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Illness narratives and chronic patients' sustainable employability:
The impact of positive work stories

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26 **Illness narratives and chronic patients' sustainable** 27 **employability: The impact of positive work stories**

28 29 **Abstract**

30 The number of workers with a chronic disease is steadily growing in industrialized countries.
31 To cope with and to give meaning to their illness, patients construct illness narratives, which
32 are widely shared across patient societies, personal networks and the media. This study
33 investigates the influence of these shared illness narratives on patient's working lives, by
34 examining the impact of reading a positive work story versus negative work story on patients'
35 sustainable employability. We expected that this relationship would be mediated by positive
36 emotions and the extent to which the story enhanced awareness of desired future selves, and
37 moderated by identification with story character. An online field experiment with 166 people
38 with Inflammatory Bowel Disease in The Netherlands showed that while reading a positive
39 story of a patient with the same condition significantly increased positive emotions, these
40 emotions did not influence sustainable employability. However, reading a positive story was
41 related to higher sustainable employability when patients became more aware of their desired
42 possible future work selves. Finally, identification with the story character moderated the
43 impact of story type on sustainable employability. This study showed that personal
44 engagement with a positive work story of a fellow patient is related to higher sustainable
45 employability. Findings can be helpful for health professionals to empower employees with a
46 chronic disease.

47 **Key words:** Illness Narratives; Narrative Impact; Sustainable Employability; Chronic Illness;
48 Identification; Desired Future Work Selves; Positive emotions; Online Field Experiment.

50

Introduction

51 *I see a positive future for myself! I know I have the brain and perseverance to hold a*
52 *challenging position that mentally demands a lot from me. I am limited by my body to work*
53 *part-time, but I find it nice to use that extra day off to do something fun (...) I will never stop*
54 *learning in my career. (...) PS. I took a photo of this as a memory for myself for when I am*
55 *not doing so well :)*

56 *- Participant, positive story condition*

57

58 During the last decades the prevalence of different types of chronic illnesses have
59 rapidly increased (1) causing chronic illness to be labeled as a new global health burden (2).

60 Chronic illnesses can be defined as “illnesses that are prolonged, do not resolve
61 spontaneously, and are rarely cured completely” (3),(4). Living with a chronic illness has a
62 pervasive effect on various different aspects of people’s personal lives (5).

63 Besides physical distress and coping with the direct symptoms of the illness, chronic
64 illnesses affect people’s identity, future expectations, employability, working life, social life
65 and mental health (6-8). While employment may pose extra challenges for people with a
66 chronic illness, having work is important as it provides both manifest and latent benefits:
67 work does not only provide income and a means for living, it also provides latent benefits
68 such as a daily time structure, contributing to a collective purpose, social contacts, social
69 status and activity, which in turn contribute to psychological well-being (9). Reversely, being
70 unemployed is associated with a lack of these latent benefits resulting in distress (10) and
71 lower mental health and well-being (11, 12).

72 Since the number of workers with a chronic disease is steadily growing in
73 industrialized countries (13), this draws attention to their specific workplace problems and
74 their sustainable employability, which we define as the perceived ability and motivation to
75 maintain a healthy working life until retirement age (14). Sustainable employability has been
76 conceptualized as a multi-faceted construct (15), yet at the core is a mindset that is focused on
77 long-term employment and the subjective perceptions that one will remain able and motivated

78 to work until retirement age (14, 16). This perception will increase chances of successful
79 employment as employees with a high sustainable employability are motivated to actively
80 manage their work and balance it with their personal values and capabilities (14, 17). Due to
81 increased prevalence of chronic illnesses and the additional challenges of working with a
82 chronic illness poses for sustainable career development, research on interventions to increase
83 sustainable employability of chronic patients is relevant for both society at large and these
84 individuals themselves in order to maintain a healthy and productive workforce (18, 19).

85 One way to make sense of and cope with the impact of chronic illness is through
86 creating an illness narrative, which is “a story the patient tells, and significant others retell, to
87 give coherence to the distinctive events and long-term course of suffering” (20-22). Illness
88 narratives are often shared and available to large audiences through social media, television,
89 and patient support group websites and magazines. Stories about illness thereby contribute to
90 a broader, cultural understanding and the social construction of the illness (23-25) which in
91 turn influences patients (20, 24) and medical professionals (26).

