

Vocational Rehabilitation and Long COVID Updates: Implications for VR Professionals



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Objectives

By the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Have knowledge of Long COVID and its signs/symptoms
2. Understand how Long COVID qualifies as a disability per the ADA and Section 504
3. Analyze case studies and review processes for establishing eligibility for a person with Long COVID
4. Explore considerations regarding participants who have Long COVID and determine helpful evidence-based practices to provide services and support
5. Increase awareness of the various resources and tools to support VR counselors and individuals with disabilities who have long COVID

Let's quickly recap the last two years...

- Starting January 2020 – the world essentially shut down
- Significant impact
 - Minoritized populations
 - Persons with disabilities
- Compounded trauma
 - Stress, isolation, employment loss, political unrest

What is Long COVID?

- Short version
 - A multisystemic condition that presents for days, weeks, or months following an initial COVID-19 infection
 - Consists of a wide range of symptoms and can be episodic
 - CDC (20220) suggests that 1 in 13 adults in the U.S. have symptoms of long COVID
- Long Version
 - Long COVID – mini conference
 - [Understanding Long COVID: Implications for Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals](#)

Official Definition

“Long COVID is broadly defined as signs, symptoms, and conditions that continue or develop after initial COVID-19 or SARS-CoV-2 infection. The signs, symptoms, and conditions are present four weeks or more after the initial phase of infection; may be multisystemic; and may present with a relapsing– remitting pattern and progression or worsening over time, with the possibility of severe and life-threatening events even months or years after infection. Long COVID is not one condition. It represents many potentially overlapping entities, likely with different biological causes and different sets of risk factors and outcomes”

(Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.)

Long COVID impact on employment

- Significant impact on workforce
 - Public reports on the topic suggests between 10 to 35 million working age adults in America have Long COVID (Bach, 2022; Burns, 2022)
 - Bureau of Labor and Statistics reported 11 million job openings for December 2022 (EARN, 2023)

Long COVID as a Disability

- Short version
 - ADA definition – someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; who has a record of such impairment; and who is regarded as having such an impairment
 - “Substantially Limits” – broad term, but does not need to prevent or significantly restrict an individual performing a major life activity
- Long Version
 - [Long COVID: Under What Circumstances is it a Disability?](#)

Evidence-based practice

- Those based in theory or grounded in research
- Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling can be considered an evidence-based practice

Social Ecological Model

- Bronfenbrenner (1979)
- Ecological systems theory
- Model recognizes that health and wellbeing are influenced by multiple factors



Interventions

1. **Personal Factors:** Vocational rehabilitation counselors can provide individualized interventions based on the individual's specific symptoms and needs. This may include symptom management strategies such as pacing, energy conservation, and mindfulness techniques.
2. **Social Factors:** Vocational rehabilitation counselors can work with the individual's family, friends, and healthcare providers to create a support network. This may include education about Long Covid and its impact on daily activities and work, as well as strategies to manage symptoms in the workplace.
3. **Environmental Factors:** Vocational rehabilitation counselors can work with employers to create accommodations and modifications in the workplace to support individuals with Long Covid. This may include flexible work schedules, modified job duties, and ergonomic accommodations.
4. **Policy Factors:** Vocational rehabilitation counselors can advocate for policy changes to support individuals with Long Covid in the workplace. This may include advocating for increased access to healthcare services, disability accommodations, and job protections.

Case Study – Meet Sally

Sally is a 43-year-old, cisgender, heterosexual, Caucasian female seeking employment in the field of nursing. Sally lives in an urban cluster (2,500 to 5,000 people). She has been out of work for the past two years, but has previous experience working in an Intensive Neonatal Care Unit at the local hospital. June 2020, she tested positive for COVID-19 and quarantined for two weeks. After her quarantine, Sally went back to work; however experienced severe fatigue and brain fog. After about 6 months, Sally quit her job and is now seeking VR services because she is unsure how to re-enter the world of employment as she does not want to return to nursing.

How can VR support Sally?

- Sally tested positive for COVID-19 in June 2020
 - She currently experiences severe fatigue and brain fog
 - Both symptoms of Long COVID – persistent for months following initial positive COVID test
- Sally has experience in Nursing – but doesn't want to return
 - Transferable skills assessment
 - Functional capacity assessment
- Consultation with a medical professional – does Sally see her PCP?

Case Study – Meet Steve

Steve is a 21-year-old, recent college graduate. He graduated with a Bachelor's of Science in Computer Programming; however due to the COVID-19 pandemic he was not able to complete an internship to gain experience in the field. Steve never tested positive for COVID-19 and reports following all recommended guidelines (e.g., social distancing, vaccination, wearing a mask); however, for the past few weeks he has noticed a cough and difficulty breathing even doing the simplest of tasks (like walking down a hall) – he also indicates having frequent headaches and difficulty sleeping. He heard about VR through his Aunt Sally.

Considerations for Steve

- Though he never tested positive, it is possible that Steve had asymptomatic COVID.
 - Have COVID-19, but does not show symptoms
- There is currently no diagnostic criteria or medical test to diagnose an individual with Long COVID.
- How do his symptoms substantially limit his daily functioning or ability to perform work related tasks?

What role can VR play?

Vocational rehabilitation can play an important role in supporting individuals with Long COVID in returning to work and participating in meaningful activities

Potential Supports

1. Comprehensive assessment: Vocational rehabilitation providers should conduct a comprehensive assessment of the person's physical and mental health, functional abilities, and vocational interests and skills to develop an individualized plan for their rehabilitation.
2. Tailored interventions: Interventions should be tailored to the individual's specific needs and may include physical and occupational therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and vocational counseling and training.
3. Flexible work arrangements: Employers may need to offer flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work, modified duties, or telework, to accommodate the person's physical and cognitive limitations.
4. Collaborative approach: Collaboration between the person, their healthcare providers, and vocational rehabilitation providers is essential to ensure that the person receives coordinated care and support.
5. Ongoing support: Long COVID is a chronic condition, and individuals may require ongoing support and accommodations to maintain their employment and participation in daily life.

Assisting with Accommodation Requests

- Available resources
 - For employers:
 - [Supporting Employees with Long COVID: A guide for employers](#)
- Job Accommodation Network (JAN)
 - [Long COVID: Accommodation and Compliance](#)

Question and Answer

References

Bach, K. (2022, Aug 24). New data shows long Covid is keeping as many as 4 million people out of work. *Brookings*. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-data-shows-long-covid-is-keeping-as-many-as-4-million-people-out-of-work/>

Burns, A. (2022, Aug 1). What are the implications of Long COVID for employment and health coverage? *Kaiser Family Foundation*. Retrieved from: <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/what-are-the-implications-of-long-covid-for-employment-and-health-coverage/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). Long COVID or Post-COVID conditions. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/long-term-effects/index.html>

Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). What is long COVID? Retrieved from: <https://www.covid.gov/longcovid/definitions>

More references and Resources

- [Long COVID and Return to Work – What Works? A Position Paper from the Society of Occupational Medicine](#)
- [Supporting Employees with Long COVID: A Guide for Employers](#)
- [Long COVID under Section 504 and the IDEA: A Resource to Support Children, Students, Educators, Schools, Service Providers, and Families](#)
- [Rehabilitation Physicians and Counselors Share Their Experience of Working with COVID-19 Long-Haulers and the Challenges These Individuals May Face Returning to Work](#)

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