

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF MARYLAND
Southern Division**

DAMON REID,

Plaintiff,

v.

**CAROLYN W. COLVIN,
Acting Commissioner of Social Security,**

Defendant.

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Civil No. TMD 15-1496

**MEMORANDUM OPINION GRANTING PLAINTIFF’S
ALTERNATIVE MOTION FOR REMAND**

Plaintiff Damon Reid seeks judicial review under 42 U.S.C. §§ 405(g) and 1383(c)(3) of a final decision of the Commissioner of Social Security (“Defendant” or the “Commissioner”) denying his applications for disability insurance benefits (“DIB”) and Supplemental Security Income (“SSI”) under Titles II and XVI of the Social Security Act. Before the Court are Plaintiff’s Motion for Summary Judgment and alternative motion for remand (ECF No. 14) and Defendant’s Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 15).¹ Plaintiff contends that the administrative record does not contain substantial evidence to support the Commissioner’s decision that he is not disabled. No hearing is necessary. L.R. 105.6. For the reasons that follow, Plaintiff’s alternative motion for remand (ECF No. 14) is **GRANTED**.

¹ The Fourth Circuit has noted that, “in social security cases, we often use summary judgment as a procedural means to place the district court in position to fulfill its appellate function, not as a device to avoid nontriable issues under usual Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 56 standards.” Walls v. Barnhart, 296 F.3d 287, 289 n.2 (4th Cir. 2002). For example, “the denial of summary judgment accompanied by a remand to the Commissioner results in a judgment under sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), which is immediately appealable.” Id.

I

Background

Plaintiff was born in 1976, has a college education, and previously worked as a restaurant worker and accounts payable clerk. R. at 27, 187. Plaintiff filed an application for DIB on September 9, 2011, and for SSI protectively on September 15, 2011, alleging disability beginning on September 25, 2010, due to, among other impairments, traumatic brain injury, mental illness, and major depressive disorder. R. at 21, 166-73, 182, 186. The Commissioner denied Plaintiff's applications initially and again on reconsideration, so Plaintiff requested a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ"). R. at 70-120. On October 25, 2013, ALJ Larry K. Banks held a hearing in Washington, D.C., at which Plaintiff and a vocational expert ("VE") testified. R. at 35-69. On January 22, 2014, the ALJ issued a decision finding Plaintiff not disabled from the alleged onset date of disability of September 25, 2010, through the date of the decision. R. at 18-34. Plaintiff sought review of this decision by the Appeals Council, which denied Plaintiff's request for review on March 24, 2015. R. at 1-6, 16, 259-62. The ALJ's decision thus became the final decision of the Commissioner. See 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.981, 416.1481; see also *Sims v. Apfel*, 530 U.S. 103, 106-07, 120 S. Ct. 2080, 2083 (2000).

On May 25, 2015, Plaintiff filed a complaint in this Court seeking review of the Commissioner's decision. Upon the parties' consent, this case was transferred to a United States Magistrate Judge for final disposition and entry of judgment. The case subsequently was reassigned to the undersigned. The parties have briefed the issues, and the matter is now fully submitted.

II

Summary of Evidence

A. State Agency Medical Consultants

On February 21, 2012, a state agency consultant, E. Lessans, Ph.D., using the psychiatric review technique (“PRT”) under 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520a and 416.920a, evaluated Plaintiff’s mental impairments under Listings 12.02, 12.08, and 12.09 relating to organic mental disorders, personality disorders, and substance addiction disorders (R. at 73, 81). See 20 C.F.R. pt. 404, subpt. P, app. 1, §§ 12.02, 12.08, 12.09. Dr. Lessans opined that, under paragraph B of the applicable listings, Plaintiff’s mental impairments caused him to experience (1) mild restriction in activities of daily living; (2) moderate difficulties in maintaining social functioning; (3) moderate difficulties in maintaining concentration, persistence, or pace; and (4) one or two repeated episodes of decompensation of extended duration. R. at 73, 81. Dr. Lessans then assessed Plaintiff’s mental residual functional capacity (“RFC”) (R. at 74-76, 82-84) and opined that he was moderately limited in his ability to (1) understand, remember, and carry out detailed instructions; (2) maintain attention and concentration for extended periods; (3) complete a normal workday and workweek without interruptions from psychologically based symptoms and to perform at a consistent pace without an unreasonable number and length of rest periods; and to (4) accept instructions and to respond appropriately to criticism from supervisors. R. at 74-75, 82-83. Plaintiff otherwise was not significantly limited. R. at 74-76, 82-84. Dr. Lessans opined: “[Plaintiff] has moderate limitations in social functioning and ability to maintain task persistence due to psychiatric symptoms, substance abuse.” R. at 76, 84.

