

The Nature and Impact of Stigma towards Injured Workers: Summary

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Many injured workers experience much stigma and discrimination. This can make their physical injuries worse and cause social and psychological harm. Stigma is a complex idea, but many researchers agree that it involves labelling, stereotyping, excluding, and discriminating against people who are thought to be somehow “different”. Generally, those who are stigmatized have less power in the situation than those doing the labelling and judging.

This research project, “The Nature and Impact of Stigma towards Injured Workers”, looks at how stigma is shown and perpetuated, and the impact it has on injured workers’ lives. We need a better understanding of stigma to improve the workers’ compensation system for injured workers, and ultimately to provide opportunities for healing and returning to work.

The 28 focus group participants were composed of 15 men and 13 women, and 18 of these 28 also participated in an individual interview (10 men and 8 women). The injured workers in this study ranged from 35 to 69 years of age, and they came from various occupations and had various injuries. The range of time off work was from 1 to 3 weeks to 2 or more years. Most participants (17) had returned to the pre-accident employer, seven had found other employment, and four had not found employment or didn’t report their situation to the researchers. Focus group discussions centered on what it means to be an injured worker, treatment experienced as an injured worker, and

attitudes encountered as an injured worker. Individual interviews focused on living as an injured worker, the nature of engagement in work, community and social activities, how needs are addressed, as well as experiences with services, supports and community members.

How stigma is shown and perpetuated

Focus group and interview respondents described that stigma often takes the form of stereotypes about injured workers: injured workers are seen to be “irresponsible”, “lazy”, and just looking for “easy money”. One of the most frequently mentioned examples was the idea that injured workers are “playing the system”. Some respondents suggested that if an injury is not visible, this influences the likelihood of stereotyping and can lead to distrust and doubt. One interview respondent noted, “Unless you have an obvious leg amputation...you are open to be labelled a fake.” In fact, the injured workers in this study felt that the distrust and doubt about their injuries is at the core of the stigma aimed at injured workers.

Respondents said that stigma also appears in the sometimes unethical treatment they receive from employers, the compensation system, and medical professionals who focused primarily on money issues rather than on the injured workers’ well-being. Referring to how his employer treated him, one respondent said he felt like “a number waiting to be replaced”. His modified work was seen as a cost to the company rather than a way for him to recover from his injury. Injured workers also said that they been followed by private investigators. One injured worker commented that, “...it’s like you’re guilty until proven innocent...The employer is always right.”

The injured workers in this study described how being stereotyped in this way over and over again made them feel demoralized. Many said that they felt that putting up with the stigma is the only way to deal with it.

The Impact of Stigma

The participants in this study described how the stigma of being an injured worker affected all aspects of their lives, causing harmful effects on their social, economic and psychological well-being.

On work

Unlike the stereotype of the injured worker, who is seen as lazy and unmotivated for work, many of the respondents said that their major goal was to return to work. Injured workers reported that their injuries affected how hard and how long they could work, and that they felt less connected with their workplace because of the stigma they faced. In many cases, injured workers found work accommodations to be helpful, but they also reported that the modifications did not go far enough or last long enough to really help them.

On relationships

Participants talked about how the stigma of being an injured worker affected their relationships with co-workers, employers and potential future employers; with their families, including spouses, partners and children; and with friends and others in the community. One respondent said that on returning to work after an injury, co-workers “hardly even want to say good morning to you” because they are afraid of the

employer making a negative connection between them and the injured worker. As well as affecting their relationships with existing employers, injured workers described how the stigma of being labelled an injured worker could also hurt their chances with future employers.

Injured workers often mentioned the impact of injury and stigma on their personal lives, especially their family lives. Many described the financial hardships caused by the loss of an income, but they also described how the loss of family role as “caregiver” or “breadwinner” was a source of shame. One participant said, “You go from a breadwinner to a bread eater.”

Even injured workers’ relationships with friends from outside the workplace changed after they experienced the stigma of a workplace injury. They reported losing spouses, friendships, and previously respected roles in the community: “...you’re no longer seeing your old buddies, and you’re not getting a call.” Some respondents said that they became isolated and reclusive because confronting others would often be too exhausting.

On mental health

The combination of losing worker and family caregiver roles, financial difficulties, and the lack of support and stigmatization by others often led to mental health issues such as depression. Depression was the most commonly mentioned mental health issue among the participants in this study. It was most often because of the frustration and anger that comes with the experience of being an injured worker in a climate of doubt and distrust. One described it this way: “...I could not run my family. I was so angry. I

was so stressed. I had to go to the psychiatric doctor and he said, ‘yes you are suffering [from] depression’... Everyday I was taking the depression pills.”

Conclusions

One of the main issues that emerges from this research is the need to dispel the myths and undo the damage created by the stereotypes of injured workers. The findings of this study show that power structures in society — governments, employers, health providers and compensation systems — all help to perpetuate the stigma of injured workers. Injured workers pointed out that the very systems that are designed to protect them are the ones that punish and blame them, which supports and spreads negative attitudes in society at large, not to mention injured workers’ own feelings of shame.

This research points to the need for helping employers provide appropriate accommodations and better return-to-work plans. For injured workers, there should be accessible services that focus on education about their rights, peer support, and individual and family counselling, to name a few, to help prevent the negative effects found in this study.