

Assessing Employment Needs of People With Mental Illness: A Photovoice Study

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PURPOSE: People with mental illness want to engage in meaningful work, yet the unemployment rate among this population is about 70 – 90%. The purpose of this study was to assess employment needs of people with lived experience of mental health issues. The research question was: what facilitating and hindering factors of employment were encountered by people lived with mental illness? This study helps identify a course of action to address unemployment as a social determinant of mental health.

DESIGN: This qualitative photovoice study recruited 7 participants from a peer-operated organization using these criteria: 18 years or older, capable to operate a digital camera after a brief instruction, capable to participate in group discussions, and willing to complete all study tasks.

METHOD: Based on principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR), we provided cameras to participants to take photos about issues in the community. Participants completed three rounds of photo assignments and meetings. We used the SHOWED discussion guide to facilitate group discussions. All meetings were recorded and transcribed. Data were analyzed using grounded theory methods, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. A computer program, NVivo 14, was used to assist in data analysis.

RESULTS: Preliminary data analysis revealed several hindering factors of work participation, including anxiety, insomnia, homelessness, past incarceration, and financial restraints. Facilitating factors included taking medications, staying healthy, having a pet, engaging in activities that make them happy, spiritual beliefs, permission to have fun, putting the past behind and knowing who we are, and being in the moment.

CONCLUSION: Alternative and newer forms of work participation are worthy of exploration. This study informs the development of community building and organizing approaches to address unemployment for people with mental illness.

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