92 Even though the construction of personal illness narratives is undergirded by larger
93 cultural narratives and the social construction of the illness (20, 25, 27), little is known about
94 the direct impact of illness narratives on fellow patients. These narratives can provide patients
95 with information and examples of how to cope successfully with chronic illness (28).
96 Sometimes patients may actively seek information via shared illness narratives of fellow
97 patients as part of the coping strategy of information seeking (6, 29), illustrative of a general
98 trend where patients engage more in medical self-help online than seeking care from medical
99 professionals (28).

100 The current experimental field study aims to add to the existing body of research on
101 illness narratives by investigating the impact of illness narratives on fellow patients,
102 specifically the effect of reading an illness narrative about working with a chronic condition

103 on patients’ sustainable employability. Principally, the impact of positive, hopeful stories,
104 versus negative, depressing stories is investigated. In this context, “positive” does not mean
105 that the patient has not suffered from the illness for a prolonged time or has only mild
106 symptoms, yet it means that the story character is coping well and has found a way to
107 successfully work, despite of her/his illness. “Negative” stories refer to illness narratives in
108 which the patient is depressed and is not coping well with the illness. Positive illness
109 narratives could offer people inspiration, help them with visualizing a positive work future or
110 provide role models for building a meaningful life. Compared to negative illness narratives,
111 positive stories could therefore stimulate patients to imagine a sustainable career despite their
112 illness.

113 Besides the direct impact of positive illness narratives on sustainable employability,
114 we propose that positive stories will increase patients’ sustainable employability by evoking
115 positive emotions via the mechanism of emotional contagion and subsequent broaden-and-
116 build processes that increase the thought–action repertoire in readers helping them envision
117 more possibilities for their future working life (30, 31). Secondly, we expect that positive
118 illness narratives will increase the awareness of the patient’s own wished-for future, by
119 inspiring their desired Possible Future Work Self (PFWS) – an “individual's representation of
120 himself or herself in the future that reflects his or her hopes and aspirations in relation to
121 work” (32). Lastly, we expect that through social comparison mechanisms (33) the reader’s
122 identification with the story character will moderate the impact of story type on sustainable
123 employability, with stronger relationships when identification with a story character is high
124 rather than low. Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual model investigated in this study.

125 -----
126 Insert Figure 1 about here
127 -----

128 **Narrative impact**

129 A large body of studies shows that narratives have a profound impact on people (34),

130 influencing people's world-beliefs (35), enhancing social skills, such as empathy (36, 37) and
131 increase self-awareness and self-reflection, ultimately leading to changes in people's sense of
132 self (38, 39). Recently, the persuasive power of narratives has been applied in medical
133 contexts (40), where narrative methods were used for patient communications (41-43). These
134 narratives influenced patients' decision-making processes regarding different treatment
135 options. A variety of narrative impact mechanisms in medical contexts has been found,
136 ranging from narratives increasing attention for and comprehension of medical information
137 (45), narratives inducing decision-making bias by making people rely on heuristic rather than
138 systematic mental processes (44), or, contradictorily, narratives have shown to stimulate
139 patients to reflect on their own impact bias, thereby helping them overcome barriers for
140 cancer screening, for example by making them aware of their own affective forecasting (40).

141 From a career perspective, personal narratives about work and building a career also
142 provide inspiration and guidance to workers (46). Narratives of successful business people are
143 regarded as important tools for successful interventions in career counseling (46, 47). This
144 may be even more relevant for people with a chronic illness, for whom building a successful
145 career poses additional challenges (19). Indeed, personal illness narratives shared in support
146 group settings helped people cope with their illness in different domains of life, including
147 family and working life (48).

148 Encountering a positive work narrative may increase hope and work motivation in
149 fellow patients, by showing them the possibility of an open future with new possibilities
150 despite of illness. This perception of an open-ended future could, according to socio-
151 emotional selectivity theory (49) stimulate patients to engage more in planning, future-
152 oriented behavior and goal-setting. Moreover, in the context of the shifting perspectives
153 model of chronic illness (50) providing people with a positive future work perspective can
154 make patients shift from an illness perspective to a wellness perspective, whereby the focus of

155 the patient is not only on managing the illness, but also on achieving other important life
156 goals, like having a valuable working life.