On August 22, 2012, another state agency consultant, Yamir Laboy, Psy.D., again used the PRT to evaluate Plaintiff’s mental impairments under Listings 12.02, 12.08, and 12.09. R. at

92-93, 101-02. Dr. Laboy opined that, under paragraph B of the applicable listings, Plaintiff's mental impairments caused him to experience (1) mild restriction in activities of daily living; (2) moderate difficulties in maintaining social functioning; (3) moderate difficulties in maintaining concentration, persistence, or pace; and (4) one or two repeated episodes of decompensation of extended duration. R. at 92, 101. Dr. Laboy then assessed Plaintiff's mental RFC (R. at 94-95, 103-04) and opined that he was moderately limited in his ability to (1) understand, remember, and carry out detailed instructions; (2) maintain attention and concentration for extended periods; (3) complete a normal workday and workweek without interruptions from psychologically based symptoms and to perform at a consistent pace without an unreasonable number and length of rest periods; and to (4) accept instructions and to respond appropriately to criticism from supervisors. R. at 94-95, 103-04. Plaintiff otherwise was not significantly limited. R. at 94-95, 103-04. Dr. Laboy opined:

[Plaintiff] retains the ability to mentally perform at the level cited and discussed in this [mental RFC]. [Plaintiff] can be expected to perform simple and repetitive tasks and to meet the basic mental demands of work on a sustained basis despite any limitations resulting from identified [medically determinable impairments].

- a. Can remember simple instructions but has difficulty with more detailed instructions, based on [consultative examination].
- b. [Plaintiff] has moderate limitations in the ability to maintain task persistence and follow detailed instructions based on limited available evidence.
- c. [Plaintiff] has moderate limitations in social functioning related to psychiatric symptoms, substance abuse.

R. at 95, 104.

B. Hearing Testimony

1. Plaintiff's Testimony

The ALJ reviewed Plaintiff's testimony in his decision:

[Plaintiff] alleges disabling limitations due to traumatic brain injury, depressive disorder, major depressive disorder, learning problems, thinking

problems, memory problems, and lethargy, as well as insomnia, inability to handle stress, and debilitating headaches from his traumatic brain injury [R. at 185-93, 207-21, 238-42]. [Plaintiff] testified that he stopped working because of stress, mental fatigue, and sleep problems associated with his impairments, as well as medication complications with Seroquel. He reported that he was first treated for mental illness in 1999 for social anxiety, general anxiety, and depression, and was placed on medication [R. at 38-66]. In 2002, he had a 30-day jail sentence where he did not have his medications and broke down after being in isolation with little sleep for two weeks (Id.). He states that the breakdown resulted in a brain injury and spending one and a half years in a mental health facility (Id.). Following the mental illness facility, he lived in a halfway house until 2004 (Id.). He lived with and cared for his grandmother from 2009 to January 2011 by helping with her daily activities (Id.). He lived with his parents for some time afterward, and now lives by himself (Id.). He complains of reduced energy, fatigue, short-term memory problems, learning problems, and weight gain [R. at 38-66]. He currently goes to a psychiatrist once per month and a therapist every three weeks (Id.). He states that he is unable to work any job because of his continued mental fatigue and his need for regular breaks and rest (Id.).

R. at 26; see R. at 38-66.

2. VE Testimony

The VE testified that a hypothetical individual with Plaintiff's same age, education, and work experience with the RFC outlined below in Part III could not perform Plaintiff's past work but could perform the unskilled, medium, light, and sedentary jobs of packer and packaging worker, janitor, table worker, machine tender, quality-control worker, and grading and sorting worker.² R. at 66-68. According to the VE, his testimony was consistent with the Dictionary of

² "Unskilled work is work which needs little or no judgment to do simple duties that can be learned on the job in a short period of time." 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1568(a), 416.968(a). "Sedentary work involves lifting no more than 10 pounds at a time and occasionally lifting or carrying articles like docket files, ledgers, and small tools." Id. §§ 404.1567(a), 416.967(a). "Light work involves lifting no more than 20 pounds at a time with frequent lifting or carrying of objects weighing up to 10 pounds." Id. §§ 404.1567(b), 416.967(b). "Medium work involves lifting no more than 50 pounds at a time with frequent lifting or carrying of objects weighing up to 25 pounds." Id. §§ 404.1567(c), 416.967(c).

