

SSR 96-7p

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SSR 96-7p: POLICY INTERPRETATION RULING TITLES II AND XVI: EVALUATION OF SYMPTOMS IN DISABILITY CLAIMS: ASSESSING THE CREDIBILITY OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S STATEMENTS

This Ruling supersedes Social Security Ruling ([SSR](#)) [95-5p](#), "Titles II and XVI: Considering Allegations of Pain and Other Symptoms in Residual Functional Capacity and Individualized Functional Assessments and Explaining Conclusions Reached."

PURPOSE: The purpose of this Ruling is to clarify when the evaluation of symptoms, including pain, under 20 CFR 404.1529 and 416.929 requires a finding about the credibility of an individual's statements about pain or other symptom(s) and its functional effects; to explain the factors to be considered in assessing the credibility of the individual's statements about symptoms; and to state the importance of explaining the reasons for the finding about the credibility of the individual's statements in the disability determination or decision.^[1] In particular, this Ruling emphasizes that:

1. No symptom or combination of symptoms can be the basis for a finding of disability, no matter how genuine the individual's complaints may appear to be, unless there are medical signs and laboratory findings demonstrating the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce the symptoms.
2. When the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce the symptoms has been established, the intensity, persistence, and functionally limiting effects of the symptoms must be evaluated to determine the extent to which the symptoms affect the individual's ability to do basic work activities. This requires the adjudicator to make a finding about the credibility of the individual's statements about the symptom(s) and its functional effects.
3. Because symptoms, such as pain, sometimes suggest a greater severity of impairment than can be shown by objective medical evidence alone, the adjudicator must carefully consider the individual's statements about symptoms with the rest of the relevant evidence in the case record in reaching a conclusion about the credibility of the individual's statements if a disability determination or decision that is fully favorable to the individual cannot be made solely on the basis of objective medical evidence.
4. In determining the credibility of the individual's statements, the adjudicator must consider the entire case record, including the objective medical evidence, the individual's own statements about symptoms, statements and other information provided by treating or examining physicians or psychologists and other persons about the symptoms and how they affect the individual, and any other relevant evidence in the case record. An individual's statements about the intensity and persistence of pain or other symptoms or about the effect the symptoms have on his or her ability to work may not be disregarded solely because they are not substantiated by objective medical evidence.
5. It is not sufficient for the adjudicator to make a single, conclusory statement that "the individual's allegations have been considered" or that "the allegations are (or are not) credible." It is also not enough for the adjudicator simply to recite the factors that are described in the regulations for evaluating symptoms. The determination or decision must contain specific reasons for the finding on credibility, supported by the evidence in the case record, and must be sufficiently specific to make clear to the individual and to any subsequent reviewers the weight the adjudicator gave to the individual's statements and the reasons for that weight.

CITATIONS (AUTHORITY): Sections 216(i), 223(d), and 1614(a)(3) of the Social Security Act, as amended; Regulations No. 4, sections 404.1528(a), 404.1529, and 404.1569a; and Regulations No. 16, sections 416.928(a), 416.929, and 416.969a.

INTRODUCTION: A symptom is an individual's own description of his or her physical or mental impairment(s).^[2] Under the regulations, an individual's statement(s) about his or her symptoms is not enough in itself to establish the existence of a physical or mental impairment or that the individual is disabled.

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The regulations describe a two-step process for evaluating symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, shortness of breath, weakness, or nervousness:

- First, the adjudicator must consider whether there is an underlying medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s)—i.e., an impairment(s) that can be shown by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques—that could reasonably be expected to produce the individual's pain or other symptoms.^[3] The finding that an individual's impairment(s) could reasonably be expected to produce the individual's pain or other symptoms does not involve a determination as to the intensity, persistence, or functionally limiting effects of the individual's symptoms. If there is no medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s), or if there is a medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) but the impairment(s) could not reasonably be expected to produce the individual's pain or other symptoms, the symptoms cannot be found to affect the individual's ability to do basic work activities.
- Second, once an underlying physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce the individual's pain or other symptoms has been shown, the adjudicator must evaluate the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of the individual's symptoms to determine the extent to which the symptoms limit the individual's ability to do basic work activities. For this purpose, whenever the individual's statements about the intensity, persistence, or functionally limiting effects of pain or other symptoms are not substantiated by objective medical evidence, the adjudicator must make a finding on the credibility of the individual's statements based on a consideration of the entire case record. This includes the medical signs and laboratory findings, the individual's own statements about the symptoms, any statements and other information provided by treating or examining physicians or psychologists and other persons about the symptoms and how they affect the individual, and any other relevant evidence in the case record. This requirement for a finding on the credibility of the individual's statements about symptoms and their effects is reflected in 20 CFR 404.1529(c)(4) and 416.929(c)(4). These provisions of the regulations provide that an individual's symptoms, including pain, will be determined to diminish the individual's capacity for basic work activities to the extent that the individual's alleged functional limitations and restrictions due to symptoms can reasonably be accepted as consistent with the objective medical evidence and other evidence in the case record.

When additional information is needed to assess the credibility of the individual's statements about symptoms and their effects, the adjudicator must make every reasonable effort to obtain available information that could shed light on the credibility of the individual's statements. In recognition of the fact that an individual's symptoms can sometimes suggest a greater level of severity of impairment than can be shown by the objective medical evidence alone, 20 CFR 404.1529(c) and 416.929(c) describe the kinds of evidence, including the factors below, that the adjudicator must consider in addition to the objective medical evidence when assessing the credibility of an individual's statements:

1. The individual's daily activities;
2. The location, duration, frequency, and intensity of the individual's pain or other symptoms;
3. Factors that precipitate and aggravate the symptoms;
4. The type, dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of any medication the individual takes or has taken to alleviate pain or other symptoms;
5. Treatment, other than medication, the individual receives or has received for relief of pain or other symptoms;
6. Any measures other than treatment the individual uses or has used to relieve pain or other symptoms (e.g., lying flat on his or her back, standing for 15 to 20 minutes every hour, or sleeping on a board); and
7. Any other factors concerning the individual's functional limitations and restrictions due to pain or other symptoms.

Once the adjudicator has determined the extent to which the individual's symptoms limit the individual's ability to do basic work activities by making a finding on the credibility of the individual's statements, the impact of the symptoms on the individual's ability to function must be considered along with the objective medical and other evidence, first in determining whether the individual's impairment or combination of impairments is "severe" at step 2 of the sequential evaluation process for determining disability and, as necessary, at each subsequent step of the process.^[4] (See [SSR 96-3p](#), "Titles II and XVI: Considering Allegations of Pain and Other Symptoms in Determining Whether a Medically Determinable Impairment is Severe," and [SSR 96-8p](#), "Titles II and XVI: Assessing Residual Functional Capacity in Initial Claims.")

POLICY INTERPRETATION: A symptom is an individual's own description of his or her physical or mental impairment(s). Once the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce pain or other symptoms has been established, adjudicators must recognize that individuals may experience their symptoms differently and may be limited by their symptoms to a greater or lesser extent than other individuals with the same medical impairments and the same medical signs and laboratory findings. Because symptoms, such as pain, sometimes suggest a greater severity of impairment than can be shown by objective medical evidence alone, any statements of the individual concerning his or her symptoms must be carefully considered if a fully favorable determination or decision cannot be made solely on the basis of objective medical evidence.

If an individual's statements about pain or other symptoms are not substantiated by the objective medical evidence, the adjudicator must consider

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all of the evidence in the case record, including any statements by the individual and other persons concerning the individual's symptoms. The adjudicator must then make a finding on the credibility of the individual's statements about symptoms and their functional effects.

Credibility

In general, the extent to which an individual's statements about symptoms can be relied upon as probative evidence in determining whether the individual is disabled depends on the credibility of the statements. In basic terms, the credibility of an individual's statements about pain or other symptoms and their functional effects is the degree to which the statements can be believed and accepted as true. When evaluating the credibility of an individual's statements, the adjudicator must consider the entire case record and give specific reasons for the weight given to the individual's statements.

The finding on the credibility of the individual's statements cannot be based on an intangible or intuitive notion about an individual's credibility. The reasons for the credibility finding must be grounded in the evidence and articulated in the determination or decision. It is not sufficient to make a conclusory statement that "the individual's allegations have been considered" or that "the allegations are (or are not) credible." It is also not enough for the adjudicator simply to recite the factors that are described in the regulations for evaluating symptoms. The determination or decision must contain specific reasons for the finding on credibility, supported by the evidence in the case record, and must be sufficiently specific to make clear to the individual and to any subsequent reviewers the weight the adjudicator gave to the individual's statements and the reasons for that weight. This documentation is necessary in order to give the individual a full and fair review of his or her claim, and in order to ensure a well-reasoned determination or decision.

In making a finding about the credibility of an individual's statements, the adjudicator need not totally accept or totally reject the individual's statements. Based on a consideration of all of the evidence in the case record, the adjudicator may find all, only some, or none of an individual's allegations to be credible. The adjudicator may also find an individual's statements, such as statements about the extent of functional limitations or restrictions due to pain or other symptoms, to be credible to a certain degree. For example, an adjudicator may find credible an individual's statement that the abilities to lift and carry are affected by symptoms, but find only partially credible the individual's statements as to the extent of the functional limitations or restrictions due to symptoms; i.e., that the individual's abilities to lift and carry are compromised, but not to the degree alleged. Conversely, an adjudicator may find credible an individual's statement that symptoms limit his or her ability to concentrate, but find that the limitation is greater than that stated by the individual.

Moreover, a finding that an individual's statements are not credible, or not wholly credible, is not in itself sufficient to establish that the individual is not disabled. All of the evidence in the case record, including the individual's statements, must be considered before a conclusion can be made about disability.

Factors in Evaluating Credibility

Assessment of the credibility of an individual's statements about pain or other symptoms and about the effect the symptoms have on his or her ability to function must be based on a consideration of all of the evidence in the case record. This includes, but is not limited to:

- The medical signs and laboratory findings;
- Diagnosis, prognosis, and other medical opinions provided by treating or examining physicians or psychologists and other medical sources; and
- Statements and reports from the individual and from treating or examining physicians or psychologists and other persons about the individual's medical history, treatment and response, prior work record and efforts to work, daily activities, and other information concerning the individual's symptoms and how the symptoms affect the individual's ability to work.

The adjudicator must also consider any observations about the individual recorded by Social Security Administration (SSA) employees during interviews, whether in person or by telephone. In instances where the individual attends an administrative proceeding conducted by the adjudicator, the adjudicator may also consider his or her own recorded observations of the individual as part of the overall evaluation of the credibility of the individual's statements.

Consideration of the individual's statements and the statements and reports of medical sources and other persons with regard to the seven factors listed in the regulations,^[5] along with any other relevant information in the case record, including the information described above, will provide the adjudicator with an overview of the individual's subjective complaints. The adjudicator must then evaluate all of this information and draw appropriate inferences and conclusions about the credibility of the individual's statements.

The following sections provide additional guidelines for the adjudicator to consider when evaluating the credibility of an individual's statements.

One strong indication of the credibility of an individual's statements is their consistency, both internally and with other information in the case record.

The adjudicator must consider such factors as:

- The degree to which the individual's statements are consistent with the medical signs and laboratory findings and other information provided by medical sources, including information about medical history and treatment.
- The consistency of the individual's own statements. The adjudicator must compare statements made by the individual in connection with his or her claim for disability benefits with statements he or she made under other circumstances, when such information is in the case record. Especially important are statements made to treating or examining medical sources and to the "other sources" defined in 20 CFR 404.1513(e) and 416.913(e). The adjudicator must also look at statements the individual made to SSA at each prior step of the administrative review process and in connection with any concurrent claim or, when available, prior claims for disability benefits under titles II and XVI. Likewise, the case record may contain statements the individual made in connection with claims for other types of disability benefits, such as workers' compensation, benefits under programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, or private insurance benefits. However, the lack of consistency between an individual's statements and other statements that he or she has made at other times does not necessarily mean that the individual's statements are not credible. Symptoms may vary in their intensity, persistence, and functional effects, or may worsen or improve with time, and this may explain why the individual does not always allege the same intensity, persistence, or functional effects of his or her symptoms. Therefore, the adjudicator will need to review the case record to determine whether there are any explanations for any variations in the individual's statements about symptoms and their effects.
- The consistency of the individual's statements with other information in the case record, including reports and observations by other persons concerning the individual's daily activities, behavior, and efforts to work. This includes any observations recorded by SSA employees in interviews and observations recorded by the adjudicator in administrative proceedings.

Medical Evidence

Symptoms cannot be measured objectively through clinical or laboratory diagnostic techniques; however, their effects can often be clinically observed. The regulations at 20 CFR 404.1529(c)(2) and 416.929(c)(2) provide that objective medical evidence "is a useful indicator to assist us in making reasonable conclusions about the intensity and persistence of" an individual's symptoms and the effects those symptoms may have on the individual's ability to function. The examples in the regulations (reduced joint motion, muscle spasm, sensory deficit, and motor disruption) illustrate findings that may result from, or be associated with, the symptom of pain. When present, these findings tend to lend credibility to an individual's allegations about pain or other symptoms and their functional effects.

When there are medical signs and laboratory findings demonstrating the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce the pain or other symptoms, the adjudicator must always attempt to obtain any available objective medical evidence concerning the intensity and persistence of the pain or other symptoms, and, when such evidence is obtained, must consider it in evaluating the individual's statements. *However, allegations concerning the intensity and persistence of pain or other symptoms may not be disregarded solely because they are not substantiated by objective medical evidence.* A report of negative findings from the application of medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques is one of the many factors that appropriately are to be considered in the overall assessment of credibility. However, the absence of objective medical evidence supporting an individual's statements about the intensity and persistence of pain or other symptoms is only one factor that the adjudicator must consider in assessing an individual's credibility and must be considered in the context of all the evidence.

Over time, there may also be medical signs and laboratory findings that, though not directly supporting or refuting statements about the intensity or persistence of pain or other symptoms, demonstrate worsening or improvement of the underlying medical condition. Such signs and findings may also help an adjudicator to draw appropriate inferences about the credibility of an individual's statements.

Apart from the medical signs and laboratory findings, the medical evidence, especially a longitudinal medical record, can be extremely valuable in the adjudicator's evaluation of an individual's statements about pain or other symptoms. Important information about symptoms recorded by medical sources and reported in the medical evidence may include:

- Onset, description of the character and location of the symptoms, precipitating and aggravating factors, frequency and duration, course over time (e.g., whether worsening, improving, or static), and daily activities. Very often, this information will have been obtained by the medical source from the individual and may be compared with the individual's other statements in the case record. However, the evidence provided by a medical source may also contain medical opinions of the source about the individual's symptoms and their effects, and such opinions must be weighed applying the factors in 20 CFR 404.1527 and 416.927.

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- A longitudinal record of any treatment and its success or failure, including any side effects of medication.
- Indications of other impairments, such as potential mental impairments, that could account for the allegations.

Although longitudinal records showing regular contact with a treating source are the most desirable, longitudinal medical records can be valuable even when they are not treating source records. For example, an individual may receive treatment at a clinic and see different physicians, but the clinic records may still show a longitudinal history of complaints and attempts at relief.

Medical Treatment History

In general, a longitudinal medical record demonstrating an individual's attempts to seek medical treatment for pain or other symptoms and to follow that treatment once it is prescribed lends support to an individual's allegations of intense and persistent pain or other symptoms for the purposes of judging the credibility of the individual's statements. Persistent attempts by the individual to obtain relief of pain or other symptoms, such as by increasing medications, trials of a variety of treatment modalities in an attempt to find one that works or that does not have side effects, referrals to specialists, or changing treatment sources may be a strong indication that the symptoms are a source of distress to the individual and generally lend support to an individual's allegations of intense and persistent symptoms.^[6]

On the other hand, the individual's statements may be less credible if the level or frequency of treatment is inconsistent with the level of complaints, or if the medical reports or records show that the individual is not following the treatment as prescribed and there are no good reasons for this failure. However, the adjudicator must not draw any inferences about an individual's symptoms and their functional effects from a failure to seek or pursue regular medical treatment without first considering any explanations that the individual may provide, or other information in the case record, that may explain infrequent or irregular medical visits or failure to seek medical treatment. The adjudicator may need to recontact the individual or question the individual at the administrative proceeding in order to determine whether there are good reasons the individual does not seek medical treatment or does not pursue treatment in a consistent manner. The explanations provided by the individual may provide insight into the individual's credibility. For example:

- The individual's daily activities may be structured so as to minimize symptoms to a tolerable level or eliminate them entirely, avoiding physical or mental stressors that would exacerbate the symptoms. The individual may be living with the symptoms, seeing a medical source only as needed for periodic evaluation and renewal of medications.
- The individual's symptoms may not be severe enough to prompt the individual to seek ongoing medical attention or may be relieved with over-the-counter medications.
- The individual may not take prescription medication because the side effects are less tolerable than the symptoms.
- The individual may be unable to afford treatment and may not have access to free or low-cost medical services.
- The individual may have been advised by a medical source that there is no further, effective treatment that can be prescribed and undertaken that would benefit the individual.
- Medical treatment may be contrary to the teaching and tenets of the individual's religion.

Other Sources of Information

Other sources may provide information from which inferences and conclusions may be drawn about the credibility of the individual's statements. Such sources may provide information about the seven factors listed in the regulations and may be especially helpful in establishing a longitudinal record. Examples of such sources include public and private agencies, other practitioners, and nonmedical sources such as family and friends.

Observations of the Individual

In instances in which the adjudicator has observed the individual, the adjudicator is not free to accept or reject the individual's complaints solely on the basis of such personal observations, but should consider any personal observations in the overall evaluation of the credibility of the individual's statements.

In evaluating the credibility of the individual's statements, the adjudicator must also consider any observations recorded by SSA personnel who previously interviewed the individual, whether in person or by telephone.

Consideration of Findings by State Agency
and Other Program Physicians and Psychologists
at the Administrative Law Judge and
Appeals Council Levels of Administrative Review

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Under 20 CFR 404.1527(f) and 416.927(f), administrative law judges and the Appeals Council are required to consider findings of fact by State agency medical and psychological consultants and other program physicians and psychologists about the existence and severity of an individual's impairment(s), including the existence and severity of any symptoms, as opinions of nonexamining physicians and psychologists. Administrative law judges and the Appeals Council are not bound by any State agency findings, but they may not ignore these opinions and must explain the weight given to the opinions in their decisions. Therefore, if the case record includes a finding by a State agency medical or psychological consultant or other program physician or psychologist on the credibility of the individual's statements about limitations or restrictions due to symptoms, the adjudicator at the administrative law judge or Appeals Council level of administrative review must consider and weigh this opinion of a nonexamining source under the applicable rules in 20 CFR 404.1527 and 416.927 and must explain the weight given to the opinion in the decision. (See [SSR 96-6p](#), "Titles II and XVI: Consideration of Administrative Findings of Fact by State Agency Medical and Psychological Consultants and Other Program Physicians and Psychologists at the Administrative Law Judge and Appeals Council Levels of Administrative Review; Medical Equivalence.")

EFFECTIVE DATE: This Ruling is effective on the date of its publication in the *Federal Register*.

CROSS-REFERENCES: [SSR 96-3p](#), "Titles II and XVI: Considering Allegations of Pain and Other Symptoms in Determining Whether a Medically Determinable Impairment is Severe," [SSR 96-8p](#), "Titles II and XVI: Assessing Residual Functional Capacity in Initial Claims," [SSR 96-6p](#), "Titles II and XVI: Consideration of Administrative Findings of Fact by State Agency Medical and Psychological Consultants and Other Program Physicians and Psychologists at the Administrative Law Judge and Appeals Council Levels of Administrative Review; Medical Equivalence;" and Program Operations Manual System, sections DI 24515.061 and DI 24515.064.B.3.

[1] For clarity, the discussions in this Ruling refer only to claims of individuals claiming disability benefits under title II and individuals age 18 or older claiming disability benefits under title XVI. However, the same basic principles with regard to determining whether statements about symptoms are credible also apply to claims of individuals under age 18 claiming disability benefits under title XVI.

[2] For an individual under age 18 claiming disability benefits under title XVI who is unable to adequately describe his or her symptom(s), the adjudicator will accept as a statement of this symptom(s) the description given by the person most familiar with the individual, such as a parent, other relative, or guardian. 20 CFR 416.928(a).

[3] The adjudicator must develop evidence regarding the possibility of a medically determinable mental impairment when the record contains information to suggest that such an impairment exists, and the individual alleges pain or other symptoms, but the medical signs and laboratory findings do not substantiate any physical impairment(s) capable of producing the pain or other symptoms.

[4] In determining whether the impairment(s) of an individual claiming disability benefits under title II or an individual age 18 or older claiming disability benefits under title XVI is medically equivalent to a listed impairment in appendix 1 of subpart P of 20 CFR Part 404, the adjudicator will not substitute allegations of pain or other symptoms for a missing or deficient sign or laboratory finding to raise the severity of the individual's impairment(s) to that of a listed impairment. 20 CFR 404.1529(d)(3) and 416.929(d)(3). In determining whether the impairment(s) of an individual under age 18 claiming disability benefits under title XVI is equivalent to a listed impairment, if the adjudicator cannot find equivalence based on medical evidence only, the adjudicator will consider pain or another symptom(s) under 20 CFR 416.926a(b)(3) in determining whether the individual has an impairment(s) that results in overall functional limitations that are the same as the disabling functional consequences of a listed impairment. 20 CFR 416.929(d)(3).

[5] The seven factors are also set out in the "Introduction," above.

[6] The adjudicator must also remember that medical treatment need not always be specifically for the relief of a symptom. Often, treatment will be aimed at ameliorating the underlying medical condition which, in turn, may result in improvement in symptoms. The treatment may also cause symptoms as a side effect.

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