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Episode 31: Peer Mentoring and Employment
Released Sept. 9, 2025

SHARON PARMET, HOST:
Welcome to [INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror/projects/inside-outcomes-rehabilitation-research-podcast). On this episode, we'll be talking about peer mentoring as it relates to employment. Today, we'll be joined by [Dr. Linda Ehrlich-Jones](https://www.sralab.org/researchers/linda-ehrlich-jones), Associate Director of the [Center for Rehabilitation Outcomes Research](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror) at [Shirley Ryan AbilityLab](https://www.sralab.org/).

She's just published a [paper](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09638288.2025.2463616) about factors that go into successful peer mentoring programs that focus on employment. We're also joined by Rob Kozarek, a longtime peer mentor in the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab [LIFE Center](https://www.sralab.org/lifecenter). Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Ehrlich-Jones and Rob.

My first question is to Dr. Ehrlich-Jones. Can you give a description of what peer mentoring is and how employment might fit into peer mentoring?

DR. EHRLICH-JONES:

So in general, if you think about mentoring, you usually have two people. Sometimes you have a group with another person. And peer mentoring basically, is people, as you mentioned earlier, who have similar experience, whether it's a diagnosis, whether it's some kind of traumatic experience, or some kind of disability that may be a result of the above.

But in terms of peer mentoring and employment, it's having someone who's had experience, who has the same or similar characteristics, but then is actually able to work. And the person that they're mentoring has that interest in either going back to work or starting a job or things along those lines. And so getting that kind of support from someone who's been through that experience, I think can be very helpful.

SHARON:

So I know that at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, the peer mentor program is through the LIFE Center. Can you kind of talk about what the LIFE Center is?

DR. EHRLICH-JONES:

Sure. So at the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, there is the LIFE Center. And LIFE stands for Learning, Innovation, Family, and Empowerment.

And there are a lot of resources for patients and patients' families, although they also provide a lot of resources for our staff as well. And there's information about diseases and treatments and diagnoses and things along those lines that you wouldn't find maybe in your regular library in your neighborhood. So it's very helpful.

There are education managers there that also provide support to individuals that come by the LIFE Center. The peer mentoring program has been around for quite a while. Lisa Rosen was involved in that while she was here. And Cris Mix, who is here right now as an occupational therapist and an education program manager, is responsible for the peer mentoring program and does training with the peer mentors. And we had been in contact with her when we had this [grant](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/Disability-Employment) from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research for employment for people with physical disabilities, and asked if there was a way that we could contribute to the peer mentoring program in terms of talking about employment and helping the peer mentors during their training to learn how to help others in terms of the ability to have employment after their injury.

SHARON:

And Rob, can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and your experience as a peer mentor at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab?

**ROB:**
So yeah, I'm Rob. I'm a T4 paraplegic. I was hurt in July of 2006. So at the time of this recording, just shy of 19 years.

Now, when it came to experiencing, you know, experiencing my injury when I first got hurt, I realized that I didn't get a whole lot of the education that I was kind of thirsting for. But, you know, in the time that I got hurt until the time that I actually started working with the LIFE Center, I was able to connect with a lot of people with disabilities, a lot of people in the community, and learn a lot of things kind of piecemeal.

You know, I've been lucky enough to have gone to college, gotten a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees, as well as experienced a lot of other life events, marriage, building a house, and then also getting involved with employment. So when I when I first actually, I ended up moving to Chicago in 2016. And I wanted to use that knowledge that I've gotten from other people as a way to help support people that have gone through what I went through when I first got hurt and provide that information that I was kind of thirsting for when I first got hurt.

And I found out about the LIFE Center, through a friend of mine, and the opportunity to peer mentor people that have recently been injured, or recently acquired a disability, talk to not only them, but also their families, and work through a lot of worry that they might have, a lot of questions they might have, and kind of work through what my experience has been to help them kind of troubleshoot a lot of these issues that they've that they've experienced. And so I found I through my experience with the LIFE Center, I found that there are a number of people that that have very similar interests and also worries when they first acquire a disability. Almost always, it's going to be whether they can go back to school, go back to work, how they can interact with their families, again, that sort of thing.

But employment, especially, is one of the is one of the topics that always comes up. And it’s a very encompassing moment. It’s something that people want to want to address because not only does it go into being able to, you know, go back to something that they've been working at for years and years, but also go back to a feeling of normalcy. And that's something that people are always looking for, it’s to get back to a sense of being normal, a sense of being what they were prior to connecting what they were prior to what their injury to what they are now.

