



# Rebecca Rengo On Presenteeism

Transcript of Interview

**Linda:** Hello everybody, this is Linda Binns and I am here with another expert interview, and today I'm delighted to be interviewing Rebecca Rengo, and Rebecca is well known as an expert with Presenteeism in healthcare. She speaks from experience because she's worked in healthcare for 28 years. Rebecca has a Masters in Social Work and a Master of Arts in Public Administration, both from the Ohio State University. She was on Faculty at Washington University School of Medicine, Neurology Department, and at the St. Louis University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry. Rebecca has worked in a variety of settings, including Long-Term Care, Home Health, Hospice, Hospitals and Private Practice.

Rebecca has published several articles and has authored a book called *Beyond Chronic Pain: A Get Well Guidebook to Soothe the Body, Mind and Spirit*. Rebecca currently consults and coaches with individuals, and is launching a new Presenteeism Program for the healthcare system. So welcome Rebecca, I'm looking forward to learning more about this.

**Rebecca:** Thank you Linda, I'm glad to be here.

**Linda:** Well, first of all, what is Presenteeism? It's quite a new term I think.

**Rebecca:** It is a new term. It was coined in 2002 so it's only 7 years old, and it means that people are present in the work force, so they're showing up work, but they're functionally absent. They're not producing like they're capable of producing. It can be taking more time to complete a task; having a lower quality of work; impaired functioning; lowered performance; not completing the quantity of work that they're capable of; impaired functioning with their co-workers, so they're having behavioral problems and more arguments and not getting along well with supervisors or co-workers at work and just overall decreased motivation. And the places where presenteeism are highest are education and healthcare.

**Linda:** Really? Now that sounds pretty serious, so what actually causes presenteeism?

Rebecca: Presenteeism is caused by a number of different factors and that's what can make it so complex to kind of get a handle on, but the American Productivity Audit is well known for conducting wide scale research into it and they have come up with the 5 most common reasons. And these are: headache and backache; cold and flu; fatigue and depression; digestive problems; and arthritis. And out of these, depression is the major cause. And out of other surveys as well chronic pain, depression and stress in one way or another, whether it's added in with depression or a separate category, are always really prominent health problems and concerns that cause presenteeism.

Depression impacts presenteeism more than any other area because it decreases your ability to focus. It can cause serious health problems and relationship issues with co-worker. It's estimated that up to 1 out of 5 people are depressed in the work force and it can account for up to 2 lost hours of productivity every day when someone is depressed. One of the problems is that the overwhelming majority of people never seek help for their depression, and in fact most people don't even realize when they're depressed. They just think that's how they always feel or that's a normal way to feel, and there are a number of reasons for that, but overwhelmingly people are unaware when they're depressed and don't seek treatment or don't want treatment. They think maybe medication is their only option and don't realize that there are other options for it. So they're going primarily unrecognized and invisible, and in healthcare with just nurses alone two thirds of nurses with depression never seek any treatment.

And then stress is another significant factor, and as I said, stress is sometimes kind of categorized with depression and it's sometimes a separate factor. Stress is really a component of anxiety and depression and anxiety have very high co-morbid levels of existence, that one triggers another. And in this economy the stress levels have risen dramatically because people are so concerned about their money and finances and whether they're going to have a job or not, and then we have ongoing stress issues.

And what I find really interesting is that when people talk about stress a lot of people attribute stress to their job or their work environment but the presenteeism research has found that most people who are stressed at work are also stressed at home. And it's hard for people to compartmentalize stress from work and home so it's obvious that one would spill over into another one and there's a whole seminar's worth of material on what different stressors people are facing today. Just some real common ones would be elder care issues, and then frequently the sandwich generation also has child care issues at the same time. And nursing is really hit hard with this sandwich generation complex because the average nurse's age on the floor is 49 years old and so there's a lot of different kinds of stress that they're facing on top of the stressful job that they're already performing. And so stress is really a significant factor, and the last one that I really like to focus on is chronic pain, and out of the conditions that I just went over from that survey, headache, back pain, digestive problems and arthritis can all be chronic pain conditions. So chronic pain is really increasing in the work force. It's estimated that over 52% of all employees suffer from those 5 conditions that the survey found is so prevalent for presenteeism. And so this is rampant.

And chronic pain is another one that I do give all day seminars on, and it's a very complex disorder. There's a lot of stigma with chronic pain, so that people frequently like to remain invisible not to draw attention to themselves. And it's difficult for people to know how to cope with chronic pain in ways that they can function better.

So in kind of a, that was a long nutshell, that's kind of a nutshell of what the presenting problems are that cause presenteeism.

