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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)

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

[#] Independent samples T-test
* Wilcoxon signed rank test

^a assessed with the Pain Self Efficacy Questionnaire significant others version

^b assessed with the Pain Catastrophizing Scale significant others version

^c assessed with the WHYMPI-significant others version

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

Theme	Contributions	Quotes
Connectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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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