

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS
FAYETTEVILLE DIVISION

CHRISTIAN GARRIS

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 15-5308

NANCY A. BERRYHILL,¹ Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Christian Garris, brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), seeking judicial review of a decision of the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration (Commissioner) denying his claims for period of disability and disability insurance benefits (DIB) under the provisions of Title II of the Social Security Act (Act). In this judicial review, the Court must determine whether there is substantial evidence in the administrative record to support the Commissioner's decision. See 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

I. Procedural Background:

Plaintiff protectively filed his current application for DIB on April 16, 2013, alleging an inability to work since July 20, 2012, due to anxiety, headaches, “angers easily,” difficulty focusing, and a learning disability. (Doc. 10, pp. 73, 155). An administrative video hearing was held on April 11, 2014, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Doc. 10, pp. 32-71).

By written decision dated August 14, 2014, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Doc. 10,

¹ Nancy A. Berryhill, has been appointed to serve as acting Commissioner of Social Security, and is substituted as Defendant, pursuant to Rule 25(d)(1) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

p. 21). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: a mood disorder. However, after reviewing all of the evidence presented, the ALJ determined that Plaintiff's impairments did not meet or equal the level of severity of any impairment listed in the Listing of Impairments found in Appendix I, Subpart P, Regulation No. 4. (Doc. 10, p. 21). The ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform a full range of work at all exertional levels but with the following nonexertional limitations: no prolonged interaction with the public.

(Doc. 10, p. 23). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform his past relevant work as a retail stocker, and a computer operator. (Doc. 10, p. 24).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which denied that request on October 30, 2015. (Doc. 10, pp. 5-10). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 6). Both parties have filed appeal briefs, and the case is now ready for decision. (Docs. 11, 12).

The Court has reviewed the entire transcript. The complete set of facts and arguments are presented in the parties' briefs, and are repeated here only to the extent necessary.

II. Applicable Law:

This Court's role is to determine whether the Commissioner's findings are supported by substantial evidence on the record as a whole. Ramirez v. Barnhart, 292 F.3d 576, 583 (8th Cir. 2002). Substantial evidence is less than a preponderance but it is enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner's decision. The ALJ's decision must be affirmed if the record contains substantial evidence to support it. Edwards v. Barnhart, 314 F.3d 964, 966 (8th Cir. 2003). 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. Haley v. Massanari, 258 F.3d 742, 747 (8th Cir. 2001). In other words, 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. 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 disability by establishing a physical or mental disability that has lasted at least one year and that prevents him from engaging in any substantial gainful activity. Pearsall v. Massanari, 274 F.3d 1211, 1217 (8th Cir. 2001); see also 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(1)(A). The Act defines “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). A Plaintiff must show that his disability, not simply his impairment, has lasted for at least twelve consecutive months.

The Commissioner’s regulations require her to apply a five-step sequential evaluation process to each claim for disability benefits: (1) whether the claimant has engaged in substantial gainful activity since filing his claim; (2) whether the claimant has a severe physical and/or mental impairment or combination of impairments; (3) whether the impairment(s) meet or equal an impairment in the listings; (4) whether the impairment(s) prevent the claimant from doing past relevant work; and, (5) whether the claimant is able to perform other work in the national economy given his age, education, and experience. See 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520. Only if the final stage is reached does the fact finder consider the Plaintiff’s age, education, and work experience in light of his residual functional capacity. See McCoy v. Schweiker, 683

F.2d 1138, 1141-42 (8th Cir. 1982), abrogated on other grounds by Higgins v. Apfel, 222 F.3d 504, 505 (8th Cir. 2000); 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520.

