

Does Work Help Manage PTSD Symptoms? A Qualitative Analysis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Supported Employment



Carolyn Bazan¹, Weili Lu¹, Francine Bates¹, William Waynor¹, LueAnn Librera¹, Giovanna Giacobbe¹, & Emily Schultz²

¹Rutgers University, ²CUNY; This research was supported by NIDILRR Field Initiated Grant # HHS 90IF0074 (PI: Lu)

Introduction

- For individuals living with severe mental health conditions (SMHC), returning to the workforce is an important personal goal and an essential step in the recovery process (Tiderington et al., 2020; van Weeghel et al., 2019).
- The Individual Placement and Support model (IPS) of Supported Employment (SE) programs has a demonstrated history of assisting individuals with SMHC in securing and maintaining employment.
- However, the program outcomes have been found to be impacted by unresolved PTSD symptomology, resulting in only about half of participants even seeking out employment.
- The current study aimed to increase the current understanding of how employment helps individuals to manage PTSD symptoms.

Methods

Participants were recruited on specific criterion to be included in the study:

- Engaged in a SE programming at specific sites in 3 US states.
- Met the probable criterion for PTSD on the PTSD Checklist for the DSM-5 (PCL-5).

Those who met the criterion were invited to participate in a broader randomized-control trial on PTSD and SE interventions from which the current data was pulled (Lu et al., 2017).

Participants were interviewed at the baseline, post-treatment, and 12-months post-treatment. In addition to the PCL-5, they were assessed on:

- The Clinician Administered PTSD Scale for DSM-5
- The Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale-Expanded
- The Posttraumatic Cognitions Inventory
- The Beck Depression Inventory
- The Beck Anxiety Inventory
- A past employment history questionnaire
- Open-ended questions on the impact of PTSD on employment

Results

A total of N=132 participants entered the study. The participants were largely in their late 40s (M=45.48, SD=12.07), female (63%, n=75), and predominantly African American (44.5%, n=53) or Caucasian (46.2%, n=55).

Only **51% (N=68)** were employed during at least one interview and included in the present study. Their most common job industries include:

- **Service/Sales Workers** (20.6%, n=14) i.e., waitresses, cashiers, kitchen staff
- **Elementary Occupations** (14.7%, n=10) i.e., custodians, housekeepers, bathroom attendants
- **Clerical Support Workers** (10.3%, n=7) i.e., call center representatives, payroll time keeping, resident coordinators

Themes were identified from the open-ended interview questions to understand how:

1. PTSD symptoms were mitigated by employment.
2. Job coaches contributed to SE program outcomes.

The theme outcomes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes from open-ended interview questions

1) If working, (how) is working helping you manage PTSD symptoms? (N=68)

1. Mental health benefits (76%, n=52)
 - a. Having a purpose (63%, n=43)
 - b. Work is a distraction (33%, n=22)
 - c. Feeling good about oneself (19%, n=13)
 - d. Work is the best medicine (13%, n=9)
 - e. Optimistic about the future (8%, n=6)
2. Helps me to develop socially (34%, n=23)
3. Less financial stress (26%, n=18)
4. Learning new things (13%, n=9)
5. Mixed or no benefit (15%, n=10)
 - a. Mix between feeling hopeful and overwhelmed (8%, n=6)
 - b. Not really (5%, n=4)

2) Is there any other specific help you would you like your job coach to provide? If so, what can s/he do to further help you? (N=57)

1. No additional help requested (37%, n=21)
2. Work related assistance (44%, n=25)
 - a. Help with the job search (37%, n=21)
 - b. Help with maintaining job tenure (9%, n=5)
3. Help with education (14%, n=8)
4. Life skills support (11%, n=6)
5. Benefits counselling (7%, n=4)
6. Mental health support (5%, n=3)

Discussion

The findings expand on the theory that PTSD symptoms negatively affect an individual's ability to maintain employment while SE programs with job coach support can help to mitigate this factor.

Responses to question 1 support the idea that employment is a recovery goal for individuals with comorbid PTSD and SMHC with 'mental health benefits' being the most common theme expressed by participants (76%, n=52). Responses to question 2 suggest the importance of incorporating a job coach for mentorship in SE services, particularly coaches who focus on work related assistance.

Limitations & Future Research

This study is limited by a small sample size due to the relatively small pool of individuals with SMHC and comorbid PTSD who were able to secure employment during the study period. Future research should use varied study methods to best capture the relevancy of employment to recovery.

Selected References

- Lu, W., Waynor, W., Yanos, Stone, B., Giacobbe, G. R., Waynor, W., Reilly, A., & Bazan, C. (2017). The hidden barrier to employment: Untreated and undiagnosed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 83*, 11-16.
- Tiderington, E., Henwood, B. F., Padgett, D. K., & Tran Smith, B. (2020). Employment experiences of formerly homeless adults with serious mental illness in Housing First versus treatment first supportive housing programs. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 43*(3), 253-260. <https://doi.org/10.1037/prj0000391>
- van Weeghel, J., van Zelst, C., Boertien, D., & Hasson-Ohayon, I. (2019). Conceptualizations, assessments, and implications of personal recovery in mental illness: A scoping review of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 42*(2), 169-181. <https://doi.org/10.1037/prj0000356>