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Cost of chronic illness huge for business, says expert

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Lost productivity. Jason Reid, who runs Mississauga-based Sick with Success, coaches high-performing professionals who have chronic illness. *Supplied photo*

Apple chief executive officer Steve Job's pending leave of absence – his second in the past few years – should be a wake-up call to businesses about the impact chronic illness can have on their bottom line, says a Mississauga expert on the subject.

Jason Reid, who runs Sick with Success, a firm that specializes in coaching high-performing professionals who have chronic illness, cites a study from American think tank The Milken Institute that concluded lost productivity due to chronic illness costs the United States economy more than $1 trillion annually.

Closer to home, the Conference Board of Canada issued a report last summer, stating: "The prevalence of a range of chronic diseases has reached a scale in Canada and around the world that should set off alarm bells within organizations."

"The good news is that more people today are able to function with serious long-term illnesses," said Reid. "Medical technology allows us to diagnose problems sooner while new drugs and advanced therapies can keep people functional longer.

"However, chronic illness obviously has a down-side. It can be unpredictable and when symptoms flare up, the reality hits that this highly-functional and talented person is actually quite sick."

Reid himself has battled both Crohn's disease and arthritis for more than 30 years. Despite these challenges, he has enjoyed a successful career as an award-winning journalist and manager.

Part of the difficulty in dealing with chronic, long-term illness, says Reid, is that the symptoms are largely invisible to the outside world.

"During my career, the vast majority of the people I worked with had no idea I was battling two serious illnesses. I was often putting in 50 to 60 hours a week, dealing with the day-to-day challenges of managing people and getting news to air. If I looked a little tired and run-down, no one thought anything of it."