III. Discussion:

Plaintiff argues the following issues on appeal: 1) the ALJ failed to reach a RFC determination that is based on substantial evidence; 2) the ALJ's finding that Plaintiff can perform his past relevant work is not based on substantial evidence; and 3) the ALJ failed to fully and fairly develop the record by ordering a mental consultative examination.²

A. Full and Fair Development of the Record:

The ALJ has a duty to fully and fairly develop the record. See Frankl v. Shalala, 47 F.3d 935, 938 (8th Cir.1995). The ALJ's duty to fully and fairly develop the record is independent of Plaintiff's burden to press his case. Vossen v. Astrue, 612 F.3d 1011, 1016 (8th Cir. 2010). The ALJ, however, is not required to function as Plaintiff's substitute counsel, but only to develop a reasonably complete record. "Reversal due to failure to develop the record is only warranted where such failure is unfair or prejudicial." Shannon v. Chater, 54 F.3d 484, 488 (8th Cir. 1995). "While an ALJ does have a duty to develop the record, this duty is not never-ending and an ALJ is not required to disprove every possible impairment." McCoy v. Astrue, 648 F.3d 605, 612 (8th Cir. 2011).

In this case, the record consists of mental RFC assessments completed by non-examining medical consultants; a consultative mental diagnostic evaluation; and Plaintiff's medical records. After reviewing the entire record, the Court finds the record before the ALJ contained the evidence required to make a full and informed decision regarding Plaintiff's

² The Court has reordered Plaintiff's arguments to correspond with the five-step analysis utilized by the Commissioner.

capabilities during the relevant time period. Accordingly, the undersigned finds the ALJ fully and fairly developed the record.

B. Subjective Complaints and Symptom Evaluation:

We now address the ALJ's assessment of Plaintiff's subjective complaints. The ALJ was required to consider all the evidence relating to Plaintiff's subjective complaints including evidence presented by third parties that relates to: (1) Plaintiff's daily activities; (2) the duration, frequency, and intensity of his pain; (3) precipitating and aggravating factors; (4) dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of his medication; and (5) functional restrictions. See Polaski v. Heckler, 739 F.2d 1320, 1322 (8th Cir. 1984). While an ALJ may not discount a claimant's subjective complaints solely because the medical evidence fails to support them, an ALJ may discount those complaints where inconsistencies appear in the record as a whole. Id. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit observed, "Our touchstone is that [a claimant's] credibility is primarily a matter for the ALJ to decide." Edwards v. Barnhart, 314 F.3d 964, 966 (8th Cir. 2003).

After reviewing the administrative record, it is clear that the ALJ properly considered and evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints, including the Polaski factors. A review of the record revealed that Plaintiff completed a Function Report in May of 2013, indicating that he was able to cook for his children, take care of his personal needs, shop for clothes on the computer, do laundry, wash dishes slowly, and play video games daily.

With respect to Plaintiff's alleged mental impairments, the record showed Plaintiff sought very little treatment for these alleged impairments. See Gowell v. Apfel, 242 F.3d 793, 796 (8th Cir. 2001) (holding that lack of evidence of ongoing counseling or psychiatric treatment for depression weighs against plaintiff's claim of disability). On June 17, 2013,

Plaintiff underwent a consultative mental diagnostic performed by Dr. Stephen A. Nichols. After examining Plaintiff, Dr. Nichols reported that Plaintiff “made a very poor effort on the mental status examination, for reasons that are unclear to me.” (Doc. 10, p. 270). Dr. Nichols noted that Plaintiff’s responses put him in the extremely low range of intelligence; however, Plaintiff’s past work suggested a much higher intelligence. Dr. Nichols opined that Plaintiff could perform all activities of daily living without assistance; could work with supervisors and coworkers; could cope with, concentrate on, and sustain persistence in completing work tasks; and would be mildly impaired by panic attacks. Based on the record as a whole, the Court finds substantial evidence to support the ALJ’s determination that Plaintiff does not have a disabling mental impairment.

The Court would also note that while Plaintiff alleged an inability to seek treatment due to a lack of finances, the record is void of any indication that Plaintiff had been denied treatment due to the lack of funds. Murphy v. Sullivan, 953 F.3d 383, 386-87 (8th Cir. 1992) (holding that lack of evidence that plaintiff sought low-cost medical treatment from her doctor, clinics, or hospitals does not support plaintiff’s contention of financial hardship). The record further reveals that Plaintiff was able to come up with the funds to support his smoking habit throughout the time period in question.