157 Proactive behavior, motivation and adaptability for maintaining a healthy and
158 satisfying future working life, are important facets of sustainable employability (14). Workers
159 who perceive themselves as sustainably employable are actively motivated in managing and
160 balancing their work to their personal values and capabilities (14, 51). For chronic patients it
161 is important to be motivated to actively deal with health issues regarding work, which is a key
162 factor to having a healthy, successful and fulfilling working life (19). Since positive stories
163 offer an empowering experience, increasing a patient's positive future time perspective, we
164 expect that positive work stories will be positively related to sustainable employability
165 compared to negative work stories of patients with the same chronic illness.

166 *Hypothesis 1: Reading a positive work story of a fellow patient is positively related to*
167 *sustainable employability of chronic patients compared to a negative story.*

168 **The mediating role of positive emotions**

169 Emotions play a central role in the construction and experience of stories
170 (52). Narratives can evoke strong emotions, experienced similarly to emotions in the real
171 world (34). By means of emotional contagion mechanisms, which pose that people adopt the
172 emotions of their surrounding environment (31), patients reading a positive illness narrative
173 will also likely adopt the emotional sentiment in the story and experience emotions like joy,
174 inspiration and comfort. Consequently, the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions
175 predicts that this positive emotional mind-set will broaden their "momentary thought-action
176 repertoire" increasing creative thinking and generating new solutions (30). After reading a
177 positive work story of someone with the same illness, patients are therefore more likely to
178 perceive ways to achieve sustainable employability vis-à-vis patients who are reading
179 negative stories. Therefore, we expect that the experience of positive emotions will mediate

180 the relationship between positive work stories and sustainable employability.

181 *Hypothesis 2: Positive emotions mediate the relationship between reading a positive*
182 *work story and sustainable employability.*

183 **The mediating role of possible future work selves**

184 Narratives offer people opportunities to experiment with different possible selves (53,
185 54) and different lives (55). Therefore, patients who put themselves in the shoes of a character
186 with a positive work experience may be stimulated to imagine their own desired or wished-for
187 future work selves. Strauss and colleagues (32) found in a series of studies that awareness of
188 Possible Future Work Selves (PFWS) increased proactive career behavior and served as an
189 important motivator for planning a career. Proactivity and awareness of sustaining a career in
190 the future are key concepts of sustainable employability (14). We therefore expect that
191 awareness of desired PFWS will mediate the relationship between reading a positive story and
192 sustainable employability. Reading positive stories will positively relate to people's
193 sustainable employability if it helps them imagine themselves in a desired future career.

194 *Hypothesis 3: Possible Future Work Selves mediate the relationship between reading*
195 *a positive work story and sustainable employability.*

196 **The moderating role of identification with narrative role models**

197 An important mechanism by which stories influence people concerns the reader's
198 identification with the main story character (36, 56). When identification with the main
199 character is stronger, stories generally have more impact (56). Based on social comparison
200 processes (57) we expect that identification with the main story character will moderate the
201 relationships between reading a positive story and sustainable employability.

202 The Identification-Contrast model (33, 58) argues that social comparison with others
203 who are doing better or who are doing worse may either improve or worsen well-being and
204 self-evaluation depending on whether individuals identify or contrast themselves with the

205 other person. If individuals identify with a better-off other this will lead to inspiration and
206 improved well-being due to assimilation of the other's position, whereas contrast with such a
207 successful person would lead to dissatisfaction and lowered self-views (59). On the other
208 hand, contrast with worse-off others may lead to consolation about one's own more favorable
209 position whereas identification may lead to fear that one would deteriorate to the other's
210 worse position. Based on this reasoning, we expect that a positive story will only lead to more
211 positive self-views (i.e., higher sustainable employability) in comparison to a negative story if
212 readers identify (rather than contrast themselves) with the main character.

213 *Hypothesis 4: Identification with the story character moderates the relationship*
214 *between positive work story and sustainably employability, such that a positive story*
215 *only leads to higher sustainable employability when identification is high.*

216 **Methods and materials**

217 **Participants**

218 An online field experiment was conducted in The Netherlands with a sample ($n = 166$)
219 of people with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). IBD is a chronic disease with the two
220 most common diagnoses being Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Even though many
221 people with IBD are able to have some form of employment (60) the uncertainty of the
222 disease, which is characterized by active periods with flare-ups and quiet periods of
223 remission, has a strong psychological impact on people suffering from it (61).

