

A closer look at the professional experiences of people living with severe mental illness and their recovery.

Catherine Vallée^{2,1}, Céline Mercier³, Raymonde Hachey¹

¹Université de Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada, ²Université Laval, Montréal, Québec, Canada,

³Centre de réadaptation Lisette-Dupras, Montréal, Québec, Canada

Introduction: People living with severe mental illness value work and productive activities as a mean for contributing to their communities. Besides, their vocational needs are often neglected or poorly addressed, even though work is known to be a contributing factor to the recovery process. If the benefits of employment are documented, the relationship between recovery and work is not well understood. Moreover, little efforts have been spent on examining the impact of other productive roles, such as parenting, volunteering or studying on recovery. **Objectives:** A grounded theory study aimed at better understanding the vocational development of individuals with a severe mental illness, taking into account the global context of their recovery process. The presentation will focus on two dimensions of the study. Firstly, the context in which participants invest productive activities will be presented. Secondly, the role of work related activities in the recovery process will be examined. **Methods:** Fourteen individuals living with severe mental disorders, including workers, volunteers and students between the ages of 26 and 45, participated in two semi-structured interviews, which focused on their professional experience and recovery. **Results:** Participants often reported a limited access to vocational training and job opportunities, which remained mostly under-specialized, if not marginalized. Many participants testified of poor working conditions, workplace abuse and violence. Participants also indicated how systemic barriers hindered their access to vocational training, while their existing competencies were often dismissed. On the other hand, a friendly working environment and an effective person-job fit allowed a positive redefinition of self-concept. Work can support recovery by primarily offering an occupation to the individual, and sometimes, a fulfilling social role. Besides, other roles may also contribute significantly to recovery. **Conclusion:** It is critical to address sociological and environmental determinants hindering the vocational development and the recovery process of these individuals. Enabling access to valued and meaningful opportunities is critical, just as investing interventions aimed at reducing stigma. **Contribution to the practice of occupational therapy:** Occupational therapists are invited to address more effectively systemic and programmatic barriers that perpetuate occupational injustices, while consolidating the core vocational skills of their clients.