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Beyond the Physical Effects: Healing the Human

The more obvious focus of a Workers Comp case is to heal the physical injury and help the employee return to work as quickly as possible. If only it were that simple. The emotional trauma that frequently accompanies an injury can present unthought-of, multiple barriers in the return-to-work process. “Employers can accelerate their return-to-work programs, lower costs and improve employee morale in workers' compensation claims if they actively address accompanying psychological issues.”

It's a bold statement, but such was the opinion of experts at the annual conference for Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC).

[Risk & Insurance Magazine](#) reviewed the topic of “biopsychosocial” model for treatment in which biological, psychological and social factors are all taken into account during treatment. It is a treatment model gaining recognition in recent years. According to [Daniel Bruns](#), a health psychologist and president of Health Psychology Associates, “Serious illness or injury can cause depression or anxiety, which in turn can cause real physical symptoms and poor health behaviors. Because of this, among those with disabilities, psychiatric disorders are common. The whole point to the biopsychosocial model is to reduce workers comp costs.” When an employee is injured, it is probably safe to say that an employer would not hesitate to send the employee to a physician for treatment. But it seems there is often a degree of reluctance to have the employee receive psychological assessment for fear of opening themselves up to a host of psychological complications, ultimately increasing costs. Quite to the contrary, if those psychological issues exist, that ship has already sailed and those issues will slow the return-to-work process if not addressed swiftly.

When out of the normal day-to-day activity and exposure to the work environment, the injured employee may begin to doubt their ability to be able to work. This is an issue that most people can relate to and understand, although many may not realize the seriousness of the impact it has on the overall healing process. In addition to those fears, [Behavioral Medicine Associates](#) lists these behavioral issues that may require treatment. Some of these include “fear, stress, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder - PTSD, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, and specific phobias, depression, sleep disorders, adjustment

disorders, anger issues, psychosocial problems, relationship issues, caregiver distress, difficulty coping with disability, injury and chronic pain and problems dealing with loss and grief.”

Clearly there is nothing simple about this. The “biopsychosocial” model referenced earlier has shown positive results when used in chronic pain cases. In a study outlined by [Physician Best Practices](#), the following Demonstrated Outcomes were presented:

- 25% Decreased Work Disability Durations (Average 6 weeks shorter)
- 9% less Physiotherapy
- 10% less Imaging
- 14% less Specialist consult
- 13% less Injections(blocks)
- 6% less Surgery

The numbers may show some significance. They help express the need for a big-picture, heal the whole human, approach to workers’ comp claims. The impact of a work-related injury can be life altering for employees and their loved ones. It’s important to identify all potential issues as quickly as possible before they manifest themselves into more complicated, avoidable issues.

Sources:

[Behavioral Medicine Associates, Workers’ Comp Psychologist in New York.](#)

[Physician Best Practices, Best Practices Insight, Early Intervention in Psychological Factors that Delay Recovery.](#)

[RiskandInsurance.com, Behavioral Strategies for Disability Management Success.](#)