Occupational Titles.³ R. at 68. A person “off task” at least 20% of the workday would not be able to do any work. R. at 68.

III

Summary of ALJ’s Decision

On January 22, 2014, the ALJ found that Plaintiff (1) had not engaged in substantial gainful activity since the alleged onset date of disability of September 25, 2010; and (2) had an impairment or a combination of impairments considered to be “severe” on the basis of the requirements in the Code of Federal Regulations; but (3) did not have an impairment or a combination of impairments meeting or equaling one of the impairments set forth in 20 C.F.R. pt. 404, subpt. P, app. 1; and (4) was unable to perform his past relevant work; but (5) could perform other work in the national economy, such as a packer, janitor, table worker, machine tender, quality-control worker, or sorter. R. at 23-28. The ALJ thus found that he was not disabled from September 25, 2010, through the date of the decision. R. at 29.

In so finding, the ALJ found that Plaintiff had the RFC

to perform a full range of work at all exertional levels but with the following nonexertional limitations: [Plaintiff] is limited to performing simple instructions (no complex tasks) with occasional contact with coworkers, supervisors and the public; and due to concentration and focus problems, [Plaintiff] would be off task 5% of the workday.

R. at 25. The ALJ also considered Plaintiff’s credibility and found that his “medically determinable impairments could reasonably be expected to cause the alleged symptoms;

³ “The Social Security Administration has taken administrative notice of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, which is published by the Department of Labor and gives detailed physical requirements for a variety of jobs.” *Massachi v. Astrue*, 486 F.3d 1149, 1152 n.8 (9th Cir. 2007); see *Pearson v. Colvin*, 810 F.3d 204, 205 n.1 (4th Cir. 2015); *DeLoatche v. Heckler*, 715 F.2d 148, 151 n.2 (4th Cir. 1983); 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1566(d)(1), 416.966(d)(1). “Information contained in the [Dictionary of Occupational Titles] is not conclusive evidence of the existence of jobs in the national economy; however, it can be used to establish a rebuttable presumption.” *English v. Shalala*, 10 F.3d 1080, 1085 (4th Cir. 1993).

however, [his] statements concerning the intensity, persistence and limiting effects of these symptoms are not entirely credible for the reasons explained in this decision.” R. at 26. The ALJ found that, with regard to concentration, persistence, or pace,

[Plaintiff] has moderate difficulties. He reports experiencing fatigue and headache when concentrating [R. at 38-66]. He estimates that he can concentrate for 15-20 minutes at a time, but sometimes more and sometimes less (Id.). He alleges sleep disturbances with fluctuating hours of sleep per night (Id.). However, [Plaintiff] engages in some activities that suggest a considerable degree of concentration. He goes fishing once or twice per week, which involves gathering the necessary materials and driving to a local pond (Id.). He performs regular activities including grocery shopping and certain household chores [R. at 38-66, 207-15]. He followed along sufficiently and provided reasoned answers at the hearing, which lasted approximately 50 minutes. Therefore, the evidence supports only moderate limitation in concentration, persistence, and pace.

R. at 24.

IV

Disability Determinations and Burden of Proof

The Social Security Act defines a disability as the inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment that can be expected to result in death or that has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than twelve months. 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A); 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1505, 416.905. A claimant has a disability when the claimant is “not only unable to do his previous work but cannot, considering his age, education, and work experience, engage in any other kind of substantial gainful work which exists . . . in significant numbers either in the region where such individual lives or in several regions of the country.” 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(2)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(B).

