

School: Return to Work
Course: The Elephant in the Room: Pain
Faculty: Becky Curtis, CEO, Take Courage Coaching
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Summary

The course "The Elephant in the Room: Pain," taught by Becky Curtis with discussion led by Ryan Guppy and Dr. Ilana Lehmann, addresses the often overlooked but critical topic of pain in the workers' compensation and return-to-work processes. Becky Curtis, an injured worker herself, shares her personal journey of coping with chronic pain following a severe car accident. Her story highlights the unique and individual nature of pain, illustrating how it profoundly affects both physical and emotional aspects of a person's life.

Curtis emphasizes that pain is a subjective experience, processed entirely in the brain, and can exist even in the absence of clear medical findings. This concept often leads to a lack of understanding and empathy from those around the injured worker, making the experience more isolating. Curtis points out that workers' compensation systems often focus on objective findings and overlook the complex nature of pain. She shares her experience of not being asked about returning to work until three years post-injury, showcasing how the system can sometimes miss critical conversations that support recovery.

A key point in Curtis's discussion is the distinction between the biomedical and biopsychosocial models of pain management. The biomedical model focuses on the physical aspects of injury, aiming to fix the body without considering the mental and social factors influencing pain. In contrast, the biopsychosocial model addresses the mental, emotional, and social dimensions of pain. Curtis advocates for this holistic approach, highlighting how it helped her regain control over her life. She describes how focusing on solutions and what is going well, rather than on the pain itself, can help rewire the brain to better manage chronic pain.

Curtis also stresses the importance of empathetic listening and support in managing chronic pain. Empathy, rather than sympathy, is crucial in helping injured workers feel understood and empowered. Sympathy can unintentionally convey pity and reinforce feelings of hopelessness, whereas empathy provides support without judgment. Curtis shares that showing unconditional positive regard—accepting the worker as they are—helps build trust and fosters a mindset shift toward recovery.

The course discusses the concept of "secondary benefits" of pain, such as the attention and care that injured workers might receive, which can create a complex dynamic. These benefits can sometimes inadvertently discourage workers from focusing on their recovery and returning to work. Curtis notes the importance of empowering injured workers through education and motivational interviewing, which involves asking open-ended questions to uncover their goals and strengths. This approach helps them shift their focus from pain to functional improvement, fostering a sense of purpose and direction.

In summary, "The Elephant in the Room: Pain" highlights the need for a compassionate and comprehensive approach to managing chronic pain in injured workers. Curtis's experience underscores the importance of recognizing pain as a complex, individual experience. By adopting a biopsychosocial model and focusing on empathy, empowerment, and education, professionals can better support injured workers on their journey toward recovery and a return to meaningful work.

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the complexities of chronic pain and its impact on injured workers.
2. Learn how to address pain effectively in the return-to-work process by focusing on solutions rather than solely on pain symptoms.
3. Explore the differences between the biomedical and biopsychosocial models of pain management.
4. Recognize the importance of empathy and listening in supporting injured workers dealing with chronic pain.
5. Develop strategies to empower workers with chronic pain to regain control of their lives and return to meaningful work.

Primary Takeaways

1. Pain is a subjective experience processed in the brain, making it unique for each person. Understanding this individuality is key in addressing pain effectively.
2. Showing empathy without pity is crucial. Providing unconditional positive regard helps build trust with injured workers and supports their recovery journey.
3. While the biomedical model focuses on physical aspects of pain, the biopsychosocial model considers the mental, emotional, and social factors that influence pain and recovery.
4. Shifting the focus from pain levels to functional goals helps injured workers to move forward and regain a sense of purpose in their lives.

5. Educating injured workers about pain and its management empowers them to take control of their recovery, reducing fear and fostering a proactive approach to their condition.

Course Outline

- 1) Introduction to the Topic of Pain
 - a) Overview of Pain in Return-to-Work
 - i) Pain as an often-overlooked aspect of worker rehabilitation
 - ii) Importance of addressing pain in a holistic manner
 - b) Personal Experience of Chronic Pain
 - i) Becky's journey through injury and chronic pain
 - ii) The emotional impact of pain and the struggle for understanding
- 2) Pain and the Return-to-Work Process
 - a) Return-to-Work Expectations
 - i) Lack of early conversations about returning to work
 - ii) The role of functional restoration programs in recovery
 - b) Empowering Questions and Support
 - i) Importance of asking, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"
 - ii) Providing a support system and fostering hope for the future
- 3) The Biomedical vs. Biopsychosocial Models
 - a) Limitations of the Biomedical Model
 - i) Focus on physical symptoms without addressing psychological factors
 - ii) The need for a shift towards holistic treatment approaches
 - b) Embracing the Biopsychosocial Model
 - i) Addressing the mental, emotional, and social aspects of pain
 - ii) Examples of successful pain management through a holistic lens
- 4) Strategies for Pain Management
 - a) The Role of Acceptance and Normalization
 - i) Reducing fear and anxiety through acceptance
 - ii) Techniques for normalizing pain and shifting focus
 - b) Focusing on Function Over Pain
 - i) Moving away from pain scales in chronic pain management
 - ii) Encouraging activity and participation in life
- 5) Pain Education and Skills for Empowerment
 - a) Educating Workers About Pain

- i) Providing knowledge to reduce fear and promote self-management
- ii) The importance of listening and unconditional positive regard
- b) Motivational Interviewing
 - i) Using motivational interviewing to uncover worker goals and motivations
 - ii) Building a path toward small, achievable functional goals
- 6) Final Thoughts and Recommendations
 - a) Changing the Approach to Pain in Workers' Compensation
 - i) Importance of early intervention and support
 - ii) Advocating for a shift in the conversation around pain
 - b) Learning to Listen and Support Without Sympathy
 - i) The power of empathy in the healing process
 - ii) Encouraging workers to focus on life beyond pain

NOTE: Artificial Intelligence was used in the creation of this document.