

*"A hollowed shell of what  
I used to be":*  
A qualitative study of injured worker  
mental health and implications for  
return to work

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BC Mental Health &  
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# Introduction

- Return to work policy focuses on the *physical injury* and returning the worker to modified employment
- Although workers' compensation must limit jurisdiction & liability, the rising number of *persistent claims* invokes consideration of issues beyond management of physical injury...such as *mental health*.
- Research has shown associations between work absence and poor mental health
- However, we have a limited understanding of pathways between the two.



# Talk outline

- Our qualitative study of workers with prolonged claims experiences identifies pathways between work absence and poor mental health
- We identify five pathways to mental health problems; these relate to loss and social exclusion
- We discuss implications for return to work



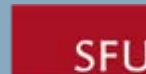
# Our study

- Qualitative study examined roadblocks faced by workers who have failed to RTW as expected
- 69 in-depth interviews
  - With 34 injured workers with prolonged, complex claims experiences
  - With 14 injured worker peer helpers
  - With 21 service providers familiar with these injured worker problems
  - Conducted in Ontario in 2005-06
- Grounded theory approach to data analysis



# Sample

- **Time since injury**
  - Mean 11 yrs, median 9 yrs, mode 2 yrs
- **Gender**
  - Injured workers: 20 male, 14 female
  - SPs and PHs: 18 male, 17 female
- **Age at interview**
  - Range 29 to 68; average 51



# Five pathways to mental health problems

- 1) “*No longer the go-to-it guy*”--From productive worker to burden
- 2) “*Watching on the sidelines*”--Social & community exclusion
- 3) “*What kind of am a man am I?*” –Loss of provider role
- 4) “*I used to play sports*”-- Loss of pleasure
- 5) “*It all went out the window*”--Loss of dreams and dignity



# 1. “No longer the go-to-it guy” From productive worker to societal burden

- Workers feel like a burden in various ways:
- a) Burden at work
- [Light duty at work] bums people right out. And it gets them **upset**. Just sit in the lunchroom for the day, yeah? What do you think that's gonna do to me, you know? ... **they see me sitting around all day and they're working and I'm not**. Like, how do you think I feel about it? (Samuel, injured worker)



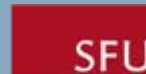
## *From productive worker to societal burden*

- b) Burden at home
- **She feels guilty....** The worst thing for her she says is having her sister come over, who ... says, "Listen, I'll spend a day with you and we'll sort of do some cleaning." And she says, "**My sister is working her tush off and I start something and then got to go sit down.**" (Finn, service provider)



## *From productive worker to societal burden*

- c) Burden to society
- They just **lost their sense of self** because they're no longer able to work... **They see themselves as drags on society** because they aren't doing what they used to do. And they lapse into depression slowly but surely ... (Gerrard, service provider)



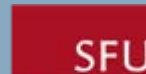
## 2. “Watching on the sidelines” Social & community exclusion

- Community and social exclusion has various dimensions
- a) No longer included in meaningful social activities
- **I'm excluded from almost everything now, right? My friends don't call me, "Hey we're gonna do this, we're buildin' a fence or we need help." Nobody calls me anymore.** I have people do things that I should...be able to do. ... And it's frustrating for me cuz I'm not 80 years old. I'm still in my 40s, I should be able to do anything, you know what I mean? (Paul, injured worker)



## *Social & community exclusion*

- b) Feeling misjudged by friends
- Family and friends are asking, “Well, you know, **why isn't your husband working?** What's wrong with him?...He needs to be out there working. He's fine”  
...And people tend to isolate because of the judgments and the **stigma** that exists, especially for those people who don't have those visible injuries. (Janice, peer helper)



### 3. “*What kind of am a man am I?*”

## Loss of provider role

- a) Loss of male family provider role
- I met my wife thirty years ago... I said, “Well, I'm a man, we're young, I'm able to support my wife and...kids.” And then something like that happens, you're fifty years old and you can't support [them]... and you're expecting *them* to support *you*. Then suddenly you feel depressed...feel bad and you say, “What kind of a man am I?”...You start losing all the values...to raise a family, to be a good person... And all that because of an injury. (Kyle, injured worker)



## Loss of family provider role

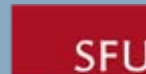
- b) Loss of parent role, and c) now “in the way”
- **Your family appreciates you for the things you contribute...So if the money's down, that's a problem. If you're hurt and you don't want to go to the hockey game, cause you can't sit there, it's no good. You can't throw the ball with the kids. You have a hard time bringing in the groceries, and then you're sittin' around on the couch, moanin'. “What the heck are you contributing around here, bud?” You know, “I'm sick and tired of hearing this, you know, you're in the way, besides.” (Samuel, service provider)**



## 4. “I used to play sports”

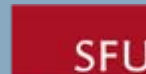
### Loss of pleasure

- Loss of things in life that gave pleasure, made living enjoyable and meaningful
- a) Loss of sports, hobbies
- I used to play sports. I used to be active, used to go out, movies, clubs, whatever. And then, I'm **injured now**, I can't do anything. Spend a lot of time at home. You know, **I don't have the money now....** So, I can no longer - like even go to watch people play sports. (Alex, injured worker?)



