



Locus of control and vocational rehabilitation

By: Dr Mary Wyatt

A sense of control over the situation improves return to work outcomes.

Take Home Messages:

People who have a lower sense of control over the situation reported higher levels of pain.

People had higher levels of internal locus of control after the rehabilitation program was completed.

In the rehabilitation context, improving an individual's sense of control over the situation is important. Other studies have shown that activities such as problem-solving training produce significantly improved return to work outcomes.

All those involved can assist the person to improve their level of the sense of control over the situation. Health providers, as well as other providers such as claims or rehabilitations staff, can and should play an active role in empowering the person to feel they have control over the situation.

Why the research matters:

An individual's locus of control (LOC) refers to whether they expect the outcome of a particular situation will be determined by them (internal locus of control), or that the outcome will be determined by external factors, such as other people or forces beyond them (external locus of control).

A number of studies have suggested that locus of control is relevant to return to work management. Clients with an internal locus of control are self-reliant, have been found to be more reliable, tolerate work better, and have a greater need for achievement. Studies have suggested that clients with higher levels of internal locus of control have shorter recovery periods.

What the research involved:

Following a dramatic increase in the number of people not working and being sick listed in Sweden, a range of research studies and initiatives were put in place. The authors of this study were based at the National Social Insurance and universities in Sweden, and assessed



approximately 350 people who had been off work for more than 60 days due to back problems. The researchers wanted to get a better understanding of the impact of locus of control on return to work rehabilitation.

People who had been off work were enrolled in a four week rehabilitation program which was undertaken eight hours a day and included individual and group activities. One of the major goals of the program was to provide people with a “toolbox” so they could help themselves and take responsibility for their wellbeing.

Specific questionnaires were completed by the group participants, and one aspect of the questionnaire measured the person's locus of control.

Summary of research findings:

The study results found that clients with low levels of internal locus of controls—ie, had beliefs that they had less control over the outcome than those with higher locus of control, reported more pain than others in the group.

The authors of the study also found that the internal locus of control was higher at the completion of the four week rehabilitation program than at the commencement of the program.

The authors went on to point out that the inference from the above was that the rehabilitation focus should be on improving the person increasing their sense and control over the situation. They noted that a higher sense of control was associated with higher pain tolerance and less negative pain response, and also with reduced medication use. The authors noted that other studies had found that people with high internal locus of control develop effective strategies to deal with pain and have reduced disability and higher rates of exercise.*

The study goes on to point out that all those involved with the person should try to assist in helping the person develop coping strategies. They point out three techniques for doing this:

i. Counselling to enable changes in the way things are dealt with, or 'response style'

The aim of counselling for changes in 'response style' is to help the person become aware that they have the power to change things.

This is done by confronting external statements—for example, the statement “They want me to be ...” is put to the person, “What do you want to be ...?” The service provider rewards statements that come from an internal locus of control perspective—eg, “I will try to”.

Encouraging the person to recognise and focus on the results of their behaviour is important—eg, if they do this, then certain results will occur.



ii. Taking action in dealing with others.

The person is asked to list “some significant others” with whom they are having some challenges. They are then asked to define the interpersonal difficulties and work out ways of dealing with the issues.

For example, there might be a delay in hearing back from a claims officer. The person would be asked to identify ways they could deal with that situation.

iii. Dealing with ways of thinking about situations.

The person is encouraged to look at their perceptions and attitudes about things that are happening. For example, a person may feel that a particular supervisor has asked them to do a job which they do not wish to do. The request might seem “oppressive”. If the person can change their attitude and take on a different attitude to the job, perhaps seeing it as a short term step in their longer term rehabilitation, and they will have a greater sense of control the situation.

Original research:

Internal locus of control and vocational rehabilitation

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