

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS
FORT SMITH DIVISION

CHRISTINA L. ASHLEY

PLAINTIFF

vs.

Civil No. 2:16-cv-02059

NANCY BERRYHILL

DEFENDANT

Acting Commissioner, Social Security Administration

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Christina Ashley (“Plaintiff”) brings this action pursuant to § 205(g) of Title II of the Social Security Act (“The Act”), 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) (2010), seeking judicial review of a final decision of the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration (“SSA”) denying her applications for a period of disability, Disability Insurance Benefits (“DIB”), and Supplemental Security Income (“SSI”) under Titles II and XVI of the Act.

The Parties have consented to the jurisdiction of a magistrate judge to conduct any and all proceedings in this case, including conducting the trial, ordering the entry of a final judgment, and conducting all post-judgment proceedings. ECF No. 5.¹ Pursuant to this authority, the Court issues this memorandum opinion and orders the entry of a final judgment in this matter.

1. Background:

Plaintiff protectively filed her disability application for DIB on September 25, 2013 and for SSI on October 15, 2013. (Tr. 13, 183-191). In her applications, Plaintiff alleges being disabled due to arthritis, back, hip, and feet pain, high blood pressure, diabetes, liver mass, migraines, and one kidney functioning at 50 percent with the other removed due to kidney cancer. (Tr. 225). Plaintiff

¹ The docket numbers for this case are referenced by the designation “ECF No. ____.” The transcript pages for this case are referenced by the designation “Tr.”

alleges an onset date of July 26, 2013. (Tr. 13, 183, 186). These applications were denied initially and again upon reconsideration. (Tr. 128-134).

Thereafter, Plaintiff requested an administrative hearing on her denied applications, and this hearing request was granted. (Tr. 141-142). Plaintiff's administrative hearing was held on November 7, 2014. (Tr. 26-78). Plaintiff was present and was represented by counsel, Michael Hamby. Plaintiff, her ex-husband Gregory White, and Vocational Expert ("VE") Jim Spragins testified at this hearing. *Id.* At this hearing, Plaintiff testified she was sixty (60) years old and had completed one year of college. (Tr. 32).

After this hearing, on May 8, 2015, the ALJ entered an unfavorable decision denying Plaintiff's applications. (Tr. 13-20). The ALJ determined Plaintiff met the insured status requirements of the Act through December 31, 2018. (Tr. 15, Finding 1). The ALJ also determined Plaintiff had not engaged in Substantial Gainful Activity ("SGA") since July 26, 2013, her alleged onset date. (Tr. 15, Finding 2).

The ALJ then determined Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: osteoarthritis/degenerative disc disease of the lumbar spine, mild bilateral carpal tunnel syndrome, hypertension, diabetes mellitus II, chronic kidney disease, osteoarthritis of the bilateral hips and shoulders, hyperparathyroidism, obesity, and a history of right nephrectomy. (Tr. 15, Finding 3). Despite being severe, the ALJ determined these impairments did not meet or medically equal the requirements of any of the Listings of Impairments in Appendix 1 to Subpart P of Regulations No. 4 ("Listings"). (Tr. 16, Finding 4).

The ALJ then considered Plaintiff's Residual Functional Capacity ("RFC"). (Tr. 17, Finding 5). First, the ALJ evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints and found her claimed limitations were

not entirely credible. *Id.* Second, the ALJ determined Plaintiff retained the RFC to perform sedentary work only occasional climbing, balancing, stooping, kneeling, crouching, and crawling, and frequent (not constant) handling and fingering bilaterally. *Id.*

The ALJ evaluated Plaintiff's Past Relevant Work ("PRW"). (Tr. 20, Finding 6). The VE testified at the administrative hearing regarding this issue. *Id.* Based upon that testimony, the ALJ determined Plaintiff retained the capacity to perform her PRW as a medical clerk. *Id.* Because Plaintiff retained the capacity to perform her PRW, the ALJ determined she had not been under a disability, as defined by the Act, from July 26, 2013 through the date of his decision. (Tr. 20, Finding 7).

Thereafter, on March 14, 2016, Plaintiff filed the present appeal with this Court. ECF No.

1. The Parties consented to the jurisdiction of this Court. ECF No. 5. This case is now ready for decision.

2. Applicable Law:

In reviewing this case, this Court is required to determine whether the Commissioner's findings are supported by substantial evidence on the record as a whole. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) (2006); *Ramirez v. Barnhart*, 292 F.3d 576, 583 (8th Cir. 2002). Substantial evidence is less than a preponderance of the evidence, but it is enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner's decision. *See Johnson v. Apfel*, 240 F.3d 1145, 1147 (8th Cir. 2001).

As long as there is substantial evidence in the record that supports the Commissioner's decision, the Court may not reverse it simply because substantial evidence exists in the record that would have supported a contrary outcome or because the Court would have decided the case

differently. *See Haley v. Massanari*, 258 F.3d 742, 747 (8th Cir. 2001). If, after reviewing the record, it is possible to draw two inconsistent positions from the evidence and one of those positions represents the findings of the ALJ, the decision of the ALJ must be affirmed. *See Young v. Apfel*, 221 F.3d 1065, 1068 (8th Cir. 2000).

It is well-established that a claimant for Social Security disability benefits has the burden of proving his or her disability by establishing a physical or mental disability that lasted at least one year and that prevents him or her from engaging in any substantial gainful activity. *See Cox v. Apfel*, 160 F.3d 1203, 1206 (8th Cir. 1998); 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A). The Act defines a “physical or mental impairment” as “an impairment that results from anatomical, physiological, or psychological abnormalities which are demonstrable by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques.” 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(3), 1382(3)(c). A plaintiff must show that his or her disability, not simply his or her impairment, has lasted for at least twelve consecutive months. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(1)(A).

