203.01, 203.02, and 203.10 and is set out in [SSR 82-63](#), PPS-79, Medical-Vocational Profiles Showing an Inability to Make an Adjustment to Other Work.) The assistance of a vocational resource may be helpful. Whenever vocational resources are used and in the decision is adverse to the claimant, the determination or decision will include: (1) citations of examples of occupation/jobs the person can do functionally and vocationally, and (2) a statement of the incidence of such work in the region in which the individual resides or in several regions of the country.

#### *Examples of Nonexertional Impairments and Their Effects on the Occupational Base*

##### *1. Mental Impairments*

There has been some misunderstanding in the evaluation of mental impairments. Unless the claimant or beneficiary is a widow, widower, surviving divorced spouse or a disabled child under the Supplemental Security Income program, the sequential evaluation process mandated by the

regulations does not end with the finding that the impairment, though severe, does not meet or equal an impairment listed in Appendix 1 of the regulations. The process must go on to consider whether the individual can meet the mental demands of past relevant work in spite of the limiting effects of his or her impairment and, if not, whether the person can do other work, considering his or her remaining mental capacities reflected in terms of the occupational base, age, education, and work experience. The decisionmaker must not assume that failure to meet or equal a listed mental impairment equates with capacity to do at least unskilled work. The decision requires careful consideration of the assessment of RFC.

In the world of work, losses of intellectual and emotional capacities are generally more serious when the job is complex. Mental impairments may or may not prevent the performance of a person's past jobs. They may or may not prevent an individual from transferring work skills. (See [SSR 82-41](#), PPS-67, Work Skills and Their Transferability as Intended by the Expanded Vocational Factors Regulations effective February 26, 1979.)

Where a person's only impairment is mental, is not of listing severity, but does prevent the person from meeting the mental demands of past relevant work and prevents the transferability of acquired work skills, the final consideration is whether the person can be expected to perform unskilled work. The basic mental demands of competitive, remunerative, unskilled work include the abilities (on a sustained basis) to understand, carry out, and remember simple instructions; to respond appropriately to supervision, coworkers, and usual work situations; and to deal with changes in a routine work setting. A substantial loss of ability to meet any of these basic work-related activities would severely limit the potential occupational base. This, in turn, would justify a finding of disability because even favorable age, education, or work experience will not offset such a severely limited occupational base.

Example 1: A person whose vocational factors of age, education, and work experience would ordinarily be considered favorable (i.e., very young age, university education, and highly skilled work experience) would have severely limited occupational base if he or she has a mental impairment which causes a substantial loss of ability to respond appropriately to supervision, coworkers, and usual work situations. A finding of disability would be appropriate.

Where there is no exertional impairment, unskilled jobs at all levels of exertion constitute the potential occupational base for persons who can meet the mental demands of unskilled work. These jobs ordinarily involve dealing primarily with objects, rather than with data or people, and they generally provide substantial vocational opportunity for person with solely mental impairments who retain the capacity to meet the intellectual and emotional demands of such jobs on a sustained basis. However, persons with this large job base may be found disabled because of adversities in age, education, and work experience. (This is illustrated in examples 2 and 3 immediately following.)

Example 2: Someone who is of advanced age, has a limited education, has no relevant work experience, and has more than a non severe mental impairment will generally be found disabled. (See [SSR 82-63](#), PPS-79, Medical-Vocational Profiles Showing an Inability to Make an Adjustment to Other Work.)

Example 3: Someone who is closely approaching retirement age, has a limited education or less, worked for 30 years in a cafeteria doing an unskilled job as a "server," almost constantly dealing with the public, and now cannot, because of a severe mental impairment, frequently deal with the public. In light of the narrowed vocational opportunity in conjunction with the person's age, education, lack of skills, and long commitment to the particular type of work, a finding of disabled would be appropriate; but the decision would not necessarily be the same for a younger, better-educated, or skilled person. (Compare sections 404.1562 and 416.962 of the regulations and rule 203.01 of Appendix 2.)

Where a person has only a mental impairment but does not have extreme adversities in age, education, and work experience, and does not lack the capacity to do basic work-related activities, the potential occupational base would be reduced by his or her inability to perform certain complexities or particular kinds of work. These limitations would affect the occupational base in various ways.