**Linda:** Wow, that's quite a range, and presumably if somebody has chronic pain that can create the depression as well, if that wasn't there initially.

**Rebecca:** Oh absolutely. People who have chronic pain have a 3 times higher rate for depression than people without chronic pain and so it becomes a downward cycle, where it's hard sometimes to even know what started first because depression and

chronic pain are both bio psycho social experiences. They both have a physical and emotional component to them and so one can easily trigger the next. They have presenting symptoms. They both can present with changes in sleep, appetite, relationship problems, loss of interest in sex, all sorts of cognitive issues with thinking and concentrating and so they present as very similar and they're processed in the same region of the brain, the limbic area of the brain, and once you have unrelieved or unmanaged chronic pain it actually causes a rewiring in the brain in the area where emotions are processed and that can increase kind of a stuck cycle with depression and chronic pain. And this downward cycle can be very hard for people to get out of unless they are kind of guided on how to do that and know what to do.

**Linda:** Wow. So, since this is so prevalent, why doesn't everybody know about this?

**Rebecca:** That's a great question. It's largely invisible. The conditions that I just talked about are invisible. People might suspect when somebody is depressed or has significant chronic pain issues only when they're very extreme. And most people don't talk about those issues because they don't want to be singled out, you know, to be looked over for promotions or bonuses, or maybe to lose their job in this uncertain time, or they don't want to be stigmatized. There are all sorts of reasons why people like to stay invisible. And the types of problems that cause presenteeism aren't seen in claims data audits. People aren't going on disability in large numbers. There are people who do go on disability with those conditions, especially back pain, but a number of people suffer with back pain and still work. They also aren't targeted by disease management programs. And so wellness programs are becoming more popular in corporations and all sectors really, healthcare as well, but they tend to focus on issues like diabetes and heart problems, and things that can also impact productivity at work, but they're not getting at the core issues, which are those 5 presenting problems. And so it remains really invisible.

Another reason is that the decision makers, the CFO's and the CEO's don't know about it. People don't tend to monitor for presenteeism, a lot of corporations don't know how to assess for it, and if they are aware that it's an issue, then they don't know what to do about it. And so it really is a hidden problem right now, and in healthcare, I've called it the elephant in the middle of the healthcare system, because it's causing all sorts of problems with safety issues, financial costs, morale, turnover issues, and there's constant nursing shortages as it is. And so this really is a big elephant in the middle of the room that people aren't addressing.

**Linda:** Well, and you said that it affects health and education even more than anywhere else?

**Rebecca:** Right. Health and education are the most affected. In healthcare and in education both there's low replace-ability of a person and so, when they don't feel well they're likely to still come in. But the root cause of that is even bigger, because for presenteeism issues, you know cold and flu are one piece of it, but the bigger piece is the depression, the stress and the chronic pain conditions.

Nurses have very high levels of chronic pain because they have to pull people up in bed and transfer people, and they pull on their arm and their back, and so back and arm pain are very, very common among nurses. One nurse that I interviewed recently for an article told me she estimated that up to 60% of her nurse co-workers had some kind of arm or back pain. So it's very problematic. And then when you have stress levels with trying to do more with less, because of the current economy and cutbacks, this can really cause a lot of internal conflict and nurses as a group tend to go into nursing in high levels because they really want to help people, and they really care about helping people. And then when they're put in a situation where there are staffing shortages and not adequate supplies, and they don't have the means they feel to provide the kind of care they went into nursing to provide, that really causes an internal conflict that can create a lot of stress for them to manage.

So there are a lot of problems inherent in healthcare, and then you layer that with all of the societal problems of stress at home and depression and anxiety, and other chronic pain issues which frequently occur, then nurses are really at high risk. And it's not just nurses, although nurses are one of the highest groups in healthcare, but it really affects everyone working in healthcare. There's also been a lot of research on physicians, social workers and anyone working within the healthcare system.

**Linda:** Well, you have a lot of experience of working with chronic pain, so why are you personally interested in presenteeism and decided to get involved with that?

**Rebecca:** Well I've actually been in healthcare for about 28 years, and in the beginning of my career I really focused heavily on helping a lot of people with sandwich generation issues. And the caregivers and the stress issues that go along with that. And because of my academic background at Washington University and St. Louis University, I've always worked a lot with physicians and CEO's and nurse practitioners and department heads, people who are in healthcare, and so I know all the stress that they have been going through and have spent my life working with them and observing what they're going through as well. And then I've also had a lot of chronic pain and depression and traumas in my life and I've worked all through them. I never was able to take time off for any type of a medical leave, and so I know what it's like to show up when you're dealing with those issues and to try to make it through the day at work. And I can guarantee that no-one ever knew what I was going through, and that you really do learn how to remain invisible so that no-one ever suspects it. So I really have a personal issue, as well as a professional issue in helping people in healthcare. That's really been my driving motivator in becoming an expert with presenteeism.

