

Work and mental health



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Introduction

In this free course, *Work and mental health*, you will explore how employment affects mental health and consider the way in which people can be supported back to work.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [K240 Mental health and community](#).

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- explain how the experience of mental health problems affect, and are affected by, employment
- understand how the recovery model can be used to support people with mental problems to return to work
- explain what can be done to reduce the barriers to employment for people with mental health problems.

1 Rewards and challenges

... 'an endless significance lies in Work'; a man perfects himself by working. Foul jungles are cleared away, fair seed fields rise instead, and stately cities; and withal the man himself first ceases to be a jungle and foul unwholesome desert thereby.

Thomas Carlyle, Scottish Philosopher (1844, p. 137)

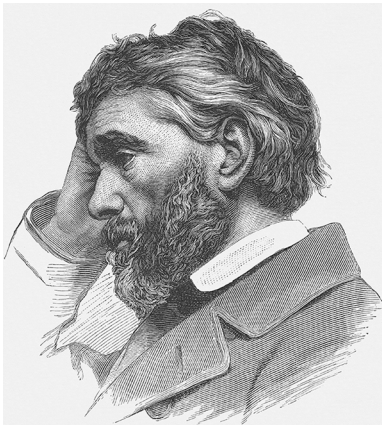


Figure 1 Thomas Carlyle

Thomas Carlyle advocates work not because of its material rewards or the benefits to the economy but because it develops us as people. Work builds our skills and our mental wellbeing. However, many people with mental health problems can't access employment opportunities. While being at work during periods of mental illness can be difficult for those with mental health problems, most people with these difficulties could take paid employment if it were not for numerous barriers in the workplace and the wider community (Centre for Mental Health, 2013).

Although employment can be stressful, difficult and exhausting, many people find it a great source of satisfaction too. The first activity in this course invites you to examine your own experience in order to develop an understanding of the rewards and troubling aspects of employment.

Activity 1 '... an endless significance lies in Work'

 Allow about 30 minutes

Think about the work that you do. This might be paid employment, volunteer work or as a homemaker or a carer. In the text boxes below, make notes of:

- some benefits of employment
- some difficulties of employment.

Benefits

Provide your answer...

Difficulties

Provide your answer...

Comment

Employment is significant in terms of who we are, self-esteem, confidence and personal development. Work builds relationships and our skills set. The financial rewards are helpful too. Although employment plays a powerful role in our mental wellbeing, stress, difficulties and problems with co-workers can cause particular mental distress.

It is clear that work has both positive and negative impacts on our mental state, so perhaps Carlyle was a little optimistic when he said we are 'perfected' through work. What happens when work gets too much?

2 Employment and mental health problems

Nick and Louis both have mental health problems and could not continue with full-time employment. They both attend the mental health charity Restore, an organisation that supports mental health recovery. For many, recovery includes work of some kind with an ultimate goal of finding paid employment. This goal may be very challenging to achieve and some people may require a lot of support. You will learn about this support later but first you need to get to know Nick and Louis.

Activity 2 ‘... and I sorta lost everything really.’

 Allow about 30 minutes

Watch the video of Nick and Louis. Identify:

- what benefits Nick and Louis gain from working
- what factors contributed to Nick and Louis becoming unwell.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1 Nick and Louis



Provide your answer...

Comment

What benefits do Nick and Louis gain from working?

For Louis, working was extremely beneficial. It not only brought him the material benefits of a ‘renovated house by the sea’ but also was important to his identity and self-esteem. He loved being ‘a real foodie’ and gained considerable self-esteem from doing a job well.

In Nick's case, he gained the satisfaction of using his musical skills in a job which gave others a lot of pleasure. He had the opportunity to socialise with people. For many, being a working musician is a valued social position.

What factors contributed to Nick and Louis becoming unwell?

You need to pay attention to both what Nick and Louis say and what they imply. Louis' lifestyle as a chef – long hours, little time off, the need for perfectionism – undermined his mental health. For Nick the uncertainties of living as a jazz musician 'overloaded his nervous system' and he became unwell.

For both, 'keeping going' piled on pressure, which made things worse. This is where the Centre for Mental Health's (2013) claim that most people with mental health problems can work becomes quite provocative. You might ask, and only Nick and Louis would be able to answer, what kind of work situation would accommodate their mental health needs? What kind of support do they need? You will come back to these questions later.

