

How and Why Does Occupational Wellness Relate to Mental Health?

Studies show that many individuals with mental health conditions want to work, and occupational wellness is a key part of recovery. Participation in occupations fosters social relationships as well as “a sense of self and of being included in the world.”¹ Occupational wellness can mean going to a full- or part-time job, volunteering, going to school, or caretaking. All of these are valuable activities in the recovery process.

What is the Occupational Dimension of Wellness?

Occupational wellness involves participating in activities that provide meaning and purpose, including employment, voluntary work, and engagement in meaningful activity connected to social roles. Through these, people find self-definition, structure their lives, develop a sense of self-efficacy, develop and maintain relationships, maintain incomes that support financial wellness, and more. Underemployment and unemployment undermine recovery. Therefore, access to evidence-based supported employment services is essential for any funded service delivery system.²

Occupational Wellness Isn't Just About Paid Employment

Volunteering and Mental Health Outcomes

Employment helps people structure time, develop identity and confidence around abilities, and grow and succeed with others. Many of these benefits can also be realized through unpaid work,³ like volunteering, which can increase life satisfaction and well-being while promoting community involvement.⁴ Volunteer work can also help individuals “transition into the workforce by taking on responsibility, learning new skills, interacting with others, and receiving recognition and feedback.”⁵ By volunteering, people can become empowered and engage in meaningful work, both of which are components of the recovery process supported by scientific evidence.⁶ Together, providers and the individuals they serve can explore volunteer opportunities in the community.

Supported Education

Supported education provides access to safe learning environments with diverse interpersonal, cultural, and social experiences. Supported education also provides opportunities for individuals served to develop interests and skills—which can shape personal identity—and attain training or earn a degree that can lead to further opportunities.⁷ For providers, it is helpful to stay aware of local supported education opportunities and connect individuals served to those resources, or even consider integrating supported education services into an existing program offered by your practice.

Research on a number of different supported education models provides evidence of effectiveness related to satisfaction, decreased hospitalization, improved quality of life, and increased competitive employment among participants.⁸

Interpersonal Relationships at School, Volunteering, or Work

Volunteer, school, and work environments present opportunities for individuals with mental health conditions to develop social skills and support systems and be part of larger social networks. Social networks can increase access to, as well as the variety of, available social supports. Additionally, inclusion in a social network can increase a person's self-esteem and produce positive emotional states, such as a sense of purpose, belonging, and safety.⁹

Paid Employment Topics

Supported Employment

Supported employment programs help anyone who wants to work living with a mental health condition.¹⁰ A systematic review found that supported employment is more effective than prevocational training, which operates with the pretense that individuals with mental health conditions, including serious mental illness, require a preparation period before securing competitive employment.¹¹

According to SAMHSA, supported employment includes:¹²

- Consumer choice: No one is excluded
- Integrated services: Employment specialists closely coordinate with other treatment practitioners
- Competitive jobs: Employment specialists help people find jobs that pay at least minimum wage
- Benefits counseling: Employment specialists help people understand how their benefits, like Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), are affected by working
- Timely support: Employment specialists help people look for jobs soon after they enter the supported employment program

- Continuous supports: Once a job is found, employment specialists provide ongoing support as needed
- Consumer preferences: Choices about work are based on a person's preferences, strengths, and experiences

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) supported employment has been validated by 15 randomized control trials in the United States and other countries, illustrating the benefit of supported employment for participants.¹³ Providers can work with organizations and resources in the community, such as vocational rehabilitation offices, to refer individuals to local supported employment programs.

Financial Self-Sufficiency Tools

Providers can work with individuals to help them access a number of financial self-sufficiency tools that are associated with occupational wellness. Resources like the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services' (NYAPRS') WE Can Work and WE Can Save campaigns provide guidance and support toward achieving meaningful employment and financial well-being.¹⁴ These tools are available online for free access by providers and community organizations and can enhance financial self-sufficiency.

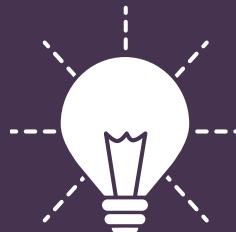
Programs like SSDI and SSI can help individuals with mental health conditions move toward financial security. Both of these disability programs also have insurance programs associated with them, which can support physical wellness with increased access to affordable care. SSI is connected to Medicaid, and SSDI is associated with Medicare.¹⁵ Providers can make referrals to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) Technical Assistance Center, a national program designed to increase access to the disability income benefit programs administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) for eligible adults who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness and have a serious mental illness, medical impairment, and/or a co-occurring substance use disorder.¹⁶

Workplace Wellness—Effective Accommodations

For individuals with mental health conditions in the workplace, there are supports and protections to enhance occupational wellness. For example, the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal law that prohibits employers from discriminating against applicants or employees with disabilities, including "psychiatric disabilities," such as serious mental illness. To be compliant with the law, employers must provide reasonable accommodations that help the individual perform the essential functions of the job unless it would cause undue hardship to the employer.¹⁷ Employers can create supportive work environments at little or no cost, offering things like one-on-one check-ins with supervisors, flexible scheduling, or remote employment. These adjustments can greatly reduce levels of stress and anxiety experienced by employees.¹⁸

Behavioral health providers can learn more about rights regarding accommodations through the Department of Labor's Job Accommodation Network (JAN) and work to ensure that individuals served are set up for furthering their occupational wellness. Providers can

also work with the individuals they serve to help them explore job opportunities—whether someone is unemployed and seeking work or currently working and hoping to change jobs, providers can help with exploring career pathways that will be a match with skills, interests, and abilities.



Remember: the wellness approach to recovery offers a holistic framework in which people are viewed as whole human beings.¹⁹ Whether working toward effective prevention efforts, treatment planning, or service delivery, keep the Eight Dimensions of Wellness and the value of occupational wellness in mind when serving individuals with mental health conditions.

Relevant Resources

[Supported Employment Evidence-Based Practices \(EBP\) KIT | SAMHSA](#)

[Supported Education EBP KIT |SAMHSA](#)

[WE Can Work Campaign | NYAPRS](#)

[WE Can Save Campaign | NYAPRS](#)

[Supported Education White Paper | Café Technical Assistance Center](#)

[Creating a Healthier Life Handbook | SAMHSA](#)

[SAMHSA SOAR Technical Assistance Center](#)

[Employment and Training Administration](#)

[Career One Stop | U.S. Department of Labor](#)

[Job Accommodation Network | U.S. Department of Labor](#)

[USAJOBS](#)

[U.S. Department of Education](#)

Acknowledgments

This product was developed by Policy Research Associates, Inc. with substantial contributions from Crystal L. Brandow, PhD and Terri Hay, Policy Research Associates, Inc.; Jasmin S. Brandow, MA, HumanKind Workshop; Cathy Cave, Inspired Vision, LLC; and Margaret (Peggy) Swarbrick, PhD, Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey.

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Endnotes

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