

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS
HOT SPRINGS DIVISION

PATRICIA ELAINE MATHIS

PLAINTIFF

vs.

Civil No. 6:13-cv-06083

CAROLYN COLVIN

DEFENDANT

Commissioner, Social Security Administration

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Patricia Elaine Mathis (“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 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. 7.¹ 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 applications for benefits on October 17, 2006. (Tr. 93-100). Plaintiff alleges being disabled due to back injuries, degenerative disc disease, neck problems, arm problems, and depression. (Tr. 124, 174, 427). Plaintiff alleges an onset date of November 10, 2004. (Tr. 93, 98). These applications were denied initially and again upon reconsideration. (Tr. 49-52). Thereafter, Plaintiff requested an administrative hearing on her applications, and this hearing request

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.”

was granted. (Tr. 70-74).

An administrative hearing was held on March 19, 2009. (Tr. 22-48). On September 16, 2009, the ALJ entered an unfavorable decision on Plaintiff's applications. (Tr. 9-21). Plaintiff appealed the unfavorable decision in federal district court, and the Court remanded the case on July 27, 2011. (Tr. 446-451). Based on the district court's order, the Appeals Council remanded the case back to the ALJ for reconsideration of the evidence. (Tr. 461-464).

On remand, a second administrative hearing was held on November 4, 2012. (Tr. 423-445). At the administrative hearing, Plaintiff was present and was represented by attorney Sherri McDonough. *Id.* Plaintiff and Vocational Expert ("VE") Robert Cox, testified at this hearing. *Id.* On the date of this hearing, Plaintiff was forty-seven (47) years old and had a high school education. (Tr. 428).

On April 23, 2013, subsequent to the hearing, the ALJ entered an unfavorable decision on Plaintiff's applications. (Tr. 404-417). In this decision, the ALJ determined the Plaintiff met the insured status of the Act through June 30, 2012. (Tr. 406, Finding 1). The ALJ also determined Plaintiff had not engaged in Substantial Gainful Activity ("SGA") since November 10, 2004. (Tr. 406, Finding 2).

The ALJ determined Plaintiff had severe impairments of disorder of the back, sprain or strain, bulging disc, degenerative bone disease, degenerative arthritis, osteoarthritis of both knees, knee sprain, fracture of the lateral tibial plateau, schizoaffective disorder, and depression. (Tr. 406, Finding 3). The ALJ also determined Plaintiff's 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. 407, Finding 4).

In this decision, the ALJ evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints and determined her

Residual Functional Capacity (“RFC”). (Tr. 409-415, Finding 5). First, the ALJ indicated he evaluated Plaintiff’s subjective complaints and found her claimed limitations were not entirely credible. *Id.* Second, the ALJ determined Plaintiff retained the RFC for sedentary work with no climbing; limited to occasional stooping, crouching, crawling, and kneeling; requiring the use of an assistive device to ambulate to work station or to reach any part of the workplace more than ten paces from the work station; limited to work where interpersonal contact is generally infrequent and limited and interaction with the public is not an essential job duty; restricted to tasks that are learned by demonstration or repetition within thirty days; performed with few variables, little judgment; and where supervision required is simple, direct, and concrete. *Id.*

The ALJ evaluated Plaintiff’s Past Relevant Work (“PRW”). (Tr. 415, Finding 6). The ALJ determined Plaintiff was unable to perform her PRW as a computer indexer, highway laborer, light fixture assembler, and fast food work. *Id.* The ALJ, however, also determined there was other work existing in significant numbers in the national economy Plaintiff could perform. (Tr. 416, Finding 10). The ALJ based his determination upon the testimony of the VE. *Id.* Specifically, the VE testified that given all Plaintiff’s vocational factors, a hypothetical individual would be able to perform the requirements of a representative occupation such as a charge account clerk with approximately 2,000 such jobs in Arkansas and 200,000 such jobs in the nation, addressing clerk with approximately 280 such jobs in Arkansas and 96,000 such jobs in the nation, and document preparer with approximately 220 such jobs in Arkansas and 26,000 such jobs in the nation. *Id.* Based upon this finding, the ALJ determined Plaintiff had not been under a disability as defined by the Act from November 10, 2004 through the date of the decision. (Tr. 417, Finding 11).

