Researchers Examine the Double Challenge of Managing Long COVID with Disabilities

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DURHAM, N.H.—Researchers at the University of New Hampshire have received a grant for $2.5 million to study long COVID — lingering, long-term effects of COVID-19 — and its ramifications on the healthcare and employment of workers with disabilities. The grant, from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), will allow researchers to focus on understanding how individuals with disabilities who are diagnosed with long COVID balance their health and job demands.

“The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragilities and fault lines in our healthcare and workforce systems,” said Vidya Sundar, associate professor of occupational therapy. “Today that can be compounded for people with disabilities who also have to deal with newly evolving cases of long COVID. For those individuals who develop the post-COVID condition, it is a double jeopardy of having to manage multiple debilitating symptoms. This study will focus on what that added layer of complication means for their day-to-day interactions with their employers and coworkers.”

Long COVID can cause lingering and persistent symptoms that can range from fatigue to issues with smell and taste, chronic cough or even symptoms that are hard to explain. The five-year nationwide study will focus on managing symptoms and the effect on their jobs, like exhaustion at work and brain fog. The researchers will use a multi-pronged approach including in-depth interviews, large scale data-driven projects and testing of a novel intervention, called job crafting, that helps people find ways to change their perception of their job to reduce burnout at work. The goal is to use this data to help develop programs and policies that enable individuals with disabilities, who are also struggling with long COVID, to continue to live and work in the community.

“We know that workers with disabilities, particularly those that worked in frontline positions in healthcare, retail and service industries during the pandemic, faced high risks from COVID exposure,” said Debra Brucker, research associate professor at UNH’s Institute on Disability. “For those that developed long COVID and remained in the workforce, we are interested in understanding how they navigate career challenges—how they manage to both stay afloat and stay ahead in the workplace.”

The study will be conducted in partnership with researchers at the UNH Institute on Health Policy and Practice, UNH Dimond Library and the Kessler Foundation, an organization that aims to improve rehabilitation and employment experiences of people with disabilities.
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For more information on the study, researchers will hold a webinar with more details. To register go to: https://umassmed.zoom.us/webinar/register/...data=05%7C01%7CKeith.Testa%40unh.edu%7Cd2d42cba8518c4ac8c08308dbf9c6e47%7Cd6241893512d46dc8d2be47e25f5666%7C0%7C0%7C6

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