When health uncertainty follows you to work: The hidden labor of staying functional

GA, UNITED STATES, September 22, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Prolonged health uncertainty does not always stay in clinics or medical appointments. It can become part of everyday life, shaping work, relationships, identity, and the ability to imagine the future even when a person continues to function outwardly.

In a new analytic autoethnography, Mehmed Zahid Çögenli examined his own experience of living and working through prolonged health uncertainty. The analysis drew on approximately 1,150 lines of contemporaneous reflective writing, together with retrospective accounts and selected self-narrative documents, and used the concept of biographical disruption to understand how uncertainty entered ordinary life.

Four connected themes were identified: health uncertainty beyond the clinic; carrying competence under strain; silence, disclosure, and institutional vulnerability; and rebuilding a livable future. The study argues that continued productivity can conceal substantial invisible effort, and that prolonged uncertainty can become an occupational and relational burden even before medical clarity is reached.

People living with unresolved health concerns may continue to teach, write, care for family members, answer emails, travel, meet deadlines, and remain productive. From the outside, that continuity can look like stability. But continuing to function does not necessarily mean that uncertainty has little effect. It may instead require repeated, largely invisible work to keep ordinary life moving.

Mehmed Zahid Çögenli from the Department of Occupational Health and Safety at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Uşak University in Tu□rkiye explored this problem through analytic autoethnography — a qualitative approach that connects personal experience with wider social, relational, and institutional questions.

Rather than presenting a technical account of diagnosis, the article, published in Qualitative Research in Medicine & Healthcare, examines how prolonged health uncertainty was lived across work, family life, and selfhood. The source material included contemporaneous reflections written while uncertainty was unfolding, as well as later reflective accounts and selected self-narrative documents.

The analysis was organized around biographical disruption, a concept used to understand how health-related difficulty can unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions about the body, identity, relationships, routines, and the future.

Four themes emerged. Uncertainty moved beyond medical settings and into ordinary routines; professional competence had to be maintained under increasing strain; decisions about silence and disclosure became tied to institutional trust and vulnerability; and the future had to be rebuilt without waiting for complete certainty.

"A central point of the study is that visible functioning should not be mistaken for the absence of strain," says Çögenli. "Continuing to work can depend on constant self-monitoring, emotional containment, selective silence, and repeated efforts to preserve a coherent professional self. Much of that labor may remain invisible precisely because the person is still functioning."

The study also highlights the role of workplaces and relationships. “Whether someone remains at work is only part of the picture,” adds Çögenli. “The energy required to remain there, the calculations involved in deciding what can safely be disclosed, and the need for recognition or accompaniment can all shape how health uncertainty is experienced. The article therefore suggests that support should not depend only on visible incapacity or complete diagnostic certainty.”

Çögenli acknowledged that this is a single, situated autoethnographic account. “It does not claim to represent everyone who lives with health uncertainty," Çögenli says. "Nonetheless, it has value in making visible a form of burden that can be difficult to see from the outside: the fragile labor of continuing to work, care, and plan a future while answers are still unavailable."

References
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