Nick and Louis' mental health problems are not simply a reflection of their employment circumstances. For example, a difficult relationship was a significant contributor to Nick's decline. Employment is only one factor influencing their experience of mental health problems. However, employment is often seen as a significant part of mental health recovery.

3 Employment and recovery

The connection between employment and mental wellbeing means that even if work were a significant factor in the development of mental health problems, the mental health recovery process often involves work of some kind. Nick and Louis' return to employment at Restore starts with a 'recovery group' in which they can work at carpentry, gardening, crafts or in a café. These groups offer Nick and Louis a work-like environment where they follow the structure of a regular working day. This work matters commercially too – their services and products are for sale to the local community.



Figure 2 Restore offers gardening, carpentry, craft and café work

Recovery groups are successful because they follow 'recovery principles' (see below). How might these be enacted in practice to meet Nick and Louis' needs?

The principles of recovery

- Recovery is about building a meaningful and satisfying life, as defined by the person themselves, whether or not there are ongoing or recurring symptoms or problems.
- Recovery represents a movement away from pathology, illness and symptoms to health, strengths and wellness.
- Hope is central to recovery and can be enhanced by each person seeing how they can have more active control over their lives ('agency') and by seeing how others have found a way forward.
- Self-management is encouraged and facilitated. The processes of self-management are similar, but what works may be very different for each individual. No 'one size fits all'.
- The helping relationship between clinicians and patients moves away from being expert/patient to being 'coaches' or 'partners' on a journey of discovery. Clinicians are there to be 'on tap, not on top'.
- People do not recover in isolation. Recovery is closely associated with social inclusion and being able to take on meaningful and satisfying social roles within local communities, rather than in segregated services.
- Recovery is about discovering – or re-discovering – a sense of personal identity, separate from illness or disability.

- The language used and the stories and meanings that are constructed have great significance as mediators of the recovery process. These shared meanings either support a sense of hope and possibility, or invite pessimism and chronicity.
- The development of recovery-based services emphasises the personal qualities of staff as much as their formal qualifications. It seeks to cultivate their capacity for hope, creativity, care, compassion, realism and resilience.
- Family and other supporters are often crucial to recovery and they should be included as partners wherever possible. However, peer support is central for many people in their recovery.

(Davidson, 2008, cited in Shepherd *et al.*, 2008)

Activity 3 Recovery groups for employment

 Allow about 1 hour 10 minutes

There are two tasks in this activity. You'll start by thinking through how you could put recovery principles into action to meet Nick and Louis' needs before looking at a real-life example of a recovery group.

Part A

 Allow about 30 minutes

Working from the recovery principles listed above, identify at least three recommendations for an effective recovery group. Make sure that these recommendations are suitable for Nick and Louis' needs. Here is an example to get you thinking:

- Recruit caring and optimistic staff who value working in partnership with those attending the recovery group.

Provide your answer...

Part B

 Allow about 40 minutes

In the video below Nick and Louis describe their experience of a recovery work group.

- Which experiences reflect your suggestions and guidelines?
- Do they mention any features that were not on your list but which you think were effective?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2 Recovery group at Restore



Provide your answer...

Comment

The video depicts several things in line with recovery principles. Your recommendations will be your own, but here are four that you may have spotted in the video.

Recommendation 1: Group activities should help people access peer support.

At Restore, group activities provided plenty of opportunities to receive empathic support from others. Louis valued the way the family atmosphere built confidence.

Recommendation 2: Individuals should be able to choose what best suits their needs and interests.

At Restore, the day started with a meeting in which people chose an activity from tasks that needed doing. Louis valued being able to do tasks he 'felt up to doing'.

Recommendation 3: Group activities should support community inclusion.

Restore's café was open to the public. Louis may not want to return to catering but Nick might value the café as a place to perform music.

Recommendation 4: Make sure that participants find the activities meaningful.

Nick felt a strong (and almost spiritual) sense of personal connection to gardening work.

The recovery groups are one step toward returning to paid employment. For many people though, their ultimate aim is a return to paid employment. What support is necessary to enable people to find and keep work?

