



NATIONAL COALITION *for* HOMELESS VETERANS

“Self-Esteem as an Outcome Measure in Studies of Vocational Rehabilitation for Adults with Severe Mental Illness” W. Torrey, K. Mueser, G. McHugo, R. Drake/
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Quick Takeaways:

- Self-esteem is often assumed to be directly related to return to work, but self-esteem may instead be a stable personality characteristic not directly linked to return to work.
- A weak relationship between self-esteem and improved rehabilitation outcomes may be the result of the long-term nature of changes in self-esteem.

Study:

This study, conducted between 1991 and 1994, included 143 participants in New Hampshire who were diagnosed with severe mental illness. To be eligible for the study, the individuals needed to be unemployed, diagnosed with a severe mental illness, interested in employment, between 20 - 65 years of age, and physically able to participate in the trial. At the beginning of the study, participants were enrolled in either an individual placement and support approach or a group skills training program.

The researchers conducted assessments at baseline and then again at six month intervals through 18 months. In addition to self-esteem, the assessment looked at symptom severity, life satisfaction, housing status, and income and work status. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to measure self-esteem. This scale includes 10 items rated on a four point scale, resulting in a score between 10 and 40 where 10 is highest self-esteem and 40 is lowest self-esteem.

Findings:

The authors hypothesized that employment would lead to higher self-esteem. They predicted that this effect would occur because the subjects' self-image would come into closer alignment with their perceived ideal self. The researchers found that mean self-esteem scores improved approximately 1 point during the first six months of the study before moving back to baseline at the 12 and 18 month testing periods.

Although the researchers found that participants who were currently employed had better self-esteem than unemployed participants, these differences were not statistically significant. When the researchers looked at the relationship between the number of hours worked and self-esteem, they again found no statistically significant results. Comparing those who worked no hours to those who worked many hours yielded comparable non-significant findings.

Conclusion:

Although most practitioners and clinicians assume that improved self-esteem is directly related to return to work, the research has yielded inconclusive evidence to support this assumption. At best, the relationship between self-esteem and employment is inconsistent and requiring of more focused research.



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In this study the relationship between self-esteem and work was weak: self-esteem scores were relatively stable over time suggesting global self-esteem might be a consistent personality characteristic. Although improvements in self-esteem are not easily linked to return to work, there may be a simple explanation: indicators of self-esteem and overall happiness may improve as the individual achieves stability within one’s life and the workplace. This process can take some time to occur, leading to delayed improvements. Practitioners implementing return to work interventions for people with severe mental illness should not expect immediate improvements in self-esteem for their clients.