To determine whether the adult claimant suffers from a disability, the Commissioner uses the familiar five-step sequential evaluation. He determines: (1) whether the claimant is presently engaged in a “substantial gainful activity”; (2) whether the claimant has a severe impairment that significantly limits the claimant’s physical or mental ability to perform basic work activities; (3) whether the claimant has an impairment that meets or equals a presumptively disabling impairment listed in the regulations (if so, the claimant is disabled without regard to age, education, and work experience); (4) whether the claimant has the Residual Functional Capacity (RFC) to perform his or her past relevant work; and (5) if the claimant cannot perform the past work, the burden shifts to the Commissioner to prove that there are other jobs in the national economy that the claimant can

perform. *See Cox*, 160 F.3d at 1206; 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)-(f). The fact finder only considers the plaintiff's age, education, and work experience in light of his or her RFC if the final stage of this analysis is reached. *See* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920 (2003).

3. Discussion:

Plaintiff brings the present appeal claiming the ALJ erred: (1) by failing to find Plaintiff met a Listing, (2) in assessing the credibility of Plaintiff, and (3) in his RFC determination. ECF No. 13, Pgs. 1-5. In response, the Defendant argues the ALJ did not err in any of his findings. ECF No. 14.

In assessing the credibility of a claimant, the ALJ is required to examine and to apply the five factors from *Polaski v. Heckler*, 739 F.2d 1320 (8th Cir. 1984) or from 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529 and 20 C.F.R. § 416.929.² *See Shultz v. Astrue*, 479 F.3d 979, 983 (2007). The factors to consider are as follows: (1) the claimant's daily activities; (2) the duration, frequency, and intensity of the pain; (3) the precipitating and aggravating factors; (4) the dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of medication; and (5) the functional restrictions. *See Polaski*, 739 at 1322.

The factors must be analyzed and considered in light of the claimant's subjective complaints of pain. *See id.* The ALJ is not required to methodically discuss each factor as long as the ALJ acknowledges and examines these factors prior to discounting the claimant's subjective complaints. *See Lowe v. Apfel*, 226 F.3d 969, 971-72 (8th Cir. 2000). As long as the ALJ properly applies these five factors and gives several valid reasons for finding that the Plaintiff's subjective complaints are

² Social Security Regulations 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529 and 20 C.F.R. § 416.929 require the analysis of two additional factors: (1) "treatment, other than medication, you receive or have received for relief of your pain or other symptoms" and (2) "any measures you use or have used to relieve your pain or symptoms (e.g., lying flat on your back, standing for 15 to 20 minutes every hour, sleeping on a board, etc.)." However, under *Polaski* and its progeny, the Eighth Circuit has not yet required the analysis of these additional factors. *See Shultz v. Astrue*, 479 F.3d 979, 983 (2007). Thus, this Court will not require the analysis of these additional factors in this case.

not entirely credible, the ALJ's credibility determination is entitled to deference. *See id.*; *Cox v. Barnhart*, 471 F.3d 902, 907 (8th Cir. 2006). The ALJ, however, cannot discount Plaintiff's subjective complaints "solely because the objective medical evidence does not fully support them [the subjective complaints]." *Polaski*, 739 F.2d at 1322.

When discounting a claimant's complaint of pain, the ALJ must make a specific credibility determination, articulating the reasons for discrediting the testimony, addressing any inconsistencies, and discussing the *Polaski* factors. *See Baker v. Apfel*, 159 F.3d 1140, 1144 (8th Cir. 1998). The inability to work without some pain or discomfort is not a sufficient reason to find a Plaintiff disabled within the strict definition of the Act. The issue is not the existence of pain, but whether the pain a Plaintiff experiences precludes the performance of substantial gainful activity. *See Thomas v. Sullivan*, 928 F.2d 255, 259 (8th Cir. 1991).

In the present action, the ALJ did not perform a proper *Polaski* analysis. Instead of complying with *Polaski* and considering the *Polaski* factors, the ALJ only focused on Plaintiff's medical records. (Tr. 17-20).³ The ALJ summarized his findings as follows:

After careful consideration of the evidence, the undersigned finds that the claimant's medically determinable impairments could reasonably be expected to cause the alleged symptoms; however, the claimant's statements concerning the intensity, persistence and limiting effects of these symptoms are less than fully credible to the extent they are inconsistent with the above residual functional capacity assessment.

In sum, the above residual functional capacity assessment is supported by the objective medical evidence contained in the record.

(Tr. 19). (emphasis added).

³ The ALJ also did not even specifically reference the *Polaski* factors which, although not required, is the preferred practice. *See Schultz v. Astrue*, 479 F.3d 979, 983 (8th Cir. 2007).

The ALJ must make a specific credibility determination, articulate the reasons for discrediting the Plaintiff's testimony, and address any inconsistencies between the testimony and the record. The ALJ failed to perform this analysis. This lack of analysis is insufficient under *Polaski*, and this case should be reversed and remanded for further consideration consistent with *Polaski*.

4. Conclusion:

Based on the foregoing, the undersigned finds that the decision of the ALJ, denying benefits to Plaintiff, is not supported by substantial evidence and should be reversed and remanded. A judgment incorporating these findings will be entered pursuant to Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 52 and 58.

ENTERED this 14th day of February 2017.

/s/ Barry A. Bryant
HON. BARRY A. BRYANT
U. S. MAGISTRATE JUDGE