



# EMPLOYMENT AND RECOVERY AMONG PEOPLE WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES

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MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK WEBINAR



# Who am I?

- Person with lived experience of mental health and substance use recovery
- A former caseworker for people with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities
- A proud former National Institute of Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research ARRT postdoctoral fellow in employment research
- Associate Research Scientist at Yale Program for Recovery and Community Health
- Recovery advocate



# What I'm going to talk about today

- Importance of work to all people and specifically those in recovery
- Changing nature of work and how it impacts mental health
- Why this matters for recovery
- Rethinking employment supports
- Takeaways & future directions



# Importance of Work

- Work serves important functions for all people:
  - Earning money
  - Structuring time
  - Social contact
  - Collective purpose
  - Status
  - Activity
- What do we really mean when we ask, ‘what do you do?’



# Work as central to recovery

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Financial importance, but also social and existential

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Important structural determinant of mental health

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Fundamental way of exercising citizenship

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# The Employment Paradox

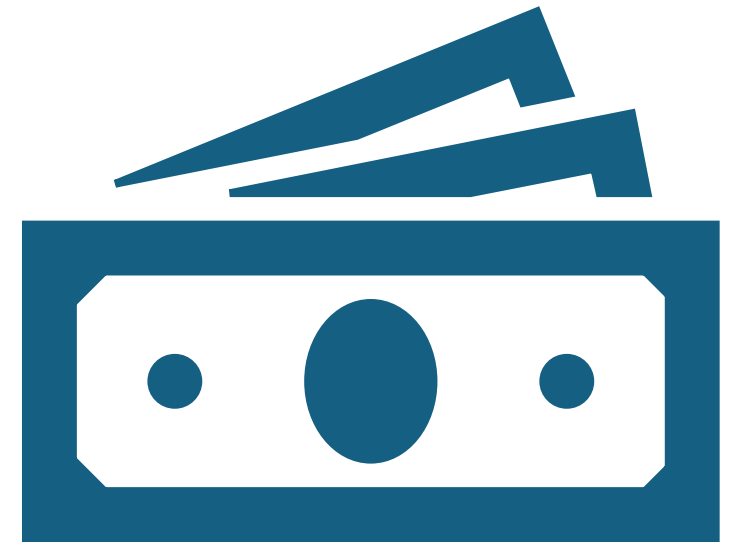
Most people with psychiatric disabilities want to work

Yet most of them are not working

Why?

# The benefits dilemma

- Work is encouraged
- Benefits provide essential security
- Losing benefits can be catastrophic
- People often face difficult tradeoffs