**Linda:** Is there anything out there? Is there anything that's being done to help with this issue right now?

**Rebecca:** Well right now there's a hodge podge of efforts that are being done and they're really on a small scale and kind of spattered around, and so different programs

are getting at different pieces of it. And so some locations might have some on-site education. There's a little bit of on-line education. Some places use personal health coaching. Actually in the corporate sector that's becoming more popular. And that's really been geared more for obesity and quitting smoking, which can be very important. Anything that's being done is very helpful and beneficial, but it's just not getting at that core, you know the core issues of chronic pain, stress and depression.

Wellness programs are very popular now and they tend to also focus on weight and fitness. And there's more education and wellness programs, but again not really geared towards these issues. And one of the kind of complicating factors is that if somebody has chronic pain and they do engage in an exercise program that's not geared for them with their back pain, for example, or arthritis, that can actually aggravate their pain and they can become less functioning as a result of the intervention that was meant to help them.

And so, without an understanding of these core issues a lot of programs are very well-meaning and very beneficial, just not for this core group that we're trying to get at with presenteeism. And then some corporations have even gone so far as to set up on-site daycare centers, or banking, or elder care programs to try to get at the stress issues, but again, that's really beneficial for the people that it helps but it's only getting at whatever people happen to have that presenting issue. If you are having a problem finding daycare for your child then, you know, a daycare center might be just what you need, but if you don't need that, then that's not really going to address that issue. And so the stress itself becomes more of an underlying issue and these are more of the kind of band-aid efforts to try to help with that.

They all show benefit, like I said, and I think that what's so promising is that research shows really good benefits from any of these efforts, so if anybody is doing anything, that's a step in the right direction. I just see where more could be done in a more targeted, systemic fashion.

**Linda:** And so what are you doing around all of this Rebecca?

**Rebecca:** Well I've been extensively researching presenteeism for the last few years to really get a good handle on it. And what I've done is I've looked at research from many different areas. So I've looked at medicine and nursing, psychology, social work, business, occupational safety, anywhere that I can see anything that's written up about it. And it's interesting to look at the similarities and differences in the different research approaches and possible solutions that they all come up with. So I see some overlap and some differences. And I also see pieces of the puzzle that fit together. So if you're only looking at psychology research, you're missing a piece that you might find in business research, for example and vice versa. I think it's been really helpful to look at all these different pieces and ways that they can all fit together to make a more comprehensive whole on how to really intervene.

The amount of research that's out there is just phenomenal. It's really overwhelming, and so I can understand why a lot of people haven't looked at all of it because it's really just so much to sort through. But I've been really fascinated by all these different disciplines, because of my own history in working in many of those areas and then my own background too in working in all of the different areas and having my own chronic pain and personal traumas, kind of have given me a perspective too on how to interpret the different literature and what it can mean. And so right now I'm putting together a unique program that's going to get at the core issues of presenteeism and how they can be addressed in a way that will really be systemic and thorough and help this problem. Not only for the bottom line, which will increase sustainability, and is very important and often a driver for the decision makers who are looking at this issue. And just as important, if not more, is the actual morale and well-being of the employee.

So I'm looking forward to launching this new program in the next couple of months. I'm putting some final touches together now and I hope that we can do a follow-up interview once I've launched it and ready to share the details of it.

**Linda:** Oh definitely. I think this is information that definitely needs to be out there and it really seems like although there are several things that are being done, what you're actually doing is taking an overview of everything and then really getting to the root cause of the problem.

**Rebecca:** Right. Exactly. And I understand that because depression, stress and chronic pain are such complex subjects, it's been difficult to approach them. But there are effective ways to do that if you really understand each of them and how they fit together and what the most effective ways to do that are.

**Linda:** And so if somebody wanted to contact you to find out more about this program that you're putting on or to find out more information, how could they do that?

**Rebecca:** Well, I'm available by e-mail any time: [Rebecca@BeyondChronicPain.com](mailto:Rebecca@BeyondChronicPain.com) and also by phone, and my phone number is: 636-300-3948, and I have a toll free number: 866-934-5065. And I would be happy to answer any questions that anyone has or if they're interested in this field to share, as well as to discuss further ways that I could help them.

**Linda:** Well that's wonderful, and thank you so much for sharing that great information, and I really do look forward to doing a follow-up with you once you've got your program completed to share more information with people.

**Rebecca:** Thank you so much Linda, I really appreciate it.

### **Contact Information:**

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