

Benefits and Mental Illness

There are two key problems concerning social security and mental illness, which, if solved, would hugely benefit both the DWP financially, and the people being supported by benefits.

The first problem is that, due to the way the benefits system operates, people with mental health issues have become terrified of returning to work. Returning to work means having their only source of income stopped, and should they suffer a relapse of their health problems, they must go back to square one, i.e. fill out a 62 page application form, attend capability for work assessments, exist without any income whatsoever while their application is being processed, and fret about whether their application will score enough points to meet the payment criteria for that benefit. People can be forced to go without food while this is happening, they can get evicted while this is happening. And all this is occurring right in the midst of a mental health relapse - a crisis. Can you imagine the strain this must put on people? The paralysing fear it must inspire? Can you blame anyone for clinging to their benefits and being frightened of returning to work when this is the way the social security system functions?

Now, imagine if these people were given a benefits safety net, whereby, for the first 12 months after returning to work, if someone with a history of mental illness should suffer a health relapse, the benefit they were receiving before they started work would immediately and with no questions asked be reinstated. How much more confidence would that give people, who might otherwise have remained on benefits for years, or even for the rest of their lives, to try going back to work? It's a simple idea, and a good idea, that makes financial sense for the DWP, and compassionate sense for all the people the DWP supports.

The second point concerns Permitted Work. If you don't know, Permitted Work is a rule whereby people receiving Employment Support Allowance may work for up to 15 hours per week, and still receive all of their benefits. It's a rule that's obviously designed to encourage people to try going back to work in a part-time capacity, so that they benefit the community, and in some cases develop the skills and confidence necessary to transition back into full-time employment.

And if that's the way the program functioned, it would be brilliant. A brilliant little incentive program. But it's not quite that simple, because what's happening in reality is that, when people with mental health issues have been taking advantage of this program, and submitting Permitted Work forms declaring this part-time work that they're engaging in, it's been resulting in people being suddenly and relentless targeted by the DWP, and being declared fit for work, and having their benefits

stopped. The supposed proof that they're fit to engage in full-time employment being the several hours of Permitted Work that they, in good faith, declared to the DWP.

This program is now being seen as a trap by many people on benefits, and rightly so. Instead of encouraging people to try a little part-time work, people have become justifiably paranoid about attempting any type or amount of work whatsoever. The only secure means of receiving an income, is to remain sick, and not get well, and never try any work. And so, as a result of this short-sighted, counter-productive, and covert tactic we've created an atmosphere where people have become frightened of getting well.

If you think people on benefits don't communicate with one another, you're mistaken. In this age of mass communication, when someone does permitted work, and then a fortnight later becomes the target of a benefits review, is suddenly declared fit for work regardless of what the doctors say, and has their benefits stopped, people do hear about these things. It does ripple out into the general population, through word of mouth, blogs, meetings, campaigns, films etc. etc.

So, we need to stop this insidious and disingenuous little tactic, by stopped whatever incentive program we're offering to DWP staff to get people off benefits as quickly as possible, by means foul or fair. And then we might have a social security system that does what it says on the tin.

How long it may take to re-establish trust is another matter. The damage already done may take years to repair. But we can and must begin right now to at least close these two open wounds in our benefits system, before we haemorrhage more money, and, create a breeding ground of fear, mistrust, and inactivity.