To determine whether a claimant has a disability within the meaning of the Social Security Act, the Commissioner follows a five-step sequential evaluation process outlined in the

regulations. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920; see *Barnhart v. Thomas*, 540 U.S. 20, 24-25, 124 S. Ct. 376, 379-380 (2003). “If at any step a finding of disability or nondisability can be made, the [Commissioner] will not review the claim further.” *Thomas*, 540 U.S. at 24, 124 S. Ct. at 379; see 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4), 416.920(a)(4). The claimant has the burden of production and proof at steps one through four. See *Bowen v. Yuckert*, 482 U.S. 137, 146 n.5, 107 S. Ct. 2287, 2294 n.5 (1987); *Radford v. Colvin*, 734 F.3d 288, 291 (4th Cir. 2013).

First, the Commissioner will consider a claimant’s work activity. If the claimant is engaged in substantial gainful activity, then the claimant is not disabled. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(i), 416.920(a)(4)(i).

Second, if the claimant is not engaged in substantial gainful activity, the Commissioner looks to see whether the claimant has a “severe” impairment, i.e., an impairment or combination of impairments that significantly limits the claimant’s physical or mental ability to do basic work activities. *Pass v. Chater*, 65 F.3d 1200, 1203 (4th Cir. 1995); see 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(c), 404.1521(a), 416.920(c), 416.921(a).⁴

Third, if the claimant has a severe impairment, then the Commissioner will consider the medical severity of the impairment. If the impairment meets or equals one of the presumptively disabling impairments listed in the regulations, then the claimant is considered disabled, regardless of age, education, and work experience. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iii), 404.1520(d), 416.920(a)(4)(iii), 416.920(d); see *Radford*, 734 F.3d at 293.

⁴ The ability to do basic work activities is defined as “the abilities and aptitudes necessary to do most jobs.” 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1521(b), 416.921(b). These abilities and aptitudes include (1) physical functions such as walking, standing, sitting, lifting, pushing, pulling, reaching, carrying, or handling; (2) capacities for seeing, hearing, and speaking; (3) understanding, carrying out, and remembering simple instructions; (4) use of judgment; (5) responding appropriately to supervision, co-workers, and usual work situations; and (6) dealing with changes in a routine work setting. *Id.* §§ 404.1521(b)(1)-(6), 416.921(b)(1)-(6); see *Yuckert*, 482 U.S. at 141, 107 S. Ct. at 2291.

Fourth, if the claimant's impairment is severe, but it does not meet or equal one of the presumptively disabling impairments, then the Commissioner will assess the claimant's RFC to determine the claimant's "ability to meet the physical, mental, sensory, and other requirements" of the claimant's past relevant work. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iv), 404.1545(a)(4), 416.920(a)(4)(iv), 416.945(a)(4). RFC is a measurement of the most a claimant can do despite his or her limitations. *Hines v. Barnhart*, 453 F.3d 559, 562 (4th Cir. 2006); see 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1545(a)(1), 416.945(a)(1). The claimant is responsible for providing evidence the Commissioner will use to make a finding as to the claimant's RFC, but the Commissioner is responsible for developing the claimant's "complete medical history, including arranging for a consultative examination(s) if necessary, and making every reasonable effort to help [the claimant] get medical reports from [the claimant's] own medical sources." 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1545(a)(3), 416.945(a)(3). The Commissioner also will consider certain non-medical evidence and other evidence listed in the regulations. See *id.* If a claimant retains the RFC to perform past relevant work, then the claimant is not disabled. *Id.* §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iv), 416.920(a)(4)(iv).

Fifth, if the claimant's RFC as determined in step four will not allow the claimant to perform past relevant work, then the burden shifts to the Commissioner to prove that there is other work that the claimant can do, given the claimant's RFC as determined at step four, age, education, and work experience. See *Hancock v. Astrue*, 667 F.3d 470, 472-73 (4th Cir. 2012). The Commissioner must prove not only that the claimant's RFC will allow the claimant to make an adjustment to other work, but also that the other work exists in significant numbers in the national economy. See *Walls*, 296 F.3d at 290; 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(v), 416.920(a)(4)(v). If the claimant can make an adjustment to other work that exists in significant

numbers in the national economy, then the Commissioner will find that the claimant is not disabled. If the claimant cannot make an adjustment to other work, then the Commissioner will find that the claimant is disabled. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(v), 416.920(a)(4)(v).