Example 4: Someone who is of advanced age, has a high school education, and did skilled work as manager of a housing project can no longer, because of a severe mental impairment, develop and implement plans and procedures, prepare budget requests, schedule repairs or otherwise deal with complexities of this level and nature. Assuming that, in this case, all types of related skilled jobs are precluded but the individual can do work which is not detailed and does not require lengthy planning, the remaining related semiskilled jobs to which skills can be transferred and varied unskilled jobs, at all levels of exertion, constitute a significant vocational opportunity. A conclusion of "not disabled" would be appropriate. (Compare rules 201.07, 202.07, and 203.13 of Appendix 2.)

Example 5: Someone who is of advanced age, has a limited education, and did semiskilled work as a first-aid attendant no longer has the mental capacity to work with people who are in emergency situations and require immediate attention to cuts, burns, suffocation, etc. Although there may be very few related semiskilled occupations to which this person could transfer work skills, the large occupational base of unskilled work at all levels of exertion generally would justify a finding of not under a disability. (This is consistent with rules 203.11-203.17 of Appendix 2.)

*Stress and Mental Illness* — Since mental illness is defined and characterized by maladaptive behavior, it is not unusual that the mentally impaired have difficulty accommodating to the demands of work and work-like settings. Determining whether these individuals will be able to adapt to the

demands or "stress" of the workplace is often extremely difficult. This section is not intended to set out any presumptive limitations for disorders, but to emphasize the importance of thoroughness in evaluation on an individualized basis.

Individuals with mental disorders often adopt a highly restricted and/or inflexible lifestyle within which they appear to function well. Good mental health services and care may enable chronic patients to function adequately in the community by lowering psychological pressures, by medication, and by support from services such as outpatient facilities, day care programs, social work programs and similar assistance.

The reaction to the demands of work (stress) is highly individualized, and mental illness is characterized by adverse responses to seemingly trivial circumstances. The mentally impaired may cease to function effectively when facing such demands as getting to work regularly, having their performance supervised, and remaining in the workplace for a full day. A person may become panicked and develop palpitations, shortness of breath, or feel faint while riding in an elevator; another may experience terror and begin to hallucinate when approached by a stranger asking a question. Thus, the mentally impaired may have difficulty meeting the requirement of even so-called "low stress" jobs.

Because response to the demands of work is highly individualized, the skill level of a position is not necessarily related to the difficulty an individual will have in meeting the demands of the job. A claimant's condition may make performance of an unskilled job as difficult as an objectively more demanding job, for example, a busboy need only clear dishes from tables. But an individual with a severe mental disorder may find unmanageable the demand of making sure that he removes all the dishes, does not drop them, and gets the table cleared promptly for the waiter or waitress. Similarly, an individual who cannot tolerate being supervised may be not able to work even in the absence of close supervision; the *knowledge* that one's work is being judged and evaluated, even when the supervision is remote or indirect, can be intolerated for some mentally impaired persons. Any impairment-related limitations created by an individual's response to demands of work, however, must be reflected in the RFC assessment.

## 2. Postural-Manipulative Impairments

a. Limitations in *climbing and balancing* can have varying effects on the occupational base, depending on the degree of limitation and the type of job. Usual everyday activities, both at home and at work, include ascending or descending ramps or a few stairs and maintaining body equilibrium while doing so. These activities are required more in some jobs than in others, and they may be critical in some occupations. Where a person has some limitation in climbing and balancing and it is the only limitation, it would not ordinarily have a significant impact on the broad world of work. Certain occupations, however, may be ruled out; e.g., the light occupation of construction painter, which requires climbing ladders and scaffolding, and the very heavy occupation of fire-fighter, which sometimes requires the individual to climb poles and ropes. Where the effects of a person's actual limitations of climbing and balancing on the occupational base are difficult to determine, the services of a VS may be necessary.

b. *Stooping, kneeling, crouching, and crawling* are progressively more strenuous forms of bending parts of the body, with crawling as a form of locomotion involving bending. Some stooping (bending the body downward and forward by bending the spine at the waist) is required to do almost any kind of work, particularly when objects below the waist are involved. If a person can stoop occasionally (from very little up to one-third of the time) in order to lift objects, the sedentary and light occupational base is virtually intact. However, because of the lifting require for most medium, heavy, and very heavy jobs, a person must be able to stoop frequently (from one-third to two-thirds of the time); inability to do so would substantially affect the more strenuous portion of the occupational base. This is also true for crouching (bending the body downward and forward by bending both the legs and spine). However, crawling on hands and knees and feet is a relatively rare activity even in arduous work, and limitations on the ability to crawl would be of little significance in the broad world or work. This is also true of kneeling (bending the legs at the knees to come to rest on one or both knees).

