

Researchers investigate 'the influence of the family' on back pain sufferers

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Researchers at the University of Huddersfield have published a research paper that focuses on the social factors involved in back pain sufferers returning to work, to give a wider context to the medical factors that are often considered.

Researchers at the University of Huddersfield have investigated recovery from back pain and the problems faced by sufferers when they attempt to return to work. The latest phase of research has broken new ground by focusing on the influence of the family or "significant others".

Headed by the [psychologists](#) Dr Joanna Brooks and Dr Serena McCluskey, of the University's Institute of Research into [Citizenship](#) and Applied Human Sciences, the project has interviewed both [chronic back pain](#) sufferers who have managed to remain at work and those who have been unable to return. Family members were also interviewed, widening understanding of the issues surrounding recovery from back pain and return to work. The research discovered marked differences between the two groups.

"Those who managed to stay at work had greater flexibility in their jobs – more professional occupations with more [autonomy](#)" said Dr McCluskey. "This type of work appeared to be very important – it seemed to help them manage their back pain condition and they had more support from their employers."

The researchers found that the family members of those who managed to

stay at work were much more independent of each other.

"They were supportive but seemed quite separate; whereas the families of back [pain sufferers](#) that weren't working were very involved in each other's lives," said Dr McCluskey.

It was also important to note, added Dr McCluskey, that the current [economic climate](#) meant that it was not easy for back pain sufferers to find work or retrain for other, more suitable occupations.

This work draws attention to the role that [social factors](#) play in back pain and how families, GPs and employers can play a supportive role in enabling sufferers to return to work.

The back pain research projects that she and her colleagues have conducted so far have been funded by the organisation BackCare – formerly the National Back Pain Association – and by the BUPA Foundation. Now there is to be further research, backed by the University of Huddersfield's School of Human and Health Sciences Research and Innovation Fund.

"This will focus on people just starting to present with back pain, going to their GP requesting time off work. We do know that you have got to intervene with back pain patients early. Once they get to a chronic stage it is very difficult for them to return to work," said Dr McCluskey. "We would like to explore new ways to intervene, using [family members](#) to aid the process."

The most recent article from this research – "Illness perceptions in the context of differing work participation outcomes: exploring the influence of significant others in persistent back pain" appears in the *Journal BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders*.

More information: Brooks, J., McCluskey, S., King, N. and Burton, K. Illness perceptions in the context of differing work participation outcomes: exploring the influence of significant others in persistent back pain, *BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders*, 14. ISSN 1471-2474, www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2474/14/48

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