V

Substantial Evidence Standard

The Court reviews an ALJ's decision to determine whether the ALJ applied the correct legal standards and whether the factual findings are supported by substantial evidence. See *Craig v. Chater*, 76 F.3d 585, 589 (4th Cir. 1996). In other words, the issue before the Court "is not whether [Plaintiff] is disabled, but whether the ALJ's finding that [Plaintiff] is not disabled is supported by substantial evidence and was reached based upon a correct application of the relevant law." *Id.* The Court's review is deferential, as "[t]he findings of the Commissioner of Social Security as to any fact, if supported by substantial evidence, shall be conclusive." 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). Under this standard, substantial evidence is less than a preponderance but is enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner's conclusion. See *Hancock*, 667 F.3d at 472; see also *Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 401, 91 S. Ct. 1420, 1427 (1971).

In evaluating the evidence in an appeal of a denial of benefits, the court does "not conduct a *de novo* review of the evidence," *Smith v. Schweiker*, 795 F.2d 343, 345 (4th Cir. 1986), or undertake to reweigh conflicting evidence, make credibility determinations, or substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner. *Hancock*, 667 F.3d at 472. Rather, "[t]he duty to resolve conflicts in the evidence rests with the ALJ, not with a reviewing court." *Smith v. Chater*, 99 F.3d 635, 638 (4th Cir. 1996). When conflicting evidence allows reasonable minds to

differ as to whether a claimant is disabled, the responsibility for that decision falls on the ALJ. *Johnson v. Barnhart*, 434 F.3d 650, 653 (4th Cir. 2005) (per curiam).

VI

Discussion

Plaintiff contends that the ALJ erroneously assessed his RFC contrary to Social Security Ruling⁵ (“SSR”) 96-8p, 1996 WL 374184 (July 2, 1996). Pl.’s Mem. Supp. Mot. Summ. J. 3-12, ECF No. 14-1 (citing, inter alia, *Fleming v. Barnhart*, 284 F. Supp. 2d 256, 271-72 (D. Md. 2003)). Plaintiff maintains that the ALJ failed to perform properly a function-by-function assessment of his ability to perform the physical and mental demands of work. *Id.* at 6. In particular, he contends that, although the ALJ found that he had moderate difficulties with regard to concentration, persistence, or pace, the ALJ did not explain his finding that Plaintiff “would be off task 5% of the workday” because of problems with concentration and focus (R. at 25). *Id.* at 6-7. Plaintiff further asserts that the ALJ failed to evaluate properly opinion evidence. *Id.* at 7-12. According to Plaintiff, substantial evidence thus does not support the ALJ’s RFC assessment. *Id.* at 12. Because inadequacy of the ALJ’s analysis frustrates meaningful review, the Court remands this case for further proceedings.

SSR 96-8p explains how adjudicators should assess RFC and instructs that the RFC

“assessment must first identify the individual’s functional limitations or restrictions and assess his or her work-related abilities on a function-by-function basis, including the functions” listed in the regulations. “Only after that may [residual functional capacity] be expressed in terms of the exertional levels of

⁵ Social Security Rulings are “final opinions and orders and statements of policy and interpretations” that the Social Security Administration has adopted. 20 C.F.R. § 402.35(b)(1). Once published, these rulings are binding on all components of the Social Security Administration. *Heckler v. Edwards*, 465 U.S. 870, 873 n.3, 104 S. Ct. 1532, 1534 n.3 (1984); 20 C.F.R. § 402.35(b)(1). “While they do not have the force of law, they are entitled to deference unless they are clearly erroneous or inconsistent with the law.” *Pass*, 65 F.3d at 1204 n.3.

work, sedentary, light, medium, heavy, and very heavy.” The Ruling further explains that the residual functional capacity “assessment must include a narrative discussion describing how the evidence supports each conclusion, citing specific medical facts (e.g., laboratory findings) and nonmedical evidence (e.g., daily activities, observations).”