224 This study was approved by the ethical review board of Utrecht University, the
225 Netherlands. Patients were informed about the experiment in the digital newsletter of the
226 Dutch IBD foundation, CCUVN (Crohn en Colitis Ulcerosa Vereniging Nederland), where
227 they could click on a link to participate. Participation in the study was voluntarily and
228 participants were told that they could stop at any time if they did not wish to continue.
229 Informed consent was obtained from each patient before starting the experiment. At the end

230 of the experiment participants had the opportunity to enter in a prize raffle, in which they
231 could win one of two 50-euro digital shopping vouchers. Initially, 252 individuals clicked on
232 the link provided by CCUVN. In total, 186 of this group finished the experiment. Participants
233 who dropped out of the study did not significantly differ from the final sample. After
234 removing 14 people from the analysis because they failed the manipulation check (a simple
235 question to check whether they had read the story) and 6 people who were retired, the final
236 sample consisted of 166 participants.

237 **Design and procedure**

238 The online field experiment consisted of two experimental conditions: reading a
239 positive work story of a fellow patient versus reading a negative work story of a fellow
240 patient. Of the 166 participants who completed the experiment, 90 participants (54%) were
241 randomly assigned to the positive story condition and 76 (46%) were put in the negative story
242 group.

243 First, all participants filled in demographics, questions about work and mental and
244 physical health, mastery and employment status. Subsequently, participants were randomly
245 assigned to either the positive story condition or the negative story condition. After reading
246 this story, participants first filled in the manipulation check, which was a relatively easy
247 question about the story content (i.e., “how long ago was the main character diagnosed with
248 IBD?”) to make sure they had read the story attentively. Then they answered questions about
249 their identification with the character and their affect after reading. After this, the participants
250 described their Possible Future Work Selves in an open question and rated their own PFWS.
251 After the PFWS measure, participants answered a quantitative scale of sustainable
252 employability. To counter-balance a possible negative impact of the story, a positive mood
253 manipulator was added for all participants at the end of the experiment, where participants

254 were encouraged to write three good qualities of themselves and three people who socially
255 supported them.

256 **Measurements**

257 Two different stimuli were used in the experiment, a positive illness narrative for the
258 positive story condition and a negative illness narrative for the negative story condition. The
259 narratives were fictitious, but based on real experience since they were written by a short
260 story author with IBD, therefore a fellow patient of the participants. The stories were written
261 in Dutch, they were of equal length and were gender neutral, and were written from a first-
262 person perspective since this is found most effective in an illness context (44). The narratives
263 were similar in terms of illness onset, diagnosis and history of illness, where in both stories
264 the patient had struggled severely and for a prolonged period of time with health issues, also
265 for several years before the official diagnosis (narratives are available in S1).

266 In the story, the main character was diagnosed with IBD five years ago, and reflects on
267 living with IBD, specifically focusing on working life. Yet the tone and ending of the story is
268 either positive (after five years the main character is coping well, has found a good balanced
269 job) or negative (after five years the main character is not coping well and has tried working
270 but is currently unemployed).

271 **Positive emotions**

272 Participant's emotions after reading the story were measured by a list of 12 positive
273 and 12 negative emotions, whereby people were asked to select all emotions that they
274 currently experienced, based on the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist (MAACL, (62, 63)).
275 Examples of items referring to positive emotions were “encouraged”, “inspired” or
276 “comforted”. The different emotions on the affective state measure were loaded on their
277 separate constructs, namely: comfort and inspiration (for positive emotions) and depression,

278 hostility and anxiety (for negative emotions). The positive emotion score combined the scores
279 for inspiration and comfort.

280 **Desired possible future work selves**

281 Participants read a short description of PFWS and were asked to freely describe their
282 PFWS in an open question (question text is available in S2). On average, participants spend
283 276.8 seconds on thinking about and writing their PFWS, with a large variety between people
284 ($SD = 297.2$). Similar to the method employed by Strauss and colleagues (32), participants
285 were then asked to self-rate their micro-narratives. They rated on a 5-point Likert scale
286 (ranging from 1= “Absolutely not” to 5= “Very much”) to what extent they had just described
287 a desired self, which was used as an indicator of how aware patients were of their desired
288 PFWS at that moment.

289 **Identification**

290 The measure for identification with the main character consisted of three items (63),
291 which were averaged to a total score ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.04$, $\alpha = .87$). A sample item is “Can
292 you recognize yourself in the main character?” (Answer with a 5-point Likert scale, ranging
293 from “No, absolutely not” to “Yes, absolutely”).