Therefore, although it is clear that Plaintiff suffers with some degree of limitation, he has not established that he is unable to engage in any gainful activity. Accordingly, the Court concludes that substantial evidence supports the ALJ’s conclusion that Plaintiff’s subjective complaints were not totally credible.

C. The ALJ's RFC Determination:

RFC is the most a person can do despite that person's limitations. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a)(1). It is assessed using all relevant evidence in the record. Id. This includes medical records, observations of treating physicians and others, and the claimant's own descriptions of his limitations. Guilliams v. Barnhart, 393 F.3d 798, 801 (8th Cir. 2005); Eichelberger v. Barnhart, 390 F.3d 584, 591 (8th Cir. 2004). Limitations resulting from symptoms such as pain are also factored into the assessment. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a)(3). The United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit has held that a "claimant's residual functional capacity is a medical question." Lauer v. Apfel, 245 F.3d 700, 704 (8th Cir. 2001). Therefore, an ALJ's determination concerning a claimant's RFC must be supported by medical evidence that addresses the claimant's ability to function in the workplace. Lewis v. Barnhart, 353 F.3d 642, 646 (8th Cir. 2003). "[T]he ALJ is [also] required to set forth specifically a claimant's limitations and to determine how those limitations affect his RFC." Id.

In finding Plaintiff able to perform work at all exertional levels with some non-exertional limitations, the ALJ considered Plaintiff's subjective complaints, the medical records, and the evaluations of the non-examining medical examiners. Plaintiff's capacity to perform this level of work is supported by the fact that Plaintiff's examining physicians placed no restrictions on his activities that would preclude performing the RFC determined during the relevant time period. See Hutton v. Apfel, 175 F.3d 651, 655 (8th Cir. 1999) (lack of physician-imposed restrictions militates against a finding of total disability). After reviewing the entire transcript, the Court finds substantial evidence supporting the ALJ's RFC determination for the time period in question.

D. Past Relevant Work:

Plaintiff has the initial burden of proving that he suffers from a medically determinable impairment which precludes the performance of past work. Kirby v. Sullivan, 923 F.2d 1323, 1326 (8th Cir. 1991). Only after the claimant establishes that a disability precludes the performance of past relevant work will the burden shift to the Commissioner to prove that the claimant can perform other work. Pickner v. Sullivan, 985 F.2d 401, 403 (8th Cir. 1993).

According to the Commissioner's interpretation of past relevant work, a claimant will not be found to be disabled if he retains the RFC to perform:

1. The actual functional demands and job duties of a particular past relevant job; *or*
2. The functional demands and job duties of the occupation as generally required by employers throughout the national economy.

20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(e); S.S.R. 82-61 (1982); Martin v. Sullivan, 901 F.2d 650, 653 (8th Cir. 1990)(expressly approving the two part test from S.S.R. 82-61).

In this case, the ALJ relied upon the testimony of a vocational expert who discussed the mental and physical requirements of Plaintiff's past relevant work. See Gilbert v. Apfel, 175 F.3d 602, 604 (8th Cir. 1999) ("The testimony of a vocational expert is relevant at steps four and five of the Commissioner's sequential analysis, when the question becomes whether a claimant with a severe impairment has the residual functional capacity to do past relevant work or other work") (citations omitted). After reviewing the record as a whole, the Court finds substantial evidence to support the ALJ's finding that Plaintiff could perform his past relevant work as a retail stocker, and a computer operator as actually and generally performed in the national economy during the time period in question.

IV. Conclusion:

Accordingly, having carefully reviewed the record, the undersigned finds substantial evidence supporting the ALJ's decision denying the Plaintiff benefits, and thus the decision should be affirmed. The undersigned further finds that the Plaintiff's Complaint should be dismissed with prejudice.

DATED this 15th day of May 2017.

/s/ Erin L. Wiedemann

HON. ERIN L. WIEDEMANN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE