

Trina Felber: Hey, everybody. Trina here. Thank you so much for joining me on The Healthy Me. Today I have a super special guest. Her name is Holly Bertone. We are going to talk about how to thrive in the workplace with autoimmune disease. This is really a great topic. I don't think anybody's really talking about what life is like when you work and you have autoimmune diseases. I know unfortunately, at the age of 14, my niece was just diagnosed with Hashimoto's Disease, so it's hitting younger children too. This is really good. Working in the workplace is one thing, but also going to school with it too, as it's hitting younger kids. Maybe Holly can talk about that.

Let me tell you about Holly. Holly Bertone is a certified national health professional and a project management professional. She's also a number one Amazon bestselling author of the book "Thriving in the Workplace with Autoimmune Disease: Know Your Rights, Resolve Conflict, and Reduce Stress." There's her book. She's also a highly sought after speaker and wellness expert. After spending over 20 years as a project manager in both government and industry, she's now the president and CEO of Pink Fortitude, and runs the health and wellness website pinkfortitude.com. Holly is also a breast cancer survivor and a Hashimoto's survivor, and turned these two significant health challenges into a passion to help others. She inspires other with her quick wit, brutal honesty, and simple ways to be healthy in real life.

Holly, as I mentioned, is a certified natural health professional, a certified essential oils coach, holds a Masters degree from John Hopkins University, a Bachelors degree from Elizabethtown College. She's been super busy, and is a project manager professional. Holly is passionate about reaching out to cancer and autoimmune survivors, and also volunteers for organizations supporting our military veterans. In her free time, she loves to garden, hit flea markets and yard sales. She's married to a retired Green Beret. She's also a stepmother and lives in Alexandria, Virginia. Welcome, Holly.

Holly Bertone: Thank you so much for having me on the show. It's such an honor to be here and I really look forward to connecting with everyone.

Trina Felber: Yes. Holly, tell me a little bit about you. Tell us about your story. I know you've got some survival things, and you've got a toolbox now that you can help us with. Give us some insight.

Holly Bertone: I was actually diagnosed with breast cancer on my 39th birthday.

Trina Felber: Ouch.

Holly Bertone: I know, right? Some people get pretty earrings or maybe some roses. I got breast cancer. A while later, it took me a little bit to get there, but I considered it my gift. It took me a while to get there. A year after treatment ended, I was diagnosed with Hashimoto's. Since then, had been really struggling, between the chemo and the Hashi's, and my body shutting down, just extreme migraines and IBS. I called them space shuttle launches to the bathroom. The chronic fatigue was so bad. It was debilitating, and then the pain on top of it. About 2015 or so, I

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really started looking at the more holistic, functional approach to getting to the root cause of all of these issues, and one day at a time, one step at a time, really starting to take these steps to turn my health back around.

Trina Felber: Talk a little bit about your workplace, because you were working at the time when you were diagnosed with both of these. How did your workplace treat you differently between your cancer and your autoimmune diagnosis? Was there a difference?

Holly Bertone: Oh, absolutely. I was actually ... I can't name the agency, but I was at one of those three letter federal government agencies that you hear about in Washington, D.C. I actually had a pretty high level position. I was the Chief of Staff and had a lot of management responsibilities. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I don't really want to say they threw a parade, but it was pretty close thereof. They just did everything they could to make my life as seamless as possible with all of the cancer treatments and everything like that. The management team was just so accommodating, and giving me parking spaces and flexible hours, letting me close the door and sleep in my office, back and forth with chemo, and things that I wasn't even asking for, they were giving me. They were absolutely amazing.

With the initial diagnosis with the autoimmune, I really wasn't experiencing as severe of the health challenges as a few years later. It wasn't until I hit that health crisis, despite having this all natural lifestyle, hitting that really health crisis mode, and everything started shutting down. I had a different set of managers, a whole different team, and I was told I should drink more coffee. I was told that it was all in my head, that I was faking it, that I was lazy. My manager said, "I have three young children at home. I'm tired too." The FMLA nurse that I went to, to handle all of my paperwork said that I should just take a pill. It was like night and day between the two.

Trina Felber: Cancer, whether you've had it or not, you can relate to someone that has had it, and it's devastating.

Holly Bertone: Absolutely. There's a high empathy factor.

Trina Felber: Right. With autoimmune diseases, I think people don't understand what that is, and they don't really treat it or look at it as complicating your life in a different way. Just remind everybody what Hashimoto's is, because I know that there's people out there that are like, "I know I've heard that term, but what is it"? Can you give a little bit of a background about what Hashimoto's is and how it affects your life?

