

# 'I Don't Want to Work:' The Challenge of Exploring Personal Recovery Goals

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"I don't want to work. Why does everyone want me to get a job?"

Those words came from "John," a 30-year old man who lived with his brother and rarely left the home. I was asked to "engage" him in services because he refused to come to an agency for meetings with his case manager.

"So, what is it that is important to you?" I asked.

"Having a quart of beer every day. I don't want to have to worry about not having a beer when I watch TV."

When I reported John's goal to his case manager, she rolled her eyes and spoke sternly. "That's not a goal. He needs to get a job, come in for appointments and take his medication. Those are goals."

"Those are goals you may value but they are not John's goals. He has a right to decide for himself what is important to him," I told her. "Let's give it some time and see where it goes."

Together, we explored ways John could ensure his daily beer. Options were somewhat limited because John didn't want to use the bus. And a social phobia also made it difficult for him to relate to people. Still, he was interested in achieving his only life goal—having that quart of beer each day.

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Ultimately, John decided the only way he could attain his goal was with some sort of income. That, he reluctantly decided, was the only answer. But how could he realize that income? Again, we explored possibilities. After many trips to his modest home in the city, I had come to know John fairly well. My job was not to find John a job but to help him decide what HE wanted and how he might fill his needs.

Through our visits, John became increasingly comfortable in our relationship. He freely shared his thoughts and feelings and I could see a flicker of hope when he talked about cars and television shows. After several months of weekly visits, John met me at his door obviously excited. "I got a job!" he announced before I got to the door. "I got a job next door."

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# Exploring Personal Recovery Goals

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John lived next to a lumber yard. He shared his news telling me he had gone on his own to the lumber yard and asked about a job. The manager hired him on the spot to load lumber on trucks. John would have limited contact with others and could easily walk to the worksite. It was a perfect way for him to achieve his goal.

John started working part-time and proved himself a hard worker. He was soon hired full-time and it wasn't long before he left Social Security benefits in favor of a regular paycheck. Last I knew, John was saving for a car. Perhaps his most meaningful accomplishment was rejoining his community where he has formed relationships and learned to step outside his comfort zones.

When people with physical or mental health challenges engage in human services there are often two responses: 1) You aren't capable of working so learn to live on entitlements, or 2) You need to get a job. Both responses reflect value-based judgments on the part of human service workers. A better approach is to explore the values of the individual and encourage him/her to create goals important to THEM and help them find their own ways to achieve those goals. Recovery goals must be based on an individual's values; not the values of service providers who often see work as one of a few "legitimate" goals.

Indeed, work can bring much meaning to our lives. In the U.S., when we meet someone new and ask, "What do you do?" the expected response is a vocational occupation. But in some European countries, the question elicits a much different response. A person may say, "I garden," "I write poetry," "I cook for my children."

The difference is values; what an individual finds meaningful in their lives. In the U.S., we have come to link our work with our life meaning. Consider the fact that U.S. workers, on average, rarely use all their vacation time while workers in many countries enjoy considerably more vacation time and use it all. One of the highest suicide rates in the U.S. is among recently retired men. Presumably, they are unable to find meaning beyond the workplace. Unfortunately, I have seen this among people who graduated high school in my class as they consider or begin retirement.

"What are you going to do when you retire?" I asked a friend preparing for retirement from a police department.

"I have no idea. The kids are grown. I never had time for a hobby. I just don't know," he said.

Instead of that "Get a job" knee-jerk reaction, let's help those we support (and ourselves) explore a broader sense of life meaning. Let us reject the notion that our life's meaning is solely linked to our work. Let us instead focus on personal growth and life in a community of our choice.