Mascio v. Colvin, 780 F.3d 632, 636 (4th Cir. 2015) (alteration in original) (footnote omitted) (citations omitted). The Fourth Circuit has held, however, that a per se rule requiring remand when the ALJ does not perform an explicit function-by-function analysis “is inappropriate given that remand would prove futile in cases where the ALJ does not discuss functions that are ‘irrelevant or uncontested.’” *Id.* (quoting *Cichocki v. Astrue*, 729 F.3d 172, 177 (2d Cir. 2013) (per curiam)). Rather, remand may be appropriate “where an ALJ fails to assess a claimant’s capacity to perform relevant functions, despite contradictory evidence in the record, or where other inadequacies in the ALJ’s analysis frustrate meaningful review.” *Id.* (quoting *Cichocki*, 729 F.3d at 177). The court in *Mascio* concluded that remand was appropriate because it was “left to guess about how the ALJ arrived at his conclusions on [the claimant’s] ability to perform relevant functions” because the ALJ had “said nothing about [the claimant’s] ability to perform them for a full workday,” despite conflicting evidence as to the claimant’s RFC that the ALJ did not address. *Id.* at 637; see *Monroe v. Colvin*, ___ F.3d ___, No. 15-1098, 2016 WL 3349355, at *9-10 (4th Cir. June 16, 2016) (remanding because ALJ erred in not determining claimant’s RFC using function-by-function analysis; ALJ erroneously expressed claimant’s RFC first and then concluded that limitations caused by claimant’s impairments were consistent with that RFC).

The Fourth Circuit further held in *Mascio* that “an ALJ does not account ‘for a claimant’s limitations in concentration, persistence, and pace by restricting the hypothetical question to simple, routine tasks or unskilled work.’” *Mascio*, 780 F.3d at 638 (quoting *Winschel v. Comm’r of Soc. Sec.*, 631 F.3d 1176, 1180 (11th Cir. 2011)). “[T]he ability to perform simple tasks

differs from the ability to stay on task. Only the latter limitation would account for a claimant's limitation in concentration, persistence, or pace.” *Id.* The court in *Mascio* remanded the case for the ALJ to explain why the claimant's moderate limitation in concentration, persistence, or pace at step three did not translate into a limitation in the claimant's RFC. *Id.* In other words, “[p]ursuant to *Mascio*, once an ALJ has made a step three finding that a claimant suffers from moderate difficulties in concentration, persistence, or pace, the ALJ must either include a corresponding limitation in her RFC assessment, or explain why no such limitation is necessary.” *Talmo v. Comm’r, Soc. Sec.*, Civil Case No. ELH-14-2214, 2015 WL 2395108, at *3 (D. Md. May 19, 2015), report and recommendation adopted (D. Md. June 5, 2015).

“The Social Security Administration has promulgated regulations containing ‘listings of physical and mental impairments which, if met, are conclusive on the issue of disability.’ A claimant is entitled to a conclusive presumption that he is impaired if he can show that his condition ‘meets or equals the listed impairments.’” *Radford*, 734 F.3d at 291 (citation omitted); see 20 C.F.R. pt. 404, subpt. P, app. 1. In addition to the five-step analysis discussed above in Part IV and outlined in 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520 and 416.920, the Commissioner has promulgated additional regulations governing evaluations of the severity of mental impairments. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520a, 416.920a. These regulations require application of a psychiatric review technique at the second and third steps of the five-step framework, *Schmidt v. Astrue*, 496 F.3d 833, 844 n.4 (7th Cir. 2007), and at each level of administrative review. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520a(a), 416.920a(a). This technique requires the reviewing authority to determine first whether the claimant has a “medically determinable mental impairment.” *Id.* §§ 404.1520a(b)(1), 416.920a(b)(1). If the claimant is found to have such an impairment, then the reviewing authority must “rate the degree of functional limitation resulting from the impairment(s) in

accordance with paragraph (c),” id. §§ 404.1520a(b)(2), 416.920a(b)(2), which specifies four broad functional areas: (1) activities of daily living; (2) social functioning; (3) concentration, persistence, or pace; and (4) episodes of decompensation. Id. §§ 404.1520a(c)(3), 416.920a(c)(3). According to the regulations, if the degree of limitation in each of the first three areas is rated “mild” or better, and no episodes of decompensation are identified, then the reviewing authority generally will conclude that the claimant’s mental impairment is not “severe” and will deny benefits. Id. §§ 404.1520a(d)(1), 416.920a(d)(1). If the claimant’s mental impairment is severe, then the reviewing authority will first compare the relevant medical findings and the functional limitation ratings to the criteria of listed mental disorders in order to determine whether the impairment meets or is equivalent in severity to any listed mental disorder. Id. §§ 404.1520a(d)(2), 416.920a(d)(2). If so, then the claimant will be found to be disabled. If not, the reviewing authority will then assess the claimant’s RFC. Id. §§ 404.1520a(d)(3), 416.920a(d)(3).