294 **Sustainable employability**

295 For sustainable employability ($\alpha = .89$) a six-item scale was developed, based on
296 earlier research (64) and comparable to the conceptualization of Le Blanc and colleagues (16).
297 Several pilot studies with this scale suggested good reliability ($\alpha > 0.75$) and meaningful
298 relationships with other constructs (65). A sample item is “I expect that, until retirement age, I
299 will be motivated to work” (Responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Definitely
300 not” to “Definitely”). For a full overview of all items, see S3.

301 **Physical and mental health**

302 The control variables for physical and mental health were measured with the SF12
303 (66) and scored into a physical health score ranging from 13.74 to 61.67 ($M = 44.8$; $SD =$
304 10.08) and a mental health score ranging from 22.27 to 60.83 ($M = 45$; $SD = 10$). The
305 measure consists of 12 different items and is approximately orthogonally scored, using the
306 original scoring (66), with questions about both physical and mental health. For example:
307 “During the past 4 weeks, how much did pain interfere with your normal work (including
308 both work outside the home and housework)? (Answer with 5-point Likert Scale ranging from
309 “Not at all” to “Extremely”). The measure of physical health was used as a background
310 variable, to check whether there would be differences between conditions. Mental health was
311 added to the model as a control variable, since it is strongly linked to proactivity and
312 motivation at work (67).

313 **Mastery**

314 Mastery was measured with the Pearlin Mastery Scale (68), which consists of seven
315 items, which are answered with a 5-point Likert scale. Sample items are: “I often feel helpless
316 in dealing with the problems of life” (reversely scored) and “What happens to me in the future
317 depends on me”. Mastery ranged from 1.86 to 5 ($M = 3.45$; $SD = .66$). Since mastery is linked
318 to resilience and motivation (69), mastery was added as a control variable to the model.

319 **Analysis**

320 For the statistical analysis SPSS 24 was used with the PROCESS plug-in of Hayes
321 (70) to be able to test all hypotheses simultaneously in one model. In the moderation analysis
322 with Process, identification was mean-centered. The story condition was dummy-coded (0 =
323 negative story; 1 = positive story) in all analyses.

324 **Results**

325 **Descriptive statistics**

326 To check for significant differences in demographic and background variables per
 327 condition an ANOVA was carried out, which showed no significant differences between
 328 conditions. The two most common diagnoses in the sample were Crohn’s disease (55.4%) and
 329 ulcerative colitis (43.4%). 33.7% of the participants were aged between 18 and 34, 37.3%
 330 were between 35 and 49, and 28.9% were age 50 and higher. 34.3% were diagnosed less than
 331 5 years ago, 39.8% 5-15 years ago, and 25.9% longer than 15 years ago. 82.5% were either
 332 employed or self-employed and the remaining 17.5% were unemployed, disabled for work, or
 333 student. See Table 1 for a correlation table of the descriptive statistics.

334

335 **Table 1: Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations of the study variables**

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>
1. Gender	.27	44.60	--							
2. Physical health	44.8	10.08	-0.08	--						
3. Mental health	45.0	10.00	-0.16*	0.21**	--					
4. Mastery	3.45	0.66	-0.14	0.45**	0.54**	.84				
5. Desired PFWS	3.83	1.03	-0.19*	0.13	0.16*	0.14	--			
6. Positive Emotions	2.08	2.13	-0.11	0.17*	0.06	0.24**	0.17*	.68		
7. Identification with story character	3.23	1.04	0.09	0.03	-0.17*	-0.09	0.20*	0.42**	.87	
8. Sustainable Employability	4.01	0.71	-0.11	0.31**	0.33**	0.43**	0.29**	0.20**	0.15	.89

336 *Note:* Reliabilities are reported along the diagonal. N = 166. PFWS = Possible Future Work Self.
 337 Gender 0 = female, 1 = male. † p < 0.1 * p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001.

338

339 Hypotheses Testing

340 Similar to the model in S4 Fig, Hypotheses 1- 4 were simultaneously tested using PROCESS.
 341 In order to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals, correct for irregular shaped sampling
 342 distributions and increase the robustness of the indirect effect, the standard bootstrap option of

343 5,000 resamples in PROCESS was used (71). Table 2 shows the results of the bootstrapped
344 moderated mediation regression analyses for the direct impact of the story condition, the
345 indirect effect of story condition through positive emotions and desired PFWS on sustainable
346 employability, and the moderation of identification with the main character. We ran the
347 analyses whilst controlling for mental health, and mastery. Age was also added as a control
348 variable, because it is intrinsically linked to sustainable employability (16).