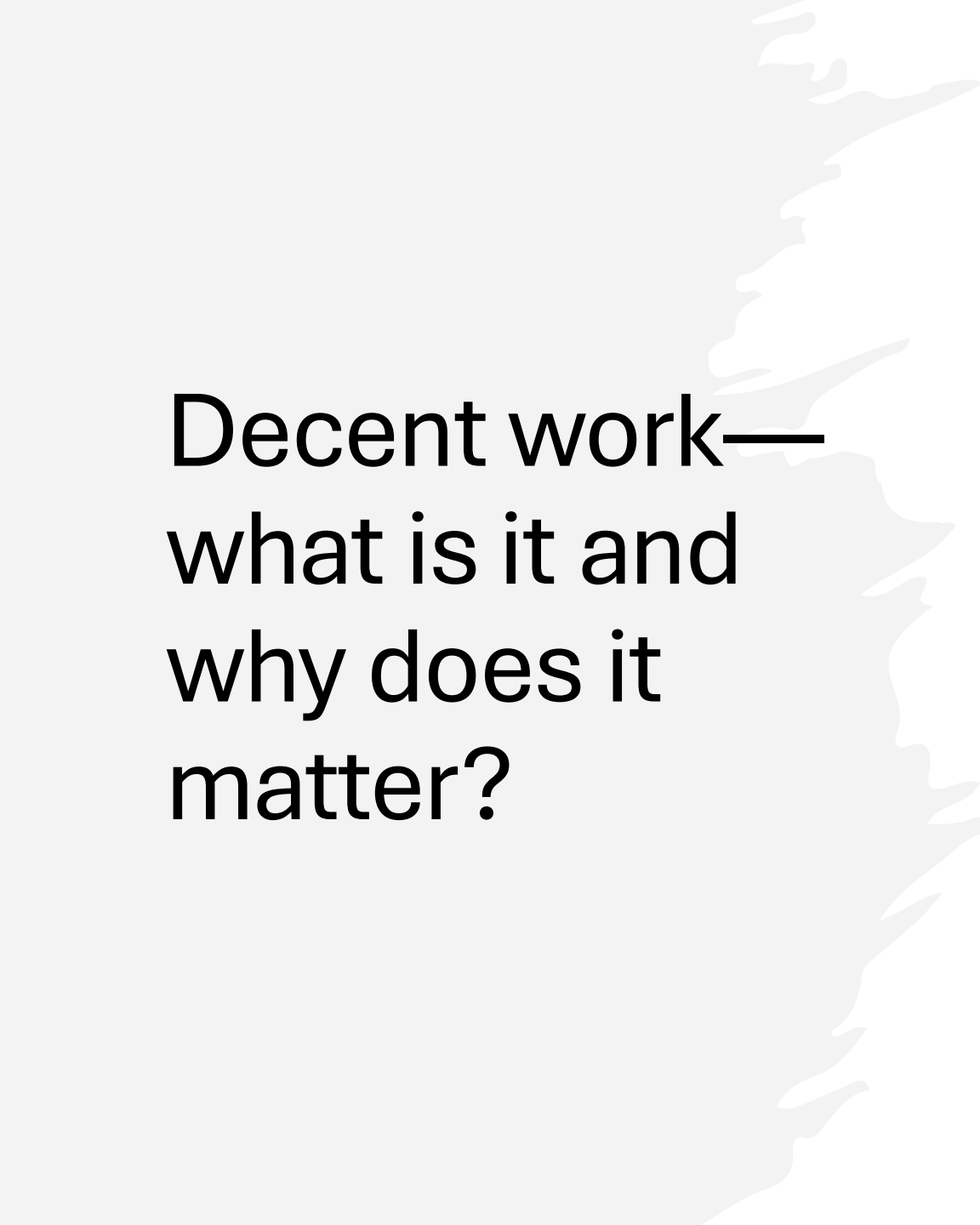
# The changing nature of work

Precarious employment situations are increasing, and linked to higher perceived stress among workers

Gig work is also increasing

Productivity culture

Burnout



# Decent work— what is it and why does it matter?

- Work that provides:
  1. Physically and psychologically safe working environment
  2. Adequate compensation
  3. Adequate rest and free time
  4. Organizational values that correspond with familial and social values
  5. Adequate health care
- Work that fits this description is hypothesized to be connected to improved mental and physical health by fulfilling survival needs, social contribution needs, and self-determination needs.