“The ALJ’s decision must show the significant history and medical findings considered and must include a specific finding as to the degree of limitation in each of the four functional areas.” *Felton-Miller v. Astrue*, 459 F. App’x 226, 231 (4th Cir. 2011) (per curiam) (citing 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520a(e)(4), 416.920a(e)(4)). With regard to the four functional areas, which correspond to the paragraph B criteria of the listings for mental disorders, “[a]ctivities of daily living include adaptive activities such as cleaning, shopping, cooking, taking public transportation, paying bills, maintaining a residence, caring appropriately for [the claimant’s] grooming and hygiene, using telephones and directories, and using a post office.” 20 C.F.R. pt. 404, subpt. P, app. 1, § 12.00(C)(1). “In the context of [the claimant’s] overall situation, [the Commissioner assesses] the quality of these activities by their independence, appropriateness,

effectiveness, and sustainability. [The Commissioner] will determine the extent to which [the claimant is] capable of initiating and participating in activities independent of supervision or direction.” Id. Moreover, “[s]ocial functioning refers to [the claimant’s] capacity to interact independently, appropriately, effectively, and on a sustained basis with other individuals. Social functioning includes the ability to get along with others, such as family members, friends, neighbors, grocery clerks, landlords, or bus drivers.” Id. § 12.00(C)(2). Further, “[c]oncentration, persistence, or pace refers to the ability to sustain focused attention and concentration sufficiently long to permit the timely and appropriate completion of tasks commonly found in work settings.” Id. § 12.00(C)(3). “On mental status examinations, concentration is assessed by tasks such as having [the claimant] subtract serial sevens or serial threes from 100. In psychological tests of intelligence or memory, concentration is assessed through tasks requiring short-term memory or through tasks that must be completed within established time limits.” Id. Finally, “[e]pisodes of decompensation are exacerbations or temporary increases in symptoms or signs accompanied by a loss of adaptive functioning, as manifested by difficulties in performing activities of daily living, maintaining social relationships, or maintaining concentration, persistence, or pace.” Id. § 12.00(C)(4). “Episodes of decompensation may be demonstrated by an exacerbation in symptoms or signs that would ordinarily require increased treatment or a less stressful situation (or a combination of the two).” Id. Episodes of decompensation may be inferred from “medical records showing significant alteration in medication; or documentation of the need for a more structured psychological support system (e.g., hospitalizations, placement in a halfway house, or a highly structured and directing household); or other relevant information in the record about the existence, severity, and duration of the episode.” Id. “The term repeated episodes of decompensation, each of

extended duration in these listings means three episodes within 1 year, or an average of once every 4 months, each lasting for at least 2 weeks.” *Id.*

Here, the ALJ’s hypothetical questions to the VE and the corresponding RFC assessment limiting Plaintiff to “performing simple instructions (no complex tasks) with occasional contact with coworkers, supervisors and the public” (R. at 25; see R. at 66) do not account for Plaintiff’s moderate difficulties in maintaining concentration, persistence, or pace. See *Mascio*, 780 F.3d at 638; *Stewart v. Astrue*, 561 F.3d 679, 684-85 (7th Cir. 2009) (per curiam) (rejecting contention that “the ALJ accounted for [the claimant’s] limitations of concentration, persistence, and pace by restricting the inquiry to simple, routine tasks that do not require constant interactions with coworkers or the general public”). But see *Hillard v. Colvin*, Civil Action No. ADC-15-1442, 2016 WL 3042954, at *6 (D. Md. May 26, 2016) (“The ALJ additionally accounted for Plaintiff’s limitation in concentration and persistence by restricting him to work ‘without frequent interaction with co-workers or the public.’”); *Linares v. Colvin*, No. 5:14-CV-00120, 2015 WL 4389533, at *4 (W.D.N.C. July 17, 2015) (“The ALJ accounted for Plaintiff’s limitation in pace by restricting her to ‘nonproduction pace,’ and he accounted for her limitation in concentration and persistence by restricting her to a stable work environment with only occasional public contact.”). The ALJ also found that Plaintiff “would be off task 5% of the workday” because of problems with concentration and focus (R. at 25), a finding that does relate to Plaintiff’s ability to stay on task. Remand under the fourth sentence of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) is warranted here, however, because it is unclear “how the ALJ reached that particular conclusion, and [it] is also unclear whether being off task only 5% of the workday is consistent with a ‘moderate limitation in concentration, persistence or pace.’” *Chandler v. Comm’r, Soc. Sec. Admin.*, Civil No. SAG-15-1408, 2016 WL 750549, at *2 (D. Md. Feb. 24, 2016).

