

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

In the
United States Court of Appeals
For the Eleventh Circuit

No. 25-14106
Non-Argument Calendar

MISTY WALLACE-BARNES,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

versus

COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL SECURITY,

Defendant-Appellee.

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Southern District of Georgia
D.C. Docket No. 4:24-cv-00087-JRH-CLR

Before NEWSOM, GRANT, and BRASHER, Circuit Judges.

PER CURIAM:

Misty Wallace-Barnes brings this appeal to challenge the denial of her claim for Social Security benefits. Applying the deferential “substantial evidence” standard of review, we affirm.

I.

Misty Wallace-Barnes worked as a special education teacher's assistant at a high school in Hinesville, Georgia. In 2019, she applied for disability benefits with the Social Security Administration, claiming that an array of illnesses precluded her from returning to work: inflammatory myopathy, rheumatoid arthritis, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. Following a hearing, the Commissioner denied Wallace-Barnes's claim on the grounds that she is still able to perform sedentary work despite her impairments.

Wallace-Barnes filed suit in federal court. The district court remanded the case back to the agency, concluding that the Commissioner failed to address the impact of her medications' side effects (namely, drowsiness) on her ability to work.¹ On remand, the Commissioner again found that Wallace-Barnes's side effects and other impairments did not preclude all substantial gainful activity. The Commissioner also concluded that Wallace-Barnes failed to draw a link between her absenteeism and her medical symptoms. This time, the district court concluded that substantial evidence supported the denial decision. Wallace-Barnes now appeals.

¹ While Wallace-Barnes testified that she has experienced a "little nausea" as a result of her medications, her side effects "mostly" involve drowsiness.

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II.

We review de novo the district court's determination that the Commissioner's decision was supported by substantial evidence. See *Buckwalter v. Acting Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 5 F.4th 1315, 1320 (11th Cir. 2021). Under the "substantial evidence" standard, we "may not decide the facts anew, reweigh the evidence, or substitute our judgment for that of the Commissioner." *Winschel v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 631 F.3d 1176, 1178 (11th Cir. 2011) (alteration adopted and quotation omitted).

III.

"Even though Social Security courts are inquisitorial, not adversarial, in nature, claimants must establish that they are eligible for benefits." *Ingram v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 496 F.3d 1253, 1269 (11th Cir. 2007). This burden is "very heavy," requiring "the claimant to demonstrate both a qualifying disability and an inability to perform past relevant work." *Moore v. Barnhart*, 405 F.3d 1208, 1211 (11th Cir. 2005).

Social Security regulations set out a "five-step sequential evaluation process." 20 C.F.R. § 416.920(a)(4). As relevant here, the Commissioner must determine—based on the claimant's "residual functional capacity"—whether she is able to work despite her impairments. See *Schink v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 935 F.3d 1245, 1268–69 (11th Cir. 2019). If the claimant remains capable of performing her past relevant work, she is not disabled and therefore not entitled to benefits. 20 C.F.R. § 416.920(a)(4)(iv).

In some cases, “the side effects of medication could render a claimant disabled or at least contribute to a disability.” *Cowart v. Schweiker*, 662 F.2d 731, 737 (11th Cir. 1981). Under Social Security regulations, claimants may establish the “nature and severity of [their] impairment(s) and any related symptoms” by pointing to the side effects of medication used to alleviate those symptoms. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529(c)(3)(iv).

Wallace-Barnes contends that the Commissioner failed to consider evidence that her medications lead to chronic daytime drowsiness. But the Commissioner did weigh that evidence. As the Commissioner acknowledged, the record “does document several complaints and testimony” about serious side effects—namely, Wallace-Barnes’s own statements during consultative examinations and hearings before the administrative law judge. However, her medical treatment records indicate that she rarely relayed these concerns to the physicians in charge of prescribing her medications and monitoring their side effects. According to the Commissioner, the mismatch between what Wallace-Barnes told the agency and what she told her physicians “strongly suggests that the side effects are not as significant as alleged.”

We find substantial evidence to support this finding. *First*, “credibility determinations are for the ALJ” to make. *Wilson v. Heckler*, 734 F.2d 513, 517 (11th Cir. 1984). That is because “the fact finder personally observes the testimony and is thus in a better position than a reviewing court to assess the credibility of witnesses.” *United States v. Ramirez-Chilel*, 289 F.3d 744, 749 (11th

Cir. 2002). Here, Wallace-Barnes does not point to anything in the record suggesting that the Commissioner’s “understanding of the facts appears to be unbelievable.” *Id.* (quotation omitted). Indeed, the Commissioner “provided a detailed factual basis for his credibility determination,” weighing her testimony against the record as a whole. *Moore*, 405 F.3d at 1212. Given the deferential nature of our review, we accept the Commissioner’s adverse credibility finding that Wallace-Barnes’s testimony is “not entirely consistent with the medical evidence.”

Second, under our precedents, the claimant’s “lack of complaints to her doctors supports the ALJ’s determination that side effects from medication did not present a significant problem.” *Malak v. Comm’r of Soc. Sec.*, 131 F.4th 1280, 1287 (11th Cir. 2025). Wallace-Barnes does not dispute that she rarely complained about symptoms of drowsiness to her treating physicians. The record reflects only one report of this sort, where she told her physiatrist that her prescription muscle relaxant “makes her sleepy during the day.” But not long after the physiatrist halved the dosage, Wallace-Barnes reported that “she is doing better.” The physiatrist’s focus remained on her “[n]eck pain, back pain and occasional headaches”—not drowsiness. Where, as here, “the record did not disclose any concerns about side effects by the several doctors who examined and treated” the claimant, the Commissioner was within bounds to discredit her “subjective assertions” of “extreme limitations.” *Swindle v. Sullivan*, 914 F.2d 222, 226 (11th Cir. 1990); *Wilson v. Barnhart*, 284 F.3d 1219, 1227 (11th Cir. 2002).

Next, Wallace-Barnes contends that the Commissioner failed to give due weight to evidence of her frequent work absences in assessing her ability to obtain and maintain gainful employment. However, “Social Security regulations and guidance indicate that a claimant’s absenteeism should not be considered” in assessing her residual functional capacity. *Malak*, 131 F.4th at 1286 (explaining that “factors other than the medically determinable impairments and related symptoms themselves, such as the time needed to attend appointments, are not proper considerations”).² And in any event, the Commissioner found that “[b]esides the claimant’s allegation, it is unclear what the source of the claimant’s purported frequent absences would be”—and whether those absences trace to her medical symptoms. In challenging that finding, Wallace-Barnes principally relies on her own testimony at the adjudicative hearing. But again, the Commissioner did not credit that testimony, and our “limited review precludes deciding the facts anew, making credibility determinations, or re-weighing the evidence.” *Moore*, 405 F.3d at 1211.

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We **AFFIRM**.

² Wallace-Barnes does not challenge the Commissioner’s evaluation of her inflammatory myopathy, rheumatoid arthritis, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety as those ailments relate to her residual functional capacity.