And, you know, through a lot of these experiences, we were able to work through a lot of the questions, work through a lot of issues that they might encounter, and find ways to overcome any kind of obstacle that they may come to. So it's been a very wonderful experience working with a lot of these, a lot of these peers, getting to know more about themselves, more about who they are, and using that information to help guide them through this employment jungle.

DR. EHRLICH-JONES:
I just wanted to say how important Rob's work is, because it is so important to have someone that looks like them, has been through similar experiences and come out the other end, and as successful as you are, Rob, that's a wonderful feeling to know that it's possible.

You know, there's hope and things along those lines. And that's not something like someone like me can instill in someone, because I have not experienced that. And I think that's the most important part of the peer mentoring experience is that you share that experience, and that you're able to give that person the hope that they may really want to hear.

ROB:
I appreciate that, too. It's also, you know, something that something that's done on paper is not always the way that it works in certain ways, too. So it's always it's always nice to have someone go through it first to see what is actually there versus what's being said, too. So I appreciate you saying that. Thank you so much, Linda.

SHARON:
So, Dr. Ehrlich-Jones, you've recently published a [paper](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09638288.2025.2463616) about employment and peer mentoring. Can you tell us a little bit more about the paper and why you looked at employment when it comes to peer mentoring?

DR. EHRLICH-JONES:
So one of the things that we noticed when the start of this grant from the National Institute on Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research, or NIDILRR, we had a grant for a Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on employment for people with physical disabilities. And one of the things we noted is that the peer mentors were not necessarily having an opportunity to talk about employment because many of them hadn't been employed. So they didn't know what it was like to be able to explain to somebody how to go back to work or how either they didn't go back to work or had never been to work. Maybe they were injured as teenagers.

And so we started looking into what was in the literature to see what we could do to help in terms of providing more information about employment. And over that five plus years of that grant, things changed a lot. People like Rob came along and other people that had been working or going back to work. And so it was a great opportunity for us, though, to see that there really wasn't a lot of information out in the literature about this.

There were a total of eight articles for this systematic review because most everything else didn't fit with the issues that we were looking at, which was really people with disabilities, people who were peer mentors, and people who were supporting employment for others. And actually, many of the studies were not done in the United States. They were done in Canada. They were done in Australia. There were a few done in California.

And there were a variety of ways in which peer mentoring was utilized. Some were face to face. Some of it was over the phone. Some of it was over online. And so they gave a lot of different examples. But it was hard because there were so few studies to make any generalized outcomes for that, other than that it did appear that peer mentors were able to help people in terms of this success that they wanted to in terms of going forward.

So one of the things that we also provided to the peer mentors at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab was what we did for that grant for other pieces of the grant, not just this paper, but what other kinds of outcomes that we were able to produce. There was a project looking at providing [telehealth cognitive behavioral therapy for people who have severe pain](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/Disability-Employment/projects/efficacy-telehealth-pain-self-management-intervention-employed-adults-physical-disability-randomized) and were having difficulty going back to work. That was very successful by our colleague Dawn Ehde at University of Washington. And then a [decision aid](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/Disability-Employment/projects/decision-support-reasonable-accommodation-requests) to help people look at how they could ask for accommodations for their job when they were looking for a job or once they had a job. And this decision aid put together by our colleague Mark Harniss at the University of Washington.

So it was an opportunity to share those results that we had as well with the peer mentoring group so that we could see what other kinds of things in the future we would be interested in working on in relation to employment.

SHARON:
So what were some of the findings that came out of it and how will those contribute to the development of an employment focused peer mentoring training?

DR. EHRLICH-JONES:
So it really kind of showed that not only was it helpful to have peer mentors, but to have that synergy between peer mentors and rehabilitation professionals. So like vocational rehabilitation counselors or rehabilitation counselors, that they were able to work together to help people in terms of finding a job or going back to a job.

The other pieces that we found were that most of them were programs that had some kind of structured activities. It wasn't just like, oh just call whomever whenever you need some help. But there were actual activities that were put together and making it sort of a meaningful experience for both people that were part of that peer mentoring team.

I think that in the future it would be nice to see more literature out there in terms of looking at this. We looked at adults or at least people who were older, maybe teens. But there also were some things that were in the literature

which we didn't include that were for younger people looking at maintaining school, going to school and maybe going on further.

So those I think were the main highlights and really kind of getting some ideas about what you could do to put together a specific curriculum based on what these different programs were. As I said with the different mediums that they used and the different length of time that they had people working one-on-one or working in a work-based model.

SHARON:
Rob, can you tell us a little bit more about your experience specifically with employment and peer mentoring and what you think are the factors that go into a successful peer mentoring relationship when it comes to employment topics?

ROB:
Yeah, absolutely.