Defendant maintains that remand is not warranted because Plaintiff fails to identify evidence that would support greater limitations, relying on this Court's opinion in *Thompson v. Colvin*, Civil No. TMD 13-3450, 2015 WL 1393562 (D. Md. Mar. 24, 2015). Def.'s Mem. Supp. Mot. Summ. J. 11, ECF No. 15-1. Since *Thompson*, however, the Fourth Circuit has reminded us that, while "there is no rigid requirement that the ALJ specifically refer to every piece of evidence in his decision," *Reid v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 769 F.3d 861, 865 (4th Cir. 2014) (quoting *Dyer v. Barnhart*, 395 F.3d 1206, 1211 (11th Cir. 2005) (per curiam)), "the ALJ 'must build an accurate and logical bridge from the evidence to his conclusion,'" which the ALJ did not do so here. *Monroe*, 2016 WL 3349355, at *10 (quoting *Clifford v. Apfel*, 227 F.3d 863, 872 (7th Cir. 2000)). Although Defendant contends that any error by the ALJ was harmless, "the Fourth Circuit has declined to find harmless error where an error or omission precludes meaningful review." *Jeffries ex rel. J.J.J. v. Comm'r, Soc. Sec.*, No. JKB-15-1727, 2016 WL 3162800, at *2 (D. Md. June 7, 2016) (citing *Fox v. Colvin*, 632 F. App'x 750, 756 (4th Cir. 2015) (per curiam); *Mascio*, 780 F.3d at 636-37); see *Radford*, 734 F.3d at 296. Defendant's reliance on *Thompson* thus is unavailing.

In short, the ALJ "failed to explain why he equated the facts to a [5%] reduction as opposed to the [20%] reduction he contemplated (or, for that matter, any other number). The ALJ's failure to connect his factual findings to his chosen number is particularly disconcerting because . . . the figure he discarded would have meant disability according to the VE's testimony" (R. at 68). *Lobbes v. Colvin*, No. 4:13-CV-57-RLY-WGH, 2014 WL 1607617, at *20 (S.D. Ind. Apr. 22, 2014); see *Sterling v. Colvin*, No. 1:13-CV-01132-SEB, 2014 WL 4328682, at *3 (S.D. Ind. Aug. 29, 2014) ("[I]t is inconsistent to determine [the claimant] has these moderate limitations [in social functioning and in maintaining concentration, persistence,

or pace], yet also determine without explanation that she is able to stay on-task for 96-100% of the workday. The logical bridge here is not sound. If the ALJ believed [the claimant's] moderate limitations would not significantly impact her productivity, he needed to articulate why. Without such explanation, his decision is not supported by substantial evidence.” (citation omitted)). The Fourth Circuit has “held that ‘[a] necessary predicate to engaging in substantial evidence review is a record of the basis for the ALJ’s ruling,’ including ‘a discussion of which evidence the ALJ found credible and why, and specific application of the pertinent legal requirements to the record evidence.’” *Monroe*, 2016 WL 3349355, at *10 (alteration in original) (quoting *Radford*, 734 F.3d at 295). Because the inadequacy of the ALJ’s analysis frustrates meaningful review, remand under the fourth sentence of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) is appropriate, see *Mascio*, 780 F.3d at 636, and the Court need not address Plaintiff’s remaining arguments.

VII

Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, Defendant’s Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 15) is **DENIED**. Plaintiff’s Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 14) is **DENIED**. Plaintiff’s alternative motion for remand (ECF No. 14) is **GRANTED**. Defendant’s final decision is **REVERSED IN PART** under the fourth sentence of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). This matter is **REMANDED** for further proceedings consistent with this opinion. A separate order shall issue.

Date: August 22, 2016

/s/
Thomas M. DiGirolamo
United States Magistrate Judge