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350 Insert S4 Figure 2 about here
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Table 2: Bootstrapped Mediation Regression Analysis Predicting Sustainable Employability

Note: N = 166. PFWS = Possible Future Work Self. For every parameter the unstandardized coefficient (B) is reported with in brackets the corresponding standard error (SE). For bootstrapping 5,000 resamples were requested. * p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001.

354

Variable	Positive Emotions	Desired PFWS	Sustainable Employability
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Age	-0.13 (0.19)	-0.31 (0.10)**	-0.15 (0.06)*
Mental health	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)†	0.01 (0.01)
Mastery	0.99 (0.27)***	0.09 (0.14)	0.27 (0.09)**
<i>Independent Variable</i>			
Story type	1.58 (0.30)***	0.45 (0.15)**	-0.05 (0.11)
<i>Pathway 1</i>			
Mediation of Positive Emotions			-0.01 (0.03)
<i>Pathway 2</i>			
Mediation of Desired PFWS			0.11 (0.05) *
<i>Pathway 3</i>			
Direct effect of Identification			-0.09 (0.08)
Moderation of Identification with Story Character			0.42 (0.12)***
Intercept	-1.31 (0.98)	3.15 (0.50)***	2.59 (0.36)***
F	10.24***	6.13***	10.32***
R ²	0.20	0.13	0.34

355 Overall, the final model predicted 34% of the variance in sustainable employability.

356 H1 predicted that reading a positive work story of a fellow patient increases sustainable
357 employability of chronic patients compared to a negative story. However, no main effect for
358 story condition was found ($b = -.05, ns$). H1 is therefore rejected.

359 H2 predicted that positive emotions mediate the effect of reading a positive story on
360 sustainable employability. The results showed that reading a positive story indeed led to
361 significantly more positive emotions than the negative story ($b = 1.58, p < 0.001$). Table 2
362 shows that positive emotions did, however, not significantly predict sustainable employability
363 ($b = -.01, ns$). Unstandardized indirect effects of story condition on sustainable employability
364 through positive emotions were computed for each of 5,000 bootstrapped samples, and the
365 95% confidence interval was computed by determining the indirect effects at the 2.5th and
366 97.5th percentiles. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect of H2 was $-.018 (ns; 95%$
367 $CI = -.10 \text{ to } .06)$. Therefore, H2 was rejected.

368 H3 predicted that a positive story increases sustainable employability through desired
369 Possible Future Work Selves. The results showed that reading a positive story indeed
370 significantly increased participant's awareness of desired PFWS ($b = 0.45, p = 0.004$).

371 Subsequently, increased awareness of desired PFWS also significantly increased sustainable
372 employability ($b = 0.11, p = 0.0297$). Furthermore, the unstandardized indirect effect of story
373 condition on sustainable employability through awareness of PFWS was 0.05 (95% CI = .004
374 to .12). Therefore, H3 was supported.

375 H4 predicted that positive stories lead to higher sustainable employability than
376 negative stories only when the participants identify with the main character. The moderation
377 of identification with the main character on the impact of story on sustainable employability
378 was significant ($b = 0.42, p < 0.001$). Figure 2 shows the interaction of identification with the
379 main character and story type on sustainable employability. The simple slope of story
380 condition for participants low in identification ($-1 SD$) was $-.47, p = 0.002$, showing that the
381 negative story was related to higher sustainable employability than the positive story when
382 identification with the main character was low. Moreover, in line with Hypothesis 4, the
383 simple slope of story condition for participants high in identification ($+ 1 SD$) was $.38, p =$
384 $.021$, showing that the positive story was related to higher sustainable employability than the
385 negative story when identification with the main character was high. S5 Fig shows a graph
386 with the impact of the interaction of identification with the main character and story type on
387 sustainable employability. H4 is therefore supported.

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389 Insert S5 Figure 2 about here
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392 Discussion

393 This study investigated whether reading a positive illness narrative about working with
394 a chronic illness related to more sustainable employability of patients with the same
395 condition, and whether this process was mediated by positive emotions and awareness of
396 PFWS, and moderated by identification with the main character. A field experiment indicated
397 that positive illness narratives only contributed to higher sustainable employability than

398 negative illness narratives when people personally engaged with the narratives. First, positive
399 stories significantly contributed to higher sustainable employability when they activated
400 patients to think about their own desired future work selves. Second, the extent to which the
401 person identified with the main character of the narrative determined whether the positive or
402 the negative narrative was more related to high sustainable employability.

