

# **Improved expectations about length of sick leave during occupational rehabilitation is associated with increased work participation.**

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**Introduction:** Individuals' expectations about length of sick leave has repeatedly been associated with work outcomes, but it is not known whether changes during rehabilitation is associated with work participation. The aim of this study was to assess changes in participants' expectations about length of sick leave during occupational rehabilitation, and whether the change in expectations was associated with future work participation.

**Methods:** Cohort study with 9 months follow-up. Sick listed workers took part in one of two randomized controlled trials. Expectations about length of sick leave were assessed with the question "For how long do you believe you will be sick listed from today?" with 6 response options. We assessed change in expectations using a test of marginal homogeneity.

Furthermore, we used linear and logistic regression to evaluate associations between changes in expectations and sustainable return to work (RTW) and number of work participation days, respectively.

**Results:** During rehabilitation, there was a statistically significant improvement in participants' (n=168) expectations about length of sick leave. During 9 months follow-up, participants with consistently positive expectations had the highest probability of RTW (0.81,

95% CI 0.67-0.95) and the most work participation days (159, 95% CI 139-180). Participants with improved expectations had higher probability of sustainable RTW (0.68, 95% CI 0.50-0.87) and more work participation days (133, 95% CI 110-156) compared to those with reduced (probability of RTW: 0.50, 95% CI 0.22-0.77; workdays: 116, 95% CI 85-148), or consistently negative expectations (probability of RTW: 0.23, 95% CI 0.15-0.31; workdays: 93, 95% CI 82-103).

**Discussion and conclusion:** Expectations about length of sick leave is a strong predictor of RTW. This study suggest that it is possible to improve sick listed individuals' expectations during occupational rehabilitation and that this change is associated with increased work participation. Hence, patients' expectations about sick leave could be useful to assess in the clinic and in clinical trials.