

# Empowerment and *change*

*Occupational therapist Joanne Park and University of Alberta physical therapy professor Doug Gross took the concept of motivational interviewing and applied it within the workers' compensation system for "groundbreaking" results.*

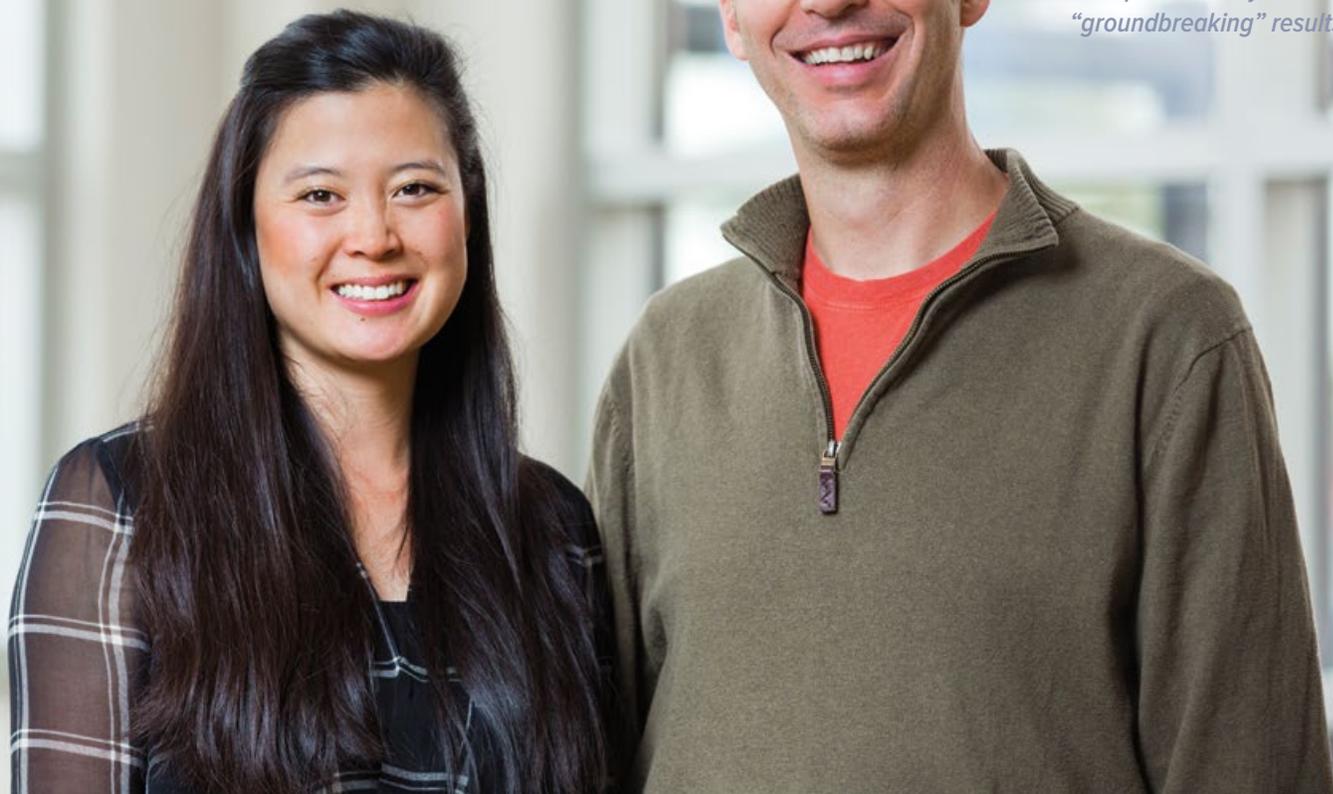


PHOTO BY LAUGHING DOG

## Motivational interviewing: A powerful return-to-work tool

By: Jamie Hall

**A**lberta has become the first workers' compensation system in Canada to investigate "motivational interviewing" to help injured workers return to work—with impressive results.

Research conducted over an eight-month period at Millard Health, WCB-Alberta's rehabilitation centre, provides strong evidence that adding motivational interviewing (MI) to a rehabilitation program dramatically helps injured workers successfully return to work.

In fact, adding MI to the rehabilitation process more than doubled the proportion of workers returning to work, compared to those who participated in a clinical rehabilitation program alone.

### **A powerful return-to-work tool**

For Joanne Park, it's an exciting and welcome outcome.

"It's well known in the work rehab world that psychosocial and behavioural barriers contribute to a delayed return to work," says Joanne, an occupational therapist with WCB-Alberta. "We do a really good job of addressing the physical barriers, but we don't really have a lot of approaches in place to address these other barriers.

"Motivational interviewing is a very powerful tool."

### **Award-winning research**

Joanne co-authored the research with Doug Gross, a professor of physical therapy at the University of Alberta, in the faculty of rehabilitation medicine.

The Canadian Institute for the Relief of Pain and Disability called their work "groundbreaking" at an international conference earlier this year, when they selected it as one winner of the Awards for Research. While motivational interviewing itself is not new—the technique has been used in the past for people dealing with everything from substance abuse to smoking cessation—applying it within a workers' compensation system is.

Joanne says the research focused on those with musculoskeletal injuries (involving a bone, joint, muscle or ligament), which are prevalent among

people hurt on the job. Most workers with these types of injuries (between 80 to 85 per cent) return to work safely, quickly and without complications. However, the remaining 15 to 20 per cent experience long periods of work disability. That disability may be coupled with personal, emotional and/or work-related issues that contribute to their delay in returning to work.

### **Chronic work disability is costly**

It's estimated that 15 to 20 per cent of workers with chronic work disability account for almost 70 per cent of the cost of work-related disorders. Physical limitations, coupled with psychosocial issues influencing the worker's behaviour, may be contributing factors. All of these are associated with the increase in the number of paid compensation days, in claim costs and, ultimately, in a delay in returning to work.

"There's this pocket population who unfortunately has further issues and is not having their needs entirely met," says Joanne. "It could be the psychological fear of returning to work, or fear of being re-injured. It could involve social aspects, like the level of support they have at work, or even at home.

"These factors, on top of their physical factors, could exacerbate everything."

### **Helping clients tap into the answers**

The effectiveness of MI, says Joanne, lies in its client-centred approach. Essentially, it begins with the premise that the client is capable of resolving their reluctance or ambivalence about

what's stopping them from returning to work—they just need someone to help them tap into the answers.

"It's really about collaboration," explains Joanne. "We honour our clients' expertise and their perspective. We believe they have the resources and motivation to help themselves make this change. We empower them to make this change instead of forcing them, or making them feel like they have to."

Joanne and some of her Millard colleagues underwent training to become proficient at MI, which she describes as being purposeful, reflective and directed. It also requires a great deal of discipline; practitioners of MI never give advice or offer solutions. Typically, it takes only one or two sessions to uncover the underlying issues behind an injured worker's ambivalence about going back to work.

Says Joanne: "It's amazing how quickly people will let you into their hearts once you establish that trust and rapport."

### **The future applications of MI**

The results of the research are relevant to anyone working with injured workers, including other workers' compensation boards.

"We've already had lots of interest from rehab providers and workers' compensation insurers around the world," says co-author Doug. "We believe it has tremendous potential to help some workers who may not otherwise go back to productive work following an injury." 



**We honour our clients' expertise ... We empower them to make this change."** — Joanne Park, occupational therapist with WCB-Alberta