On July 22, 2013, Plaintiff filed the present appeal. ECF No. 1. The Parties consented to the jurisdiction of this Court on July 24, 2013. ECF No. 7. Both Parties have filed appeal briefs. ECF

Nos. 9, 10. 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:

In her appeal brief, Plaintiff claims the ALJ’s disability determination is not supported by substantial evidence in the record and should be reversed and remanded. ECF No. 9, Pgs. 9-20. Specifically, Plaintiff claims the ALJ erred (1) in failing to find Plaintiff met a Listing and (2) in his RFC determination. *Id.* In response, the Defendant argues the ALJ did not err in any of his findings. ECF No. 10. Because this Court finds the ALJ erred in his RFC determination and by failing to fully evaluate Plaintiff’s Global Assessment of Functioning (“GAF”) scores, this Court finds Plaintiff’s case must be reversed and remanded.

Prior to Step Four of the sequential analysis in a disability determination, the ALJ is required to determine a claimant’s RFC. *See* 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520(a)(4)(iv). This RFC determination must be based on medical evidence that addresses the claimant’s ability to function in the workplace. *See*

Stormo v. Barnhart, 377 F.3d 801, 807 (8th Cir. 2004). The ALJ should consider “‘all the evidence in the record’ in determining the RFC, including ‘the medical records, observations of treating physicians and others, and an individual’s own description of his limitations.’” *Stormo v. Barnhart*, 377 F.3d 801, 807 (8th Cir. 2004) (quoting *Krogmeier v. Barnhart*, 294 F.3d 1019 (8th Cir. 2002)).

In social security cases where a mental impairment is alleged, it is important for an ALJ to evaluate a claimant’s Global Assessment of Functioning (“GAF”) score in determining whether that claimant is disabled due to the claimed mental impairment. GAF scores range from 0 to 100. Am. Psychiatric Ass’n, *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)* 34 (4th ed., text rev. 2000). The Eighth Circuit has repeatedly held that GAF scores (especially those at or below 40) must be carefully evaluated when determining a claimant’s RFC. *See, e.g., Conklin v. Astrue*, 360 F. App’x 704, 707 (8th Cir. 2010) (reversing and remanding an ALJ’s disability determination in part because the ALJ failed to consider the claimant’s GAF scores of 35 and 40); *Pates-Fires v. Astrue*, 564 F.3d 935, 944-45 (8th Cir. 2009) (holding that the ALJ’s RFC finding was not supported by substantial evidence in the record as a whole, in part due to the ALJ’s failure to discuss or consider numerous GAF scores below 50).

Indeed, a GAF score at or below 40 should be carefully considered because such a low score reflects “a major impairment in several areas such as work, family relations, judgment, or mood.” *Conklin*, 360 F. App’x at 707 n.2 Am. Psychiatric Ass’n, *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)* 34 (4th ed., text rev. 2000)). A GAF score of 40 to 50 also indicates a claimant suffers from severe symptoms. Specifically, a person with that GAF score suffers from “[s]erious symptoms (e.g., suicidal ideation, severe obsessional rituals, frequent shoplifting) OR any serious impairment in social, occupational, or school functioning (e.g., no friends, unable to keep a

job).” Am. Psychiatric Ass’n, *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)* 34 (4th ed., text rev. 2000).

Between November 2007 and November 2012, Plaintiff’s numerous GAF of scores of 40. (Tr. 261, 268, 276, 283, 295, 300, 307, 519, 522, 525, 675, 681, 685, 691, 695, 705, 712, 723, 732, 739, 746, 751, 754, 760, 768, 783, 793, 809, 813, 815, 820, 878, 892, 910, 916, 922, 925, and 931). The ALJ’s opinion made no reference to Plaintiff’s GAF scores and provided no discussion or analysis. It was the ALJ’s responsibility to properly evaluate those GAF scores and make a finding regarding their reliability as a part of the underlying administrative proceeding. *See Conklin*, 360 F. App’x at 707. Indeed, it is especially important that the ALJ address low GAF scores where, as in this case, Plaintiff has been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and depression.

Accordingly, because the ALJ was required to evaluate these scores and provide a reason for discounting the low GAF scores but did not do so, Plaintiff’s case must be reversed and remanded for further development of the record on this issue. *See Pates-Fires*, 564 F.3d at 944-45.

4. Conclusion:

Based on the foregoing, the undersigned finds that the decision of the ALJ, denying benefits to Plaintiff, must be reversed and remanded. A judgment incorporating these findings will be entered pursuant to Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 52 and 58.

ENTERED this 24th day of July 2014.

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