Holly Bertone: Sure. There's hyperthyroid and hypothyroid. Hypothyroid is that slow and sluggish thyroid, and Hashimoto's is the autoimmune component of hypothyroidism. It's kind of like my thyroid is slow and sluggish, and I am too.

Trina Felber: I talk a lot about thyroid and the disrupting things that can be put in skincare that can affect it, and Hashimoto's is obviously one of those things that can result from not just skincare, but other things as well.

Holly Bertone: I don't know the percentage, but there is actually a pretty strong correlation too, between Hashimoto's and breast cancer.

Trina Felber: I can imagine. Autoimmune diseases are difficult, because it's basically your body treating your body differently, not really recognizing it. There's a lot of different autoimmune diseases that we don't realize, and get treated a little bit different. People get treated differently. Irritable Bowel and Crohn's and things like that, people don't always look at them as real problems, but they totally affect your life. They totally affect you at home, they affect you at work, they affect you at play. Talking about autoimmune diseases, is it a disability when you have an autoimmune disease?

Holly Bertone: Yes. It is. In the United States of America, and I can't speak to other countries, but in the United States, in 2009, the Americans with Disabilities Act was amended to include the endocrine and the immune systems. If there was ever a gray area before 2009, after that and since then, autoimmune disease is considered a legal disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act. You have autoimmune disease, you may not think of yourself as disabled and that's okay, but you are legally protected, and that's the message that I want to get out.

Trina Felber: That's awesome, because you didn't have that when you went through this, right?

Holly Bertone: Right. I didn't know anything about this. I had such a horrible time at work, we ended up dropping. I went to EEO office and they basically said, "We're here for management and we're here to protect ourselves against lawsuits. We're not here to advocate for the employee." I'm there trying to do all this research on my own. I realized there is nothing out there that talks about autoimmune disease as a disability in the workplace, so I made it my mission to put the message out there.

Trina Felber: Awesome. I know there's a lot of people out there. Whether anybody listening has any problems or knows someone that does have a problem, getting the word out there that you do have some protection. It's a lifestyle. There's things out there, so I'm so proud of you, and I'm so grateful that you are getting the message out there. Otherwise, it's a lonely world, right?

Holly Bertone: It is.

Trina Felber: It's a very lonely world. When you're feeling like you have no support and you just have to get up and do what you can do, and you don't feel good. What talking about this with your boss? Do you recommend that you tell your boss in your workplace that you have an autoimmune disease when you're working or when you're hired? How does that all work?

Holly Bertone: First, let me just say I'm not an attorney, so this is not official legal advice. This is me going through a really tough time in my life, doing a lot of research, contacting all the experts that I could, and sharing that information with as many people as I can. Do you tell your employer? It's kind of a gray area. Let me go through a couple scenarios. Number one, you're totally fine, and you don't say anything. A flare hits, and your work performance starts to be affected. If you haven't said anything, if you don't have that legal documentation behind you through HR or the EEO office, or whatever your workplace has, they can actually ding you on your performance for poor performance if it's not documented. If it is documented, then your rights are protected. That's one scenario to think about.

The other thing too, is that we in this society, can't keep secrets. Even if you're on the phone or you say something to your co-workers, I don't know about anyone else, I worked within two feet of six people. We were all in each other's businesses. We knew everything about each other.

Trina Felber: That's how most places work, right?

Holly Bertone: Right. Even if your co-worker says something, even if it's not intentional and your boss overhears, or let's say you're posting something on social media like, "I'm having a really bad fibromyalgia day," or "My Crohn's is really acting up today," be cognizant that if you're putting it out there and you're talking about it, there are no secrets in this world and you can't really put the toothpaste back in the tube.

Trina Felber: Right.

Holly Bertone: The other thing too is that if you are going to say something, then you definitely want to go to your HR or EEO office first, and find out what documentation you're going to need, and then go to your doctor and have your doctor fill out the information. What I recommend is take a couple copies and fill it out first with your words, basically to help them fill out the paperwork for you, and then they'll put in their medical expertise.

Trina Felber: I also think that just opens the door to communication and education.

Holly Bertone: Right.

Trina Felber: That way, when something happens, or maybe before it happens, you can have that conversation of what life is like when it happens, and what they can expect, but don't worry, it lasts this long, typically, and then this is what you can expect. That leads to the next question of what kind of accommodations can you ask for?

Holly Bertone: Let me add one more thing. Whenever you do have that conversation, I'd recommend getting your paperwork filled out first so that you are legally protected through HR, EEO, whatever office your company has. When you do have that conversation with your manager, I always recommend have someone there with you, whether it's someone

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through HR, or another supervisor. Also, really quick, keep in mind good managers, great managers are always going to be good and great managers. Jerk managers are always going to be jerk managers, so keep that in mind too, the tone of your office as well and how you want to handle it.