Building a bridge of trust is going to be something that is going to be invaluable to create a discussion to not only allow the information that you pass to the peer being accepted, but also so that they are able to share with you what their desires, what their true goals are, and a lot of people keep those guarded especially when you're early on in your recovery.

You know, when it comes to these peer mentoring meetings, employment is never going to be the first thing that people talk about and there's a reason for that. The reason being that, you know, at least from my perspective, a lot of people want to test the waters, and they want to make sure that what you're providing is going to be valuable to them. People that are able-bodied, people with disabilities, they always are, at least in our society today, it's one of those things that people take a lot of pride in and that they keep guarded and they can be a little embarrassed if it derails and disability can be seen as a big derailer of employment and so it's very understandable that that's never the first thing that comes out. However, that being said, when it does come out, those are some of the more meaningful conversations that I do have. Largely because a lot of people coming into this world are disproportionately working physical labor jobs.

A lot of them are providing, they're sole providers for families and they want to make sure that they can either go back to something that they were doing before or find something new so that they can, you know, continue on providing and being a contributing member of society, which is, those are all goals that the majority of people that I talk to have.

You know, when it comes to people that are looking to get back into their own job, a job that may be less physical, more an office-based role or something along those lines, those are conversations that are a little bit less nuanced, I would say. They tend to be, you know, what did you do to get back into your role? Or, what did you have to do in order to get to what you're doing? And for me, my conversations are always really funny because for me, my background is very eclectic.

I have an English degree as well as a Master of Public Health and then also a MBA and now I work for a, I do medical device sales. And so what I tell them is that this is an amazing environment for innovation. And it's going to be something that could be a really great experience for you to build something on your own or to fit your experiences to align with something that's already out there.

And that can look like a number of different things that could be, you know, either working with, using your background and your perspective to work in the public or private sector. There's always, the federal government's always looking to hire people, and you can use your experiences to adjust accordingly to that way or in that, to what your goals are in that regard.

Now, the more interesting and nuanced conversations I have are going to be those that are, that were in physical jobs before and want to go back to doing something like that after their disability. And that could be farming, it could be construction, and any number of those things, truck driving, that sort of thing. Now, what that looks like is that things will be different. You know, there's going to be some changes that need to happen in order to get back to something that's going to be more aligned with what they're looking for.

However, like I was saying, this is an excellent area for innovation. You know, this is something that you're going to have to look at and see if there's an, there's might be an area that is underserved that might not necessarily be as physical, but would be providing services to be aligned with that physicality. One example that I recently heard about was someone was disabled working in construction and they wanted to get back into construction and someone recommended getting into machinery cleaning, setting up a that would clean the drill bits and things like that, but doesn't require you to be physically standing and things like that.

So it requires a little bit of critical thinking and ways in which to look at it. But also my encouragement to my peers is always that technology is always going to be on your side. We're in an area of technological revolution. And if you want to get back into either physical or non-physical roles, there are ways in which you can do that by using your technology and using your voice to make sure that that happens.

And that gets my last point is that kind of alluding to what Linda was saying, is that a lot of these peers really don't know what to ask and what kind of accommodations that they need. So being able to, before you get back into the get back into a working role, sitting down, writing down, figuring out exactly what you need and how to voice that to future employers or your current employer is going to be something that is going to be extremely important as you navigate this kind of new normal and work not only on yourself, work not only to get yourself back into, into the workforce, but also helping educate your employers as to what they need to do in order to make sure that that happens, because that is something that they have to do for you. And that is, and you have a lot of different laws on your side to make sure that that happens.

One last thing I want to plug though too, vocational rehab is something that I was never informed about until I was already through my bachelor's degree, but vocational rehab is there to help you get back into the workforce. And that can look like a number of different things that could help you. That could pay for a car to get back to work, or it could look at paying for a degree, paying for books, things of that nature. These things, these are critical resources that everyone is entitled to and should be used, utilized, and, and, honestly known about from the onset of, of their disability, because it's something that will help you get back into the workforce and is incredibly important to do so.

SHARON:
It sounds like peer mentoring, maybe the core of it is not only sharing your experience, but it's an opportunity to let people know about things that they never knew about before and don't know how to ask about.

ROB:
This is one thing that I wish I had known about before I even started school, before I had left inpatient. But I never knew about it until I was, you know, an off-hand comment from one of my friends.

SHARON:
Well, thank you both for being on this episode. And I will link Dr. Ehrlich-Jones's paper. So thanks again to both of you for being on the podcast.

 This has been [INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror/projects/inside-outcomes-rehabilitation-research-podcast). This podcast is supported by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research.

This is your host, Sharon Parmet, signing off.