

Work as a Conduit to Recovery from Mental and Substance-Related Disorders



Research Focus

An estimated 500,000 Canadians a week are unable to work due to mental health-related issues. This makes exploring the importance of work as both a social determinant of health and a potential pathway to recovery, crucial for Albertans. The authors examine the characteristics of workplaces that support recovery, as opposed to presenting barriers to recovery. This article aims to connect the role of work, employers, and recovery friendly workplace policies to support those struggling with mental health and substance use disorders.

Research Overview

The authors conducted iterative literature searches across academic databases, including PubMed and Google Scholar, supplemented by a range of reports and governments documents. The review focused on four thematic areas: 1) work as a social determinant of health 2) precarious employment 3) benefits of good work, and 4) recovery-friendly workplace practices. Drawing on multidisciplinary evidence, the article synthesizes findings to articulate how workplace conditions affect mental health outcomes, how work contributes to recovery capital, and what organizational changes enable psychologically healthy and recovery-supportive environments.

Key Findings

- Work is a critical social determinant of health, shaping mental and physical well-being through income, structure, identity, and social connection.
- High-quality jobs that provide safety, stability, fair compensation, autonomy, and positive relationships promote better mental health and life satisfaction for employees, especially those in recovery.
- Supportive workplace environments help prevent or mitigate mental health issues by promoting inclusion, providing resources, and enabling early intervention.
- Precarious employment, including insecure or low-control jobs, is associated with significantly higher rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.
- Unemployment contributes to worse health outcomes, including increased hospitalization, psychological distress, and higher mortality rates.
- Early and supportive return-to-work processes focused on capability rather than limitation, improve employee outcomes, and reduce unnecessary absences.
- Employers who adopt recovery-friendly policies benefit from higher retention, reduced absenteeism, stronger workplace culture, and improved productivity.

CoRE Insights

- 1 **Work is a powerful source of recovery capital:** Work can provide structure, purpose, income security, social relationships, and opportunities for growth, all of which support recovery from mental and substance-related disorders.
- 2 **Good work promotes recovery:** Quality of work, as opposed to just being employed, determines whether work supports or harms mental health. Stable, fair pay, safe, and supportive work environments contribute positively to health and recovery.
- 3 **Precarious employment is a risk factor:** Unpredictable hours, low income, job insecurity, and toxic work environments exacerbate stress, anxiety, depression, and addiction-related harms.
- 4 **Employers and employees benefit from recovery-friendly workplaces:** Workplaces with recovery-friendly policies reduce absenteeism, strengthen retention, support timely return-to-work processes, and help sustain long-term recovery.

How to Take Action

Employers & Organizational Leaders

- Design positions to promote decision-making, predictable schedules, living wages, and benefits.
- Implement flexible work arrangements and workload management strategies to reduce burnout and absenteeism.
- Foster a psychologically safe and supportive culture by offering education on mental health, encouraging open dialogue.
- Invest in continuous training and skill development to ensure employees receive adequate training, opportunities for growth, and resources needed to succeed.
- Normalize help-seeking, access to support resources, and recognize the unique contributions and perspectives of those with lived experience of mental health or addiction challenges.

Employers

- Introduce return-to-work planning early by encouraging the use of modified duties where possible, providing precise recommendations, and collaborating closely with employers.
- Ensure return-to-work plans consider medical conditions and workplace risk factors specific to those in recovery with mental health concerns.
- Use a strengths-based, recovery-oriented approach and embed it into practice to encourage healing and client growth.

Decision Makers

- Support policies that expand access to “good work” by encouraging employers to adopt fair wages, employment security, and safe work standards.
- Integrate work-quality considerations into mental health and addiction strategies that recognize employment as a core component of recovery capital.
- Invest in public awareness about the benefits of recovery-friendly work through campaigns that destigmatize recovery and highlight employer success stories.

Links to Research Materials

[Work as a Conduit to Recovery from Mental and Substance-Related Disorders](#)

Lead Authors

Riley Stewart-Patterson, Stone Li. Anna A. Noga, Sebastian Straube, Charl Els