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Canadian Disability Participation Project



The CDPP is an alliance of university, public, private and government sector partners working together to enhance community participation among Canadians with physical disabilities. The research team for this project has expertise in work disability prevention, life course research, population health, organizational behaviour, and qualitative research methods.



Young Adults with Chronic Conditions and Disabilities Face Workplace Barriers

Research suggests young workers with arthritis have more difficulty accessing workplace supports than older workers with the same condition.

A recent study¹ led by CDPP Employment Team Member, Dr. Arif Jetha, examines the unique challenges faced by young workers with chronic disease and disability.

The goal of the study was to examine similarities and differences in the workplace needs of people with arthritis at different ages and stages of their careers. Dr. Jetha and his team found that young workers with arthritis faced unique difficulties in accessing workplace supports for a number of reasons.

The study's results provide insight for both employers, policy makers, and other researchers who are committed to improving employment options for people with chronic conditions and disabilities.

Study Methods

Dr. Jetha and his team recruited 45 individuals who were working or had worked in the previous 12 months. Twenty-five were older than 55 years, while seven were between 18 and 34 years old. The participants had inflammatory arthritis, osteoarthritis or another rheumatic disease.

The researchers used focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and a follow-up questionnaire to learn about participants' experiences finding and keeping a job. They also wanted to learn more about the formal and informal workplace resources the participants needed, whether or not these resources were available, and, if available, whether the participants ultimately used these resources. Participants were also probed on how their work experiences and work-support needs changed over the course of their lives.

Study Findings

The team found that, regardless of age, participants needed similar types of accommodation and workplace supports for their arthritis. Of these, scheduling flexibility was top of the list. Due to the episodic and unpredictable nature of the condition, participants said they benefitted from policies that allowed them to arrive late or leave early, take frequent breaks, work from home, or otherwise modify their schedules as symptoms flared. Other workplace supports needed were medical and drug benefits, changes to the physical work environment, job modifications, and supportive work environments where employees with accommodation needs find help and empathy when faced with challenges.

But when it comes to accessing these supports, the study's younger participants indicated more barriers than their older counterparts due to their age and their lower status in the workforce.

Having arthritis at a young age made it difficult for some study participants to talk about their condition to supervisors and co-workers. Some young study participants also said they faced disbelief among co-workers who thought arthritis only affected older people. Many participants said they feared jeopardizing their career if they disclosed their condition. As one young study participant described it: "I think there's always the misconception that people don't get impairments until later in life, and so (having an impairment when you're young) can always be something very difficult either to convey to your employer or to your colleagues (who think) maybe you're getting special treatment or you're just a big complainer."

Lack of job tenure were also revealed to limit options for younger workers. The short-term, entry-level jobs in which many young participants worked typically offered less support or accommodations. In comparison, the middle-aged and older workers who had longer tenures said the time spent at their workplaces gave them an opportunity to build supportive relationships with supervisors and peers.



Those who had worked less time at an organization were more likely to describe a less supportive workplace.


One concerning theme that emerged regardless of age was that many participants revealed a reluctance to turn to workplace accommodation as a first step. Instead, participants reported changing and adapting their lives outside work as a strategy to stay in their jobs. Some reported reducing their social roles and cutting out social activities in order to get more sleep and preserve their energy for work. Many said they preferred making these adjustments instead of having to disclose their health needs at work and request support.

Conclusions

The study's authors say that the good news is that workplaces don't have to offer different workplace supports to meet the need of young workers with arthritis.

"The same supports can meet the needs of people with arthritis across different ages," they wrote.

They also suggest that employers and managers might want to pay special attention to young people and those who are new to their jobs, as they may perceive more barriers to accessing those supports and therefore be more susceptible to work disability.



“We sometimes don’t think about challenges faced by young people who live with potentially disabling chronic health conditions, and often lack the knowledge to support them as they enter the labour market,” conclude the researchers. “An important first step may be to strengthen communication practices between supervisors and young workers to enable a dialogue on employment needs and the identification of relevant support strategies.”

The study, which is titled *Transitions that matter: life course differences in the employment of adults with arthritis*, was published in September 2017 in *Arthritis Care & Research*.

References

1. Jetha A, Gignac MAM, Bowring J, Tucker S, Connelly CE, Proulx L, Martin Ginis KA. Supporting arthritis and employment across the life course: A qualitative study. *Arthritis Care & Research*. 2018: E-Pub ahead of press. <https://doi.org/10.1002/acr.23523>

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