403 Based on socio-emotional selectivity theory (49) we expected that positive stories
404 would increase people's perception of an open-ended future, and increase planning and a
405 future-oriented mind-set, which are strongly linked to sustainable employability (14). This
406 would also be in accordance with the shifting perspectives model of chronic illness (50),
407 whereby a positive story could make people switch from an illness perspective to a wellness
408 perspective, whereby he or she focuses on other important life goals, including working life.
409 Nonetheless, no direct relationship was found between reading a positive illness narrative and
410 sustainable employability, indicating that merely reading a positive story does not
411 automatically increase sustainable employability – more is needed to elicit this change.

412 In addition, contrary to our expectations, positive emotions did not mediate the impact
413 between positive narratives and sustainable employability. We found that positive stories led
414 to more positive emotions than negative stories, which is in line with emotional contagion
415 mechanisms (31). However, the proposed broad-and-build effects of these positive emotions
416 (72) leading to an increased motivation and proactive mind-set towards one's own
417 employability in the future did not occur. These results imply that merely experiencing a
418 positive emotional state does not translate to concrete increased sustainable employability.

419 Awareness of desired PFWS did significantly mediate the relationship between
420 reading a positive story and sustainable employability. This is in line with the idea that
421 narratives offer people opportunities to experiment with different possible selves (53, 54) and
422 with studies showing that positive and hopeful stories increase wellbeing and positivity (73).

423 Patients in the positive story condition had the opportunity to put themselves in the shoes of
424 the main character, who successfully managed to work with IBD, and those who as a result
425 became more aware of their own desired work selves, showed higher sustainable
426 employability.

427 Furthermore, this study shows that the impact of positive illness narratives on fellow
428 patients is moderated by the identification with the story character. In line with the
429 Identification-Contrast model (33, 58), participants who strongly identified with the main
430 character in the story seemed to assimilate the other's position, leading to higher sustainable
431 employability when reading the positive rather than in the negative illness narrative. On the
432 other hand, participants who did not identify with the character seemed to contrast themselves
433 with the character in the story, leading to higher sustainable employability after reading a
434 negative rather than a positive narrative (*cf.* (59)). This suggests that confrontation with a
435 positive story that is regarded as unattainable for oneself, may sometimes lead to
436 discouragement if identification is low. The moderation effect of identification is in line with
437 research showing that in order for outstanding characters to be effective role models,
438 identification with them is important (74).

439 The significant relationships of both desired PFWS and identification with sustainable
440 employability suggests that personal engagement with an illness narrative is necessary for its
441 impact. With personal engagement we mean that the narrative has to resonate with the patient
442 on a personal level in order to exert an influence, because the results indicate that merely
443 reading the positive story – even when this induces positive emotions – does not relate
444 positively to sustainable employability. The significant mediation of desired PFWS suggests
445 that stimulating participants' imagination of themselves in a desired work future is a
446 prerequisite for being able to subsequently perceive themselves in a sustainable work future –
447 a fundamental part of sustainable employability (14). In addition, personal engagement can be

448 linked to the notion of identification (75), whereby it takes effort or psychological
449 involvement for the reader to put themselves in the shoes of a character. Identification and
450 personal engagement could be further stimulated by increasing perceived similarity with a
451 character, for example by having similar attitudes towards life, age or educational level.
452 Furthermore, since positive emotions induced by a positive story did not contribute to higher
453 sustainable employability, it is likely that cognitive processes are also required for an illness
454 narrative to impact sustainable employability. Indeed, awareness of possible selves has been
455 conceptualized as an interplay of emotional and (meta)cognitive mental processes (76, 77).
456 Since a possible self is fundamental to a person's current self-concept (78), awareness of a
457 desired PFWS can have a strong motivating power (76-78) as was portrayed in the study of
458 Strauss and colleagues (32). Similarly, the interplay of emotional with cognitive mental
459 processes related to awareness of possible selves, can explain the higher sustainable
460 employability among patients with increased awareness of desired PFWS in comparison to
461 those who only experienced a positive mood as a result of reading the positive story.

