

Loss of employment or day activities can lead to loneliness and social isolation

## Impact of employment loss on people with intellectual disabilities during the covid-19 pandemic

Meaningful employment is important for people with intellectual disabilities. There is little research on the consequences of employment loss on the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. The Academic Collaborative Centre Living with an Intellectual Disability (AWVB, Tranzo, Tilburg University) studied the impact of loss of employment or access to day activity programs outside the home during the covid-19 pandemic.

### About the study

For the study, eight people with mild intellectual disabilities were interviewed once or twice. During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants experienced partial or complete loss of employment for an extended period. Interviews were qualitatively analyzed.

### Results

Three important interrelated themes emerged from the results:

Employment loss during the covid-19 pandemic caused people with intellectual disabilities to experience a lack of social contact and loneliness (theme 1). This led to feelings of restlessness within themselves and in interactions with others (theme 2). They also experienced difficulties maintaining their sense of self-worth (theme 3). The themes are explained in more details below..

#### 1. LACK OF SOCIAL CONTACT AND LONELINESS

Due to contact-restricting measures, lockdowns, and employment loss, people with intellectual disabilities experienced a prolonged lack of connection and contact with people in their lives. This resulted in social isolation and sometimes feelings of loneliness.

*“Then it really is all down to you, and it even gets to the point where you don’t want to go on anymore. You just go crazy inside, you get headaches and you get depressed.” – Nick*

#### 2. RESTLESSNESS WITHIN MYSELF AND IN CONTACT WITH OTHERS

Because of contact restrictions, lockdowns, and employ-



*The closure of the hospitality industry during the corona pandemic meant that many people were out of work for a long time.*

ment loss, people with intellectual disabilities had to rely more on themselves. They experienced a personal struggle. Prolonged social isolation and loneliness led to depressive feelings or negative thoughts. Some felt that their autonomous position in society was threatened by employment loss and contact-restricting measures. This could, for example, be related to stricter rules for people in residential facilities. Sometimes, they were also (re)confronted with the stigma of having an intellectual disability.

*(...) “In a facility, they see you as vulnerable. (...) At the start of the outbreak, you weren’t allowed any visitors, which I found really difficult. No one was allowed to come, for three months (...).” – Karin*

> Results (continue)

### 3. MAINTAINING MY SENSE OF SELF-WORTH

People with intellectual disabilities experienced difficulties in maintaining their sense of self-worth, as important aspects of their daily lives were no longer self-evident following loss of employment. They struggled with the uncertainty and unpredictability of this period and found it challenging to remain hopeful and to cope with days that felt empty and without purpose. In addition, they missed work-related opportunities to keep developing professionally (for example, they could no longer attend training) and to be meaningful to others (for example, due to lack of contact with customers).

*(...) "A standstill. The brakes are mostly on, I can keep moving but not a lot actually, (...) I do miss growing, continuing to grow, in the sense of learning all kinds of things and being allowed to make mistakes." – Olivier*

### Conclusion

The results of this study show the important value that people with intellectual disabilities attach to meaningful employment. Losing this employment, during a time of lockdowns and contact-restricting measures, can lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation for them. Affecting their well-being, mental health, and sense of participation in society. Therefore, it is important that people with intellectual disabilities have real opportunities to sustainably participate in meaningful employment and continue to do so during crisis periods, such as a pandemic.

### Recommendations

For healthcare professionals, policymakers, and potential employers, the following recommendations are important:

- Be aware of the negative impact that losing meaningful employment can have on the well-being of people with intellectual disabilities.
- Recognize the important role that work-related contacts have for people with intellectual disabilities and create opportunities for social interaction both on and off the work floor.
- Recognize that individuals with intellectual disabilities seek to have a meaningful impact on others and society and facilitate opportunities that allow them to achieve this.
- Give people with intellectual disabilities space to continue developing professionally.
- Draw lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to develop future strategies that enable people with intellectual disabilities to maintain access to employment..
- Be aware that collaboration (healthcare professionals, policymakers, and employers) is essential to create suitable jobs for people with intellectual disabilities. For example by:
  - Collaboratively invest in appropriate and accessible workplace support (job coaches, employee training).
  - Offering paid internships within companies, especially in sectors with high labor shortages.

This factsheet is based on the article [Long-term social restrictions and lack of work activities during the COVID-19 pandemic: impact on the daily lives of people with intellectual disabilities](#)

**Authors:** Moniek Voermans MSc (AWVB & Amarant), dr. Marieke den Boer (AWVB), prof. Ton Wilthagen (Public Governance, Tilburg University) and prof. dr. Petri Embregts (AWVB), 2021, Disability and Rehabilitation

**Want to know more?** Please contact Lucienne Heerkens, knowledge manager at the AWVB: [awvb@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:awvb@tilburguniversity.edu)

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