4 Finding and keeping paid work

Both Nick and Louis eventually want to return to full work and a career. Research from Mind (2017/2018) has reported that 48 per cent of all the people surveyed said that they had experienced a mental health problem in their current employment. This staff survey included 43,892 workers across 74 organisations. Importantly, of the 48 per cent who had experienced a mental health problem in their current work, only half of them had disclosed this to their employer. These statistics show how common it is to experience a mental health problem while in employment. They also demonstrate that many people find it challenging to disclose this information to employers.

How do we ensure that people with mental health problems can find and keep employment?


Mind (2016) reports many barriers to keeping and finding work for individuals with a mental health problem. These include:

- limited employment support
- employer stigma
- benefits system constraints
- low self-esteem and low aspirations as a result
- difficult economic conditions (housing issues, debts)
- fear that job will cause a relapse
- gaps in CV and lack of recent references.

Mind's (2016) report makes recommendations aimed at a wide range of stakeholders, including the government, employers and those providing mental health services. For example, local agencies can assist individuals by offering job clubs, employment workshops and offering mock interviews. They also recommend support to build up an individual's weekly routine so that they can gradually build up to the working hours they are aiming for. Employers can develop trust with individuals with mental health problems by being aware of the current staff with lived experience who can provide knowledge and support for others, particularly applicants and new recruits dealing with mental health problems.

In the next activities, you will have the opportunity to make recommendations to the government, employers and mental health service providers that might improve the employment chances of people with mental health problems. Since your recommendations should reflect the reality of people's lives, you will start by considering the experience of two people who have returned to paid employment.

Activity 4 Sarah and Julie

 Allow about 1 hour

Watch the video where Sarah and Julie discuss returning to work and, using the table below, identify the challenges they faced. Then note any recommendations of necessary actions you would make to mental health service providers, employers and the government that might improve the employment chances of people with mental health problems. Be creative.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 3 Returning to work



Interactive table 1 Supporting people with mental health problems in employment: challenges and recommendations

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Comment

Here are some things you may have observed.

Example table 1 Supporting people with mental health problems in employment: challenges and recommendations

| | Challenges | Recommendations |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Mental health services | People with mental health problems often lack self-confidence. | Employ coaches who can sensitively but assertively provide encouragement to apply for work. |
| Employers | Mental health problems can fluctuate. | Employers accommodate flexible working patterns such as reduced hours or phased return. |
| Government | People fear that if they return to work but cannot cope, it will take a long time to reinstate their benefits. This may prevent them from seeking work. | Improve the flexibility and responsiveness of the benefits system. |


Grounding your analysis in lived experience is a good place to start.

5 A vision for employment support

In the next activity, you will examine how we as a society might need to reconsider work. This is especially important following the COVID-19 lockdowns, in which many people had to work from home and others, particularly in the health care sector, endured a very stressful work environment.



Activity 5 How working might change after COVID-19

 Allow about 1 hour

Read the following article by the NHS Confederation about how employment can be reconsidered in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic:

[Five key principles to guide us through the COVID-19 aftermath](#). Note the recommendations they propose and the challenges they address in your table, adding to your existing notes.

Interactive table 2 Supporting people with mental health problems in employment: challenges and recommendations

Interactive content is not available in this format.



Comment

The blog from NHS Confederation identifies several things that need to happen. Three are noted below to give you an idea, but your list of recommendations may be longer.

Example table 2 Supporting people with mental health problems in employment: challenges and recommendations (continued)

| | Challenges | Recommendations |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Mental health services | Mental health support is patchy and fragmented. | Work together with communities and civil society to support individuals. |

| | | |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Employers | The seasonal economy suffered during the pandemic, affecting unemployment rates. | Individual placement support (IPS) would support people with mental health problems to attain and retain employment. Invest in employment support with a therapeutic element. |
| Government | The pandemic had economic and social impacts and increased economic inequality. | A long-term plan for the nation's health must focus on mental health. Increase investment in employment services. |

Conclusion

Finding and keeping paid employment can be daunting and presents several challenges. However, as Carlyle (1844) suggests, for many 'an endless significance lies in Work'. As you have seen in this course, despite the demands, it can be hugely beneficial for our mental health. That is, if we have the right job with the right employer.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [*K240 Mental health and community*](#).

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