



BRACING FOR IMPACT: ATL EMPLOYEES GIVE US THE INSIDE SCOOP ON HOW TO DEAL WITH LIFE GETTING IN THE WAY OF YOUR CAREER

By Brianna Rhodes

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We all know negative situations in life can pop up at the most unexpected times, but we have the power to decide whether we let them break us.

If you're looking to take the high road when this happens, three Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport employees are here to guide you on how to handle life when it gets in the way of your career.

Through health issues, a family loss and a natural disaster, these three strong women were able to persevere through their hardships. Now they're sharing their testimonies on how you can too.

Overcoming setbacks in life isn't an easy feat, and Jennifer Ogunsola, manager of policy and communications at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, chose to not let her multiple sclerosis diagnosis in 2011 keep her from moving up in her career. In fact, it helped her grow and become more aware of finding her purpose in life.

"In November 2011, I was diagnosed with MS, and just before I got sick, I was looking to leave the City of Atlanta," Ogunsola said. "A few months later, I got a promotion to lead communications for Atlanta's Department of Parks and Recreation, which didn't have a communications team...and I felt like I was where I was supposed to be because I was able to create an entire communications department for the City of Atlanta at 27 years old," she

added. “So I did that for a while and then I was ready to move on, and it was like as soon as I was ready to start job hunting again, I became really sick again.”

Ogunsola believed that getting sick everytime she started looking for a new job was a sign from God that she needed to stay where she was in order to grow.

“MS kept getting in the way of what I thought were great career moves for me and I kind of had a talk with God and I said ‘okay it seems as though you want me to stay here, so I’m just going to keep still,’” Ogunsola. “Right after I came to that conclusion, I got a promotion...and I became the communications director for Atlanta Workforce Development Agency.”

Ogunsola credits her director in the Mayor’s Office for being so supportive in her taking off the time she needed while dealing with her sickness. Like Ogunsola, Jai Ferrell, the director of marketing and creative services and Joy Brown, special events manager at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport both said their colleagues at their jobs were very understanding while they both dealt with personal situations as well.

Ferrell received a lot of support from her team at Turner in Atlanta while dealing with her grandmother’s sickness and death in 2007.

“I just felt like I could not focus because I had so many things going on at home,” Ferrell said. “I also didn’t want to be the girl who was seeking empathy and pity for being late or not being on the job. So the best way I was able to do that was to have transparency with my immediate manager. Often times you make an assumption that people know what it is that you’re going through, but a lot of people don’t look like what they’ve been through or what they’re going through.”

“So there are a lot of people dealing with things and battling issues and challenges that you never know and there’s a level of empathy with any human with a heart that you have when you understand what a person is going through,” Ferrell added.

Ferrell recalls going to her manager professionally and telling her about her situation. She credits her ability to balance her work and personal life during this difficult time to the transparency showed and her manager’s empathetic response. Ferrell said her manager gave her the reprieve she needed and she didn’t know what she would’ve done if her manager wasn’t aware of her situation. When her grandmother passed her colleagues were there to support her, which she sincerely appreciated.

“I really felt that because I wasn’t trying to be a superhero and wear my silence in shame and quiet, I got the support I needed in the way that she could help me with her flexibility and her understanding,” Ferrell said. “I would say that was probably one of the times where I felt like I didn’t want people to pity me. I don’t want to be at work crying. I don’t want to be emotional. I still want to work on the projects and do what I’m supposed to do even though I was oftentimes tired from waking up in the middle of the night to help her or just emotionally exhausted and it’s a lot.”

Brown also received much support from her team when a tornado ripped through her hometown in Alabama while she was there visiting for Easter weekend a few years ago.

“Needless to say, my plans to return back to Atlanta were totally derailed,” Brown said. “We were without power for at least four days and it took a few days for the roadways to become driveable again. There I was, stuck in Alabama with no power during a very busy work season for me.”

Luckily, Brown’s team back at the office completely understood her situation.

“I had enough battery in my phone to send out an email letting everyone know that I and my family were safe but we had no power and the roads were not safe to drive on,” Brown said. “I wasn’t even able to work remotely and of course no one expected me to, so I included any and every detail to my workload and workspace that may have needed some attention so nothing would drop during my absence. I fully trusted my team to step up and support me during that time and that’s exactly what they did.”