Accommodations. My book covers the two main issues that most people with autoimmune have, which are the fatigue and the pain. There is also a lot of different issues that we struggle with. Things like flexible work hours. For me, I get really tired in the afternoon. Showing up at work at 5:00 or 5:30 in the morning was actually a good thing, and I was able to knock out the overnight stuff that came in and then leaving early, so I could come home and take a nap. Maybe working from home a couple days a week. Having flexible hours to accommodate for your doctor's visits. Having the ability to go to a free office or conference room to make phone calls to discuss private medical matters with your physicians. If you have Celiac or Crohn's, IBS, you have something that you need a really dedicated gluten-free environment, having your own refrigerator that you're not going to have cross-contamination.

Let's say you need a lot of trips to the bathroom during the day, you have an office that's closer to the door. Maybe you need a parking space. Things like that. You could get an adjustable desk. If you stand all day, you can ask for an anti-fatigue mat, or ask to have seated accommodations. Also, like you said, the education. The chance to talk to your co-workers and the employees there, so that there's some understanding. There's cognition issues, you can request to have everything in writing. Instead of your boss coming to your desk and like, "Blah, there's your assignment," everything has to be in writing so you can go back to it and look over your notes. There's a lot of different accommodations. My book covers some more, but that's the basic ones.

Trina Felber: Awesome. Definitely check out her book. Show them the cover of your book again. It's called "Thriving in the Workplace with Autoimmune Disease: Know Your Rights, Resolve Conflict, and Reduce Stress." I think it's awesome. All the information that you give us is incredible because I know there's a lot of people that struggle with things like this. How do you balance work and a busy life with an autoimmune disease with what's going on in your life?

Holly Bertone: I like to share this story, and then I'll get into the tips. There was one point where I was holding down a full-time job outside of the home, managing a family, and just going through a lot of stress. It was the funniest thing. I came home, I made dinner, I cleaned up, and I was like, "I've got one hour before bedtime," because I go to bed early. You get tired with autoimmune disease. I ran downstairs, I drew a bath, I get on my phone, I put on my meditation app, and I jumped in the tub and I'm like, "Meditate. Go. Rest." I was like, "This should not be this way." That forced me to really rethink how I was handling things.

First of all, is find out what your high points and your low points are during the day, and then really work around them. Make sure that you're the most productive, that you actually schedule your most productive

things that you have to do during those high times, and either plan to rest or plan those low productive things that you have to get done during those low times. Meal planning is really good. Every Sunday, take an hour, plan for the week, prepare for the week. We always have at least one or two Crock-Pot meals a week because-

Trina Felber: I totally agree.

Holly Bertone: Right. We have 100% healthy home. It's all natural foods. It's a lot of food preparation, but it's worth it.

Trina Felber: Since we're mentioning it, there's also the different websites that you can go to that you can order your meals. They're not prepared, they send you all the ingredients that you need. Even doing that, I did it for a while, and it was very helpful. I would just two meals a week that way, because at least for two days a week, I had everything I needed and then I filled in the rest.

Holly Bertone: Right. Amazon Fresh delivers, Thrive Market delivers some really healthy foods as well. Getting your family involved. Your family wants to help. They just probably don't know what to do. I don't know for other women, like me, "I want the dishwasher loaded a certain way," or "I want the laundry done a certain way." You know what? Give it up and give it over. Your family wants to help. Give them chores to do.

Trina Felber: Stop being so in control.

Holly Bertone: Exactly. That helps as well. I make a tiered approach to my day and my week. I was like, "These are the things that absolutely have to get done today, this week. Absolute priority." That's really what I focus on, and then I go to that next level. Anyways, those are some of the things that have really helped me balance.

Trina Felber: Awesome. Where can they find you if they're interested in seeing what you have? I know you've got more information on your website.

Holly Bertone: Absolutely.

Trina Felber: Let them know where they can find you.

Holly Bertone: Sure. It's pinkfortitude.com, and then the backslash and the word thank, T-H-A-N-K. We have over \$50 worth of free eBooks and downloads to help you create and maintain that healthy lifestyle.

Trina Felber: Awesome, Holly. Thank you for joining me. Anybody, if you know someone out there that suffers from any autoimmune disease or any problems and they're struggling at home or in the workplace, Holly's got great tips, especially on the website and in her book, "Thriving in the Workplace with Autoimmune Disease." Make sure that you get the word out there. It's more important to share good information with people. It's such a blessing. Holly, thank you for joining me.

Holly Bertone: Thank you so much for having me.

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Trina Felber:

You're welcome. It was great to see you again. Thanks, everybody, for joining us on The Healthy Me.

Thanks for watching. Make sure you subscribe to keep learning how to create your healthy self. See you next time.