# Why decent work matters

Survival needs

Social connection

Self-determination

# Three types of work precarity

## Precarity OF work

- Unstable hours
- Temporary contracts
- Unpredictable income

## Precarity AT work

- Discrimination
- Bullying
- Unsafe environments

## Precarity FROM work

- Wages insufficient to meet basic needs

# Mental illness stigma at work

Fear of disclosure

Concerns about  
discrimination

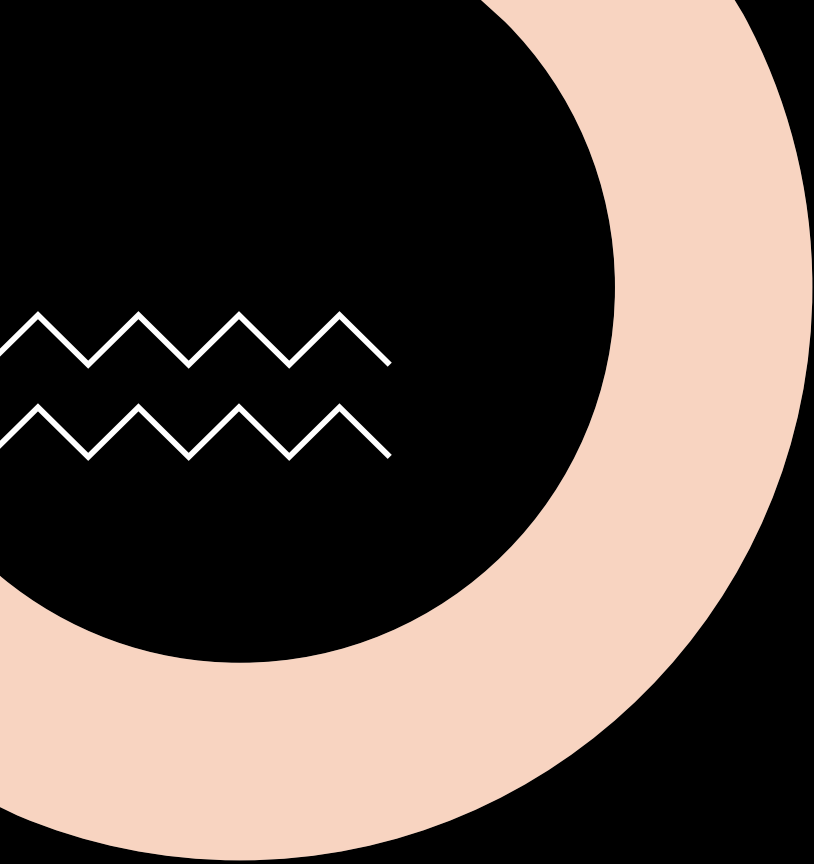
Internalized stigma

Challenges requesting  
accommodations

Pressure to mask

# Vocational services landscape

- Individualized placement and support
  1. Focused on competitive employment
  2. Zero exclusion policy
  3. Consideration of worker preferences
  4. Rapid job search
  5. Integration of vocational services with clinical services
  6. Systematic job development
  7. Benefits planning
  8. Time-unlimited services



IPS is evidence-based and effective, but...

- IPS has been shown to help people obtain competitive employment
- However, there is less evidence for improving quality of life and recovery outcomes
- Has not been successful at moving people out of poverty or off disability rolls
- We need broader outcome frameworks—job placement isn't enough



# Employment is not a binary outcome



## **Traditional question:**

Did they get a job?



## **Better questions:**

Is the work meaningful?

Is it sustainable?

Is it psychologically safe?

Does it support recovery?

Does it reduce poverty?

Does it improve quality of life?

# Recovery- supporting employment



Meaningful work



Sustainable



Flexible



Safe (psychologically and physically)



Adequately compensated



Aligned with personal goals



# Recovery-oriented employment supports

Accommodations

Individualized approaches

Benefit counseling

Time-unlimited support



# The role of employers & organizations

- Workplace culture matters
- Psychological safety matters
- Anti-stigma efforts matter
- Flexible policies matter
- Recovery-friendly supervision matters

# What should we measure?



## **Traditional outcome measures of vocational services:**

Employment status

Hours worked



## **Recovery-oriented measures:**

Quality of life

Meaningful participation

Community inclusion

Role satisfaction

Financial well-being

Goal attainment

# Future directions



## **For researchers**

Measure outcomes that are meaningful to service users!



## **For employers**

Create psychologically safe workplaces  
Address mental illness stigma in the workplace



## **For policymakers**

Address barriers to sustainable employment



## **For service systems**

Support career development in addition to job placement

# Key Takeaways

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Helping people get jobs is the floor. It is not the finish line.

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The goal is helping people to access work that supports recovery, dignity, financial stability, and meaningful participation in community life.