Although these women got through these hard situations, they do admit they were hard to cope with mentally and emotionally.

Ogunsola said she was so confused and angry during her diagnosis. She even questioned why God allowed something to happen to her during the point when her career was taking off.

It took a while for Ogunsola to cope, and for years it was a huge emotional roller coaster for her. She eventually learned her lesson and stopped questioning her situation and she eventually came to realize that her diagnosis happened for a reason.

“It took a minute before I realized, ‘why not me?’” Ogunsola said. “Only because life happens to everyone. So then the question shifted from ‘why me?’ to ‘Okay God, you allowed this to happen. What is it that you want me to do with it?’ Because there’s a reason that I have this disease and have to deal with this daily.”

“Once I shifted my thoughts, things in my life started to shift - my career and everything,” Ogunsola said. “Things just got better for me overall once I stopped being angry and feeling sorry for myself, and that’s a process. That’s not anything that’s going to happen overnight and I don’t think that any part of the process is wrong. Don’t let anyone tell you that you were angry for too long or you were in denial for too long. I believe that every single part of your process and everyone’s journey is going to be different when you are dealing with an unexpected life change.”

Ogunsola believes the whole process made her stronger and has given her the ability to deal with anything that comes her way.

“What I’ve been able to do with what happened to me has only made me stronger and prepared me for life,” Ogunsola said. “As of right now, I can say that’s the worst that has happened to me, but as long as we are alive, life is going to happen.”

“I will say that the lessons that I’ve learned through this process will help me with whatever life throws my way,” she added. “It doesn’t mean that when something happens to me I’m not going to be angry and even ask God why again, but at the end of the day after I go through all of that, when it’s quiet and when I am alone, I will say to myself, ‘I got through the last situation, I’m going to get through this situation.’”

Ferrell also learned valuable lessons while dealing with her grandmother’s death also. One of the lessons was giving herself a break and not being too hard on herself.

“I’m not sure who gave us these black girl magic dreams, but along with that magic comes a lot of time inside the kitchen cooking up the right concoction and the spell,” Ferrell said.

“Like nobody sees that part with the work, the time and the effort,” Ferrell added. “All they just see is the magical source that comes out when it’s done and so that’s kind of how I feel sometimes. I had to learn to not be so hard on myself, you know like give myself a break.”

Ogunsola and Ferrell both say going through these hard situations in life can’t be done alone. They both feel that it’s important to have someone you can confide in and hold you accountable whether it’s a family member, close friend, or a mentor.

Support is everything.

“Find someone who you can just talk to,” Ogunsola said. “You’re not going to tell them everything, but there are going to be times that you’re going through something where you need someone to talk to or just simply someone to sit and be with you. If you are a Christian or a believer, don’t ever underestimate the power of talking to God and praying about your situation.”

Ferrell says that having a person with you during your journey can help you find your way back towards your purpose, which is one of the steps in her flight plan to help women navigate and move through life successfully.

“Plans still don’t go anywhere, they’re still important to you,” Ferrell said. “They’re still very much achievable, and so that takes me back to saying you can travel with a companion. Have an accountability partner to bring you back to remember because we forget often. Then you take flight and you still board and you move on and you watch your plan, whether it’s health, a financial issue, a family challenge, or spiritual or mental challenge. Remember why you chose the destination.”

For anyone dealing with any life issues currently, Ogunsola and Brown have advice to help you make it through.

“If you believe that it’s going to get better, it’s going to get better,” Ogunsola said. “That doesn’t mean that it’s immediately going to get easier...but if you believe that it’s not going to get better, that mindset will reflect how you respond to things, and ultimately having an attitude of defeat can make your situation more difficult.”

“When you are alone, tell yourself that you not only deserve, but will have a life of joy, peace and happiness, and that hardship, disappointment and pain will not consume your life,” Ogunsola added. “You must constantly feed yourself with positivity, and those positive words may not be reflective of what you see going on in your life. You just have to keep telling yourself that it’s going to get better and when it does it’s going to become better than you ever imagined. I truly believe that we have a way of speaking and thinking things into fruition.”

Brown believes everything that happens in life happens for reason. It’s up to you to decide what to take from it. Do whatever is best for you.

“I think life gets in the way on purpose,” Brown said. “There’s always a lesson in that. The lesson may be to try something different, go a different route or to just simply slow down.”



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