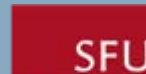
## *Loss of pleasure*

- b) loss of sex life
- c) Loss of family habitat
- We have four-wheelers, we have horses, and we're selling all that stuff, 150 acres.. ... I can't raise my cows anymore, I can't go for horse rides...I can't even ... cut my own grass. (Brian, injured worker)



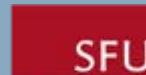
## 5. “It all went out the window” Loss of dreams & dignity

- a) Loss of hopes & dreams
- I was working to save for one more year to go buy a property... I just needed one more year.. And the banks were willing...I'd go to the bank, they'd call me “Sir” {chuckle}. So I had a good relationship going on, you know? Get the right things in place... and then it all just went out the window. (Steve, injured worker)

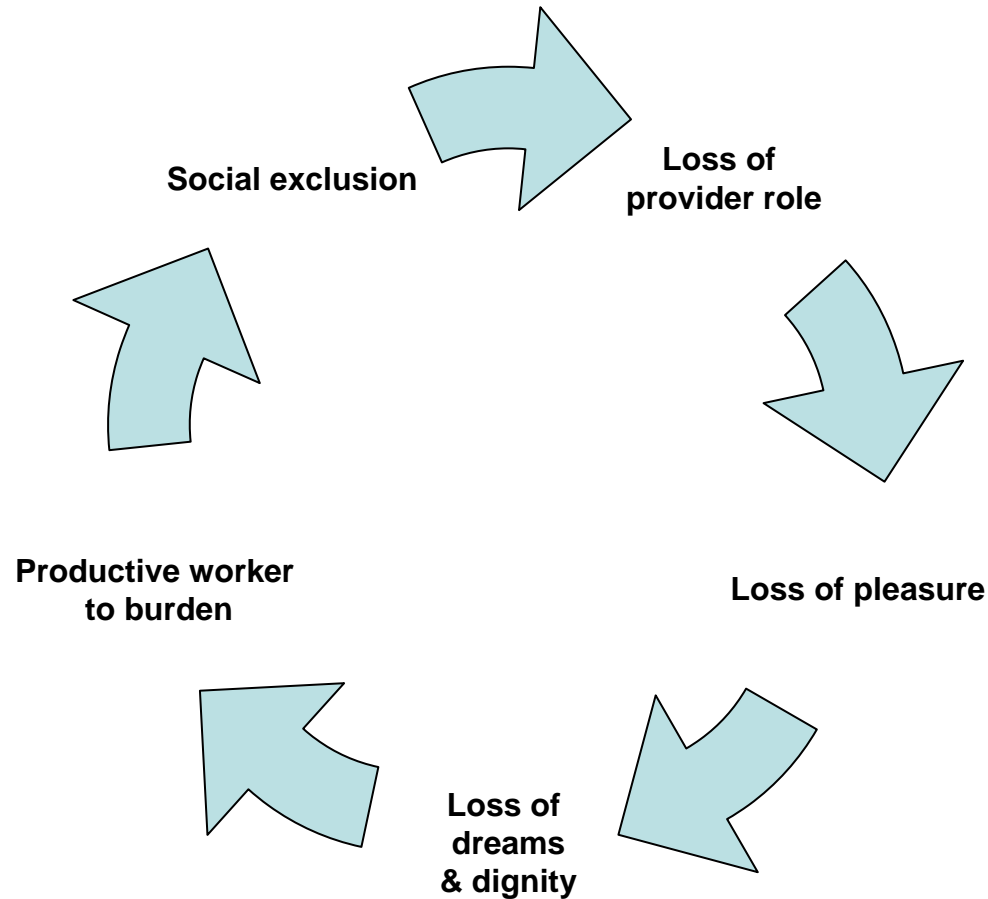


- b) Loss of dignity

- I've got a lot of pride, I want to paddle my own canoe. You know, I'm not in this for the ride, and ... that, that to me is the most hurtful of any of it...I've been married to the same woman for forty years, I've paid the bills, and worked and built a nice home ... done all the responsible things, if you will, and... having said all that, I'm nothing but number somewhere [with workers' compensation]...like, there's just no personal credibility. That's the part that I just find very, very humiliating. (Jesse, injured worker)

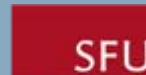


# Pathways between work absence & mental health



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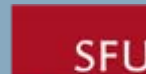
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# Implications for return to work

- Our study identifies the need for an understanding of how return to work *affects* and *is affected by* issues *beyond functional abilities*.
- Persistent work absence creates significant personal (new problems) and financial loss (new costs)
- Much relates to sense of value, role and place
- Workers with persistent claims do not fit with policy expectations of workers who are able to engage in *self-reliance*
- Compensation & health care providers require understanding of worker frailty, loss, and their need to cope with many consequences of work absence
- RTW policy based on 'functional abilities' and 'self reliance' does not address these dimensions.



# Thank you

This study is funded by the *Workplace Safety & Insurance Board Research Advisory Committee 2005-2007*



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