c. *Reaching, handling, fingering, and feeling* require progressively finer usage of the upper extremities to perform work-related activities. Reaching (extending the hands and arms in any direction) and handling (seizing, holding, grasping, turning or otherwise working primarily with the whole hand or hands) are activities required in almost all jobs. Significant limitations of reaching or handling, therefore, may eliminate a large number of occupations a person could otherwise do. Varying degrees of limitations would have different effects, and the assistance of a VS may be needed to determine the effects of the limitations. "Fingering" involves picking, pinching, or otherwise working primarily with the fingers. It is needed to perform most unskilled sedentary jobs and to perform certain skilled and semiskilled jobs at all levels of exertion. As a general rule, limitations of fine manual dexterity have greater adjudicative significance — in terms of relative number of jobs in which the function is required — as the person's exertional RFC decreases. Thus, loss of fine manual dexterity narrows the sedentary and light ranges of work much more than it does the medium, heavy, and very heavy ranges of work. The varying degrees of loss which can occur may require a decisionmaker to have the assistance of a VS. However, a VS would not ordinarily be required where a person has a loss of ability to feel the size, shape temperature, or texture of an object by the fingertips, since this is a function required in very few jobs.

## 3. Hearing Impairments

Communication is an important factor in work. The inability to hear, because it vitally affects communication, is thus of great importance. However, hearing impairments do not necessarily prevent communication, and differences in types of work may be compatible with various degrees of

hearing loss. Occupations involving loud noise, such as in printing, have traditionally attracted persons with hearing impairments, whereas individuals with normal hearing have to wear ear protectors to be able to tolerate the working conditions. On the other hand, occupations such as bus driver require good hearing. There are so many possible medical variables of hearing loss that consultation of vocational reference materials or the assistance of a VS is often necessary to decide the effect on the broad world of work.

#### 4. *Visual Impairment*

As a general rule, even if a person's visual impairment(s) were to eliminate all jobs that involve very good vision (such as working with small objects or reading small print), as long as he or she retains sufficient visual acuity to be able to handle and work with rather large objects (and has the visual fields to avoid ordinary hazards in a workplace), there would be a substantial number of jobs remaining across all exertional levels. However, a finding of disability could be appropriate in the relatively few instances in which the claimant's vocational profile is extremely adverse, e.g., closely approaching retirement age, limited education or less, unskilled or no transferable skills, and essentially a lifetime commitment to a field of work in which good vision is essential.

#### 5. *Environmental Restriction*

A person may have the physical and mental capacity to perform certain functions in certain places, but to do so may aggravate his or her impairment(s) or subject the individual or others to the risk of bodily injury. Surroundings which an individual may need to avoid because of impairment include those involving extremes of temperature, noise, and vibration; recognized hazards such as unprotected elevations and dangerous moving machinery; and fumes, dust, and poor ventilation. A person with a seizure disorder who is restricted only from being on unprotected elevations and near dangerous moving machinery is an example of someone whose environmental restriction does not have a significant effect on work that exist at all exertional levels.

Where a person has a medical restriction to avoid excessive amounts of noise, dust, etc., the impact on the broad world of work would be minimal because most job environments do not involve great noise, amounts of dust, etc.

Where an individual can tolerate very little noise, dust, etc., the impact on the ability to work would be considerable because very few job environments are entirely free of irritants, pollutants, and other potentially damaging conditions.

Where the environmental restriction falls between very little and excessive, resolution of the issue will generally require consultation of occupational reference materials or the services of a VS.

**EFFECTIVE DATE:** Final regulations providing the Medical-Vocational Guidelines were published in the *Federal Register* on November 28, 1978, at FR 55349, effective February 26, 1979. They were rewritten to make them easier to understand and were published on August 20, 1980, at 45 FR 55566. The policies in this PPS also became effective as of February 26, 1979.

**CROSS-REFERENCES:** Program Operations Manual System, Part 4 (Disability Insurance State Manual Procedures) sections DI 00401.691 and 00401.694; [SSR 83-10](#), PPS-101, Determining Capability to Do Other Work — The Medical-Vocational Rules of Appendix 2 (with a glossary); [SSR 83-11](#), PPS-102, Capability to Do Other Work — The Exertionally Based Medical-Vocational Rules Met; [SSR 83-12](#), PPS-103, Capability to Do Other Work — The Medical-Vocational Rules as a Framework for Evaluating Exertional Limitations Within a Range of Work or Between Ranges of Work or Between Ranges of Work; and [SSR 83-14](#), PPS-105, Capability to Do Other Work — The Medical-Vocational Rules as a Framework for Evaluating a Combination of Exertional and Nonexertional Impairments.

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