



# The Meaning of Work Among Young Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions

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## Objective:

Describe and explore the meaning of work among young adults with serious mental health conditions who were enrolled in vocational support services in an effort to inform vocational rehabilitation specialists, treatment providers, and parents.

## Background/Significance:

Adults with serious mental illness are less likely to be employed full or part time than those without any mental illness. Young adults with mental illness particularly struggle to achieve their education and employment goals compared to their peers without mental illness and face challenges finding and keeping work. Young adulthood is also a developmentally distinct period of the life course, and a critical time for individuals to develop the foundations for their long term career trajectories. Adults with mental illness report that employment not only provides economic rewards but also social and psychological functions (e.g., time structure, collective purpose, social contact, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and promotion of recovery). However, we know very little about what work means to young adults (ages 18-30) with serious mental health conditions (SMHC).

## Sample:

Young adults, ages 18-30, with serious mental health conditions were recruited from three vocational programs in Massachusetts: Vocational Rehabilitation services, Individualized Placement and Support (IPS), and the Clubhouse Model.

## Methods:

One-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted by Participatory Action Research (PAR) staff at the Transitions RTC. The interviews asked about the individual's experiences and feelings with the vocational program and with finding and keeping a job. In order to understand the meanings of work among participants, interviewers asked respondents "what does work mean to you?" All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. We used a thematic analysis approach to coding to analyze content related to the meaning of work among participants.

## Results: What does work mean to you?

### Economic Functions:

*"Well uh, you know I don't feel like my family has to like support me, like I always have to go running to my family for like money or something. I just know that I worked for it myself and whatever I use to buy with that money I know I earned it on my own."*  
 (White female, 18 years old)

### Social Functions:

*"Something that I've always liked in my jobs is like you know doing the job and like asking people for help when you don't know something and kind of like getting to be friends with people, and it just really makes you happy to um, it's just so fun to be able to talk to people and it's like getting to hang out and have fun but you're working, you're working, but it's really... like I miss that"*  
 (American Indian female, 30 years old)

*"So I feel working for me is very important to me and also the world cause I'm part of society and helping them do things."*  
 (White male, 20 years old)



### Psychological Functions:

*"A chance to prove a little bit that some of the naysayers out there are wrong. People that say, it can't be done, that people with mental illnesses can't do certain things."*  
 (White male, 25 years old)

*"It gives structure, also gives you a sense of purpose..... Like uh it gives you something to look forward to, like 'okay today I got work and um, I gotta do this and this at work today,' so I don't know, it gives you a sense of purpose."*  
 (White female, 25 years old)

*"I get proud of myself, feeling good because like at least I am able to have a job and without thinking of my disorders; to have like a free away from my disorders."*  
 (Hispanic female, 18 years old)



Table 1: Demographics	Percent or Mean
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	54%
Female	46%
<b>Average Age (Years) (Range 18-30)</b>	22.93
<b>Race and Ethnicity</b>	
Hispanic/Hispanic	28%
Non-Hispanic White	59%
American Indian (AI)/Alaska Native (AN)	5%
Black/African American	2%
Mixed Race	4%
Other (Did Not Know)	2%
<b>Language Spoken</b>	
English Only	77%
Both English & Spanish	21%
Both English & Other (German)	2%
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Never Married	82%

Table 2: Mental Health History	Percent
<b>Diagnoses</b>	
Participants W/ 1 Diagnosis	40%
Participants W/ 2 Diagnoses	44%
Participants W/ 3-4 Diagnoses	16%
<b>Primary Diagnosis</b>	
Bipolar Disorder	56%
Depression	54%
Anxiety Disorder	37%
Schizophrenia and Schizo Affective Disorder	31%
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder & Other Diagnosis (Mood Disorder & Hypomania)	8%
<b>Doctor Prescribed Psychiatric Medication</b>	
Yes	96%
<b>Currently Taking Psychiatric Medication</b>	
Yes	82%
<b>Ever Hospitalized With Disorder</b>	
Yes	81%

## Conclusion and Implications:

The meaning of work among young adults with SMHC is not only economic but also psychological and social. Young adults reported that working helped prove to others that they were capable of working and in some cases, help prove to society that individuals with mental illness can work. This finding is unique to the data on adults with mental illness and could be unique to younger adults; further research is needed. Many young adults with SMHC report being socially isolated after high school. Working may provide young adults with social interaction that they would otherwise be lacking. Only Hispanic respondents reported that working specifically helped them overcome their diagnosis. Research is needed to understand potential cultural differences in the meanings of work. Young adults with serious mental health conditions are motivated to work based on the meanings they associate with work and the positive economic and non-economic benefits they receive from working. These findings are important for vocational service providers, parents, and other service workers.

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