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Maintaining work participation with chronic musculoskeletal pain: how important are significant others?

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‘I think positivity breeds positivity’: The role of significant others in supporting those with chronic musculoskeletal pain to stay at work

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Background
- Research investigating the influence of significant others (spouses/partners/relatives) on chronic musculoskeletal pain (CMP) has often focused on their negative responses, which may impede recovery and work participation.
- Several studies have proposed that significant others can reinforce unhelpful pain cognitions, pessimism about the outcome of treatment and the expectations of returning to work for those with CMP.
- The role of significant others in helping those with CMP to stay at work is scarcely explored.

Aims
- To examine significant others’ beliefs about, and responses to, their relative’s pain and work participation.
- To gain insight in the specific contributions made by significant others in helping their relatives with CMP to stay at work.

Methods
- A mixed-methods design was applied, assimilating quantitative and qualitative data from studies conducted in the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom.
- Data from workers with CMP and their significant others were collected in the Netherlands using questionnaires (pain self-efficacy, pain catastrophizing and pain responses) and open ended questions on the nature of support provided by significant others in helping workers to stay at work (n=103).
- In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted separately with patients and their significant others in the UK (n=10).

Results
Beliefs and perceived partner responses of workers who stay at work with CMP and their partners (n=103)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>Sign. others</th>
<th>ES</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pain self-efficacy beliefs, mean (sd)</td>
<td>0-60</td>
<td>46.7 (8.8)</td>
<td>45.3 (9.6)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pain catastrophizing, mean (sd)</td>
<td>0-52</td>
<td>11.1 (8.9)</td>
<td>14.4 (10.3)</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing support, median (IQR)</td>
<td>0-6</td>
<td>4 (3-5)</td>
<td>4 (3-5)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishing responses, median (IQR)</td>
<td>0-6</td>
<td>1 (0.3-1.7)</td>
<td>1 (0.3-1.7)</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.52*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solicitous responses, median (IQR)</td>
<td>0-6</td>
<td>2.3 (1.5-3)</td>
<td>2.5 (1.8-3.3)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting responses, median (IQR)</td>
<td>0-6</td>
<td>2.7 (1.7-3.3)</td>
<td>3 (1.3-3.8)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Independent samples T-test
* assessed with the Pain Self Efficacy Questionnaire significant others version
* assessed with the Pain Catastrophizing Scale significant others version
* assessed with the WHYMPI-significant others version

Contributions of significant others to sustained work participation of relatives with CMP: 3 themes

- **Connectivity**
  - providing emotional support
  - communicating about the pain
  - showing understanding
  - “Make sure that the complaints remain open to discussion”
  - “Take the pain seriously, be patient, and avoid patronizing”
  - “Always have a listening ear and sympathize”
  - “Talk about it, try to show understanding and help as much as possible”

- **Activity**
  - encouraging to keep active
  - encouraging to stay at work
  - stimulating a proactive attitude
  - taking over everyday tasks
  - “Just continue, the pain is there, whether you work or not”
  - “Ensure that they remain active despite the pain”
  - “If you’re at work, then you have no time to brood”
  - “Continue activities and do not give in to the pain quickly”
  - “And my husband then said to me, if you want it [continue work] then you should go for it, and don’t let it depend on others”

- **Positivity**
  - being a source of positivity
  - encouraging a positive outlook
  - encouraging to accept the pain
  - “Try to keep doing the things that are important and use your energy for that”
  - “Try to enjoy the things that you can and emphasize these”
  - “Someone has to remain positive……I think positivity breeds positivity”
  - “I have a colleague who calls in sick very often, she may have a weaker constitution, but she might not have a home like me, with at least positive influence and stimulation”
  - “A lot of people are just proud of me and say, let us see what you can, and I will”

Conclusions
- The beliefs and perceived partner responses of workers with CMP and their significant others were closely aligned: high pain self-efficacy, low pain catastrophizing and punishing responses, and moderate levels of solicitous and distracting responses.
- This research reveals novel insights about the positive and supportive influence significant others may have on helping those with CMP to stay at work.
- These findings further highlight the importance of the worker’s social environment, indicating the potential value of including family members in vocational rehabilitation programs.

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