

Title: The perspective of professionals in occupational rehabilitation when employees have not achieved early RTW.

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Objectives

Comprehensive occupational rehabilitation programs (OR) may be offered to sick-listed individuals with composite health problems. The overarching goal of these programs is to hinder long-term sickness absence and disability, and to facilitate return to work (RTW). However, little is known about how the clinicians in the rehabilitation team work and which elements in the rehabilitation are deemed effective and modifiable. The objective of this study is to explore rehabilitation clinicians' experiences on how to work with participants with the longest sick leave spells in order to facilitate return to work.

Methods

An exploratory qualitative design was used. Four focus-groups were conducted with 29 clinicians working in interdisciplinary inpatient and outpatient occupational rehabilitation teams in Norway participated. Systematic text condensation was conducted.

Results

The clinicians used several approaches to facilitate RTW among those on long-term sick leave. Three themes emerged as especially important in order to succeed: 1) To get a basic understanding of the participant's lifeworld through a mapping process. 2) To achieve a therapeutic alliance with the participants. 3) To initiate processes of change that increase the possibilities for RTW. Four main areas targeted for change were identified, three directed at the individual and one encompassed the participants' surroundings: a) To increase feelings of confidence and coping; b) To increase awareness of own limits; c) To challenge inappropriate attitudes and thoughts related to the sick-role; d) Close and immediate dialog with local stakeholders.

Conclusion

A thorough mapping process and a therapeutic alliance are seen as crucial elements in the OR clinicians approach. By gaining the participants trust and identifying their barriers and possibilities for work, the clinicians are able to choose appropriate interventions and to initiate change processes that increase the participants' possibilities for RTW. This study contribute both to the research field and to those working in OR by describing what the clinicians consider as modifiable targets, and what they do and say in order to facilitate RTW processes among those on long-term sick leave.