Increased self-awareness in the process of returning to work


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Introduction. Long-term sick leave is a significant problem for individuals, employers, health services and the welfare society. Conventional medical treatment may not increase work ability, and research on the effect of rehabilitation has suffered methodological problems. From health understood as an interactive process of the individual's capacity in relation to the demands of everyday life, employees on sick leave were offered participation in a counselling programme, based on Gestalt theory, mindfulness and phenomenological understanding of the body.

Method. The aim of this study was to explore the participants’ processes of change related to their increased ability to work. The qualitative study design was based on modified grounded theory. A total of 12 female employees, all of whom had increased work ability one year after the programme, participated in open focus-group interviews at the end of the programme. The participants in the two focus-groups were the same as in their counselling groups.

Results. Experienced processes of change are described through: Becoming more aware of one’s own thoughts, emotions and bodily reactions; Taking oneself seriously and accepting oneself; Being secure enough to face being challenged; Realizing new possibilities and choices and Trying out new ways of acting. A secure setting and open-minded listening seemed essential for exploring new ways of thinking and behaving. Existential issues as own core values were important, together with taking own emotions seriously and being challenged by the counsellors.

Conclusions. The women described how experiences of increased awareness contributed to reconstruction of their self-understanding and opened up for new possibilities. This seemed to have provided them with new ways of communicating and acting, which enhanced participation in work. The context of the learning programme, the existential issues and counselling challenges appeared as essential in these processes of change. The findings give insights into aspects that might be important when designing rehabilitation programmes.