

Clinician's Corner

Epilepsy and Employment

By Anne Barnwell, MS, CRC, CPRP, CBIS

In 2014 the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that unemployment for people with disabilities is twice the national average, a statistic which was the same 30 years ago. When we take into account qualitative research on what people with epilepsy want, we learn that employment is a top concern. Additionally, in 2014, the Epilepsy Foundation of Minnesota conducted a research based needs assessment that placed employment as one of the top concerns of their respondents. Additionally, a 2010 study of the University of Michigan's Center for Managing Chronic Disease reported "respondents emphasized the interconnectedness of under or unemployment with poverty, social isolation, mood disorders, reduced access to care, and inability to pay for treatments", a disappointing assessment at best. As a community what can we do about this disparity?

Employment rate improves when people with epilepsy have access to resources, information and support.

An article published in *Epilepsia* in 2014 reports the effects of an inpatient rehabilitation program after temporal lobe epilepsy surgery improved employment status. A 2006 study in the *Journal of Occupational Health* reported that when employees receive training in self advocacy (requesting workplace accommodations) their self confidence and sense of self-efficacy in work related situations help them stay in the workplace. A 2014 *Epilepsy Research* journal reported that when people have access to basic educational and vocational training, job search and placement assistance their employment outcomes improve significantly.

Individuals who have fewer seizures and fewer side-effects as a result of appropriate health care have better employment outcomes.

Appropriate health care includes the recognition of the common co-occurrence of psychiatric comorbidities and epilepsy. One in five adults diagnosed with seizure disorders has a clinically treatable mood disorder. Research supports the correlation between seizure control, management of depressive disorders and employment. The relationship between employment and mental health is so well accepted that national mental health rehabilitation programs include supported employment as a key component in evidence based treatment.

Effective education addresses both internal and external barriers to employment.

People with epilepsy who are not employed may have many misconceptions about personal employability including fear of harming self or others by returning to work, fear of discrimination in hiring at the workplace, fear of losing health coverage or financial benefits, and fear and shame about

disclosure to supervisors and coworkers. Research shows that addressing these beliefs has a positive impact on employment.

In addition to this, recent research shows that persistent negative beliefs of hiring professionals and managers that not only affect workers with epilepsy, but unfair treatment of parents who have children with epilepsy as well. In an article published in 2009 hypothetical parents of a child with epilepsy received fewer workplace rewards and greater workplace penalties than did employees with identical workplace productivity who had children with asthma or other conditions. Skill training in addressing disability questions in interviews and during employment has a statistically positive effect on hiring and job retention.

Let's work together to create a seizure smart economy; one in which having a seizure disorder is no longer a barrier to employment

As members of the epilepsy community we are obliged to move beyond the belief that the task is overwhelming. We can make positive change in the lives of many people with epilepsy by offering appropriate vocational programming and support. The Epilepsy Advocacy and Employment Group (EPAEG) provides education and coaching to help people deal with the thorniest aspects of epilepsy in the workplace. Group training and individual advocacy empowers people to challenge their own fears of employment related issues and possible discrimination and avoidance by coworkers and supervisors regarding possible seizures. Skill based training helps people seek appropriate support and workplace accommodations for managing challenges in transportation, scheduling, learning and training. EPAEG also provides employment support by helping individuals in the job search process with practical skills in identifying job leads, resume and employment interview preparation, funding resources for education and training, and managing a job search.

Other employment resources

Minnesota Association of Center for Independent Living macil.org

Minnesota Workforce Center

mn.gov/deed/job-seekers/workforce-centers/

Minnesota Vocational Rehabilitation Units, search by county, contact EFMN or EPAEG for more information.

Upcoming Event

Seize the Moment – Epilepsy and Employment Conference

May 16, 2015

Epilepsy and Employment Group is sponsoring a conference for health and human services workers, social workers and nurses who work with people who have epilepsy and seizures. Seize the Moment – Epilepsy and Employment® conference features important topics addressing seizure recognition and response, an Americans with Disabilities Act update, Advances in Epilepsy Treatment, Epilepsy's Impact on Employment and the ABLE Act, a new federal law that addresses financial issues of workers with

epilepsy and their families. Presenters include epileptologists, a disability law attorney and vocational rehabilitation and social services experts.

Conference information and reservations:

Location: Doubletree by Hilton, **Address:** 7800 Normandale Boulevard, Bloomington, MN

Time: 8:30 – 2:30pm **Cost:** FREE

CEU's available for nurses, teachers, social workers and rehabilitation counselors

<http://www.EPAEG.org>

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