462 **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

463 A number of limitations regarding the present study should be addressed. First, this
464 experimental study aimed to explore the impact of illness narratives on patients with a chronic
465 illness by investigating the immediate impact of one positive versus negative story on
466 participants' sustainable employability. The duration of the effects of the story is therefore
467 uncertain. Even though the results of this study suggest that a deeper, cognitive form of
468 mental processing may be involved, future studies should investigate this in more depth and
469 explore the impact of exposure to several stories over time. Gaining more insight into in-
470 depth and long-term mechanisms of narrative impact could also contribute a deeper
471 understanding of at which moments of a patient's journey reading a positive narrative could
472 exert the most beneficial impact, for example at the time of diagnosis, during a flare-up or at

473 time of remission. Moreover, with the widespread availability of illness narratives online and
474 in the media, future studies could also focus on how to counter the influence of negative
475 narratives with positive experiences of fellow patients. This could also be applied in future
476 studies, whereby patients in a negative story condition could besides receiving a positive
477 mood manipulator also read the positive narratives in the end of the study. In addition, this
478 study focused only on written narratives, future studies could explore other ways to present
479 narratives (e.g. visual), or longer stories, such as books or novels and investigate the impact of
480 actively discussing narratives in counseling sessions. Future research could also focus on
481 intervention programs that combine narratives with other forms of occupational health
482 therapy. In such interventions, personal engagement with positive role models could also be
483 encouraged.

484 It also has to be noted, that although this is an experimental study, most of the findings
485 are the result of internal analyses, relating measured rather than manipulated constructs. This
486 precludes definite causal interpretation of our findings. For example, we cannot say for sure
487 that sustainable employability really is the effect of identification with the positive story
488 character, as people with a higher score for sustainable employability might identify more
489 with the positive character to begin with. We tried to counter this by controlling for mental
490 health and mastery, which we measured before reading the story. Future studies should,
491 however, try to manipulate identification with the story character rather than merely
492 measuring it.

493 Thirdly, this study focused on sustainable employability, which is a complex construct
494 with several conceptualizations and different measurements (14, 79). Nevertheless, research
495 on sustainable employability has focused on people's subjective experience of their chances
496 for obtaining or retaining long-term employment (14, 16). In line with this research, we
497 focused on the participant's perceptions of a common core element found in each of these

498 conceptualizations: the ability and motivation to maintain healthy working life until
499 retirement age (see also (14, 16, 51). However, it remains unclear to what extent these
500 conceptualizations of sustainable employability are related to actual prolonged successful
501 employment. We believe this field of study would greatly benefit from long-term prospective
502 studies that examine this relationship.

503 Additionally, by focusing on the perceptions of individuals, this study took a personal
504 agency perspective (80) investigating whether patients can be empowered through positive
505 illness narratives. Even though it was beyond the scope of this study, the work opportunity for
506 patients provided by employers is also an important factor for achieving sustainable
507 employment (14, 16). In turn, inequality of the work environment has a profound impact on
508 people's health (81) and for chronic patients this is even more important. Overall, patients
509 with a chronic illness have lower employment ratings compared to the rest of the population
510 (82). Since intervention programs that stimulate employment for people with a chronic illness
511 have shown to be effective (83), future research could expand the scope of this study by
512 investigating the impact of positive work stories of chronic patients on employers' motivation
513 to create opportunity for these employees.

514 Fifthly, this study focused on sustainable employability for chronic patients based on
515 the rationale that employment provides people with both manifest (salary) and latent benefits
516 (e.g. time structure, collective purpose and social contacts), which are linked to higher
517 psychological well-being (9). Even though this study mainly focused on paid employment, it
518 should be noted that volunteering work or informal care for others, can also provide such
519 latent benefits (9). Future studies could adopt a broader notion of work by including these
520 types of participation more explicitly in their research.

521 Finally, this study specifically focused on the effect of illness narratives on patients
522 with IBD, a group of chronic illnesses that has an increased incidence rate with more

523 diagnoses every year (84). Even though it is evident that every chronic illness will present its
524 own challenges for sustainable employability, we aimed to uncover more general mechanisms
525 by which positive illness narratives can inspire fellow patients. More research is needed to
526 investigate to what extent results can be generalized to patients with other chronic illnesses.

527 **Practical Implications**

528 On the basis of this study, it could be advised to occupational health professionals and
529 career counselors to use inspiring illness narratives for patients in order to increase their
530 motivation and proactivity for a sustainable working life. This study indicates that it is
531 important that patients can personally relate to the story. For example, a young student with
532 IBD who wishes to study a semester abroad will be most empowered by hearing a story of
533 another student with IBD who managed to study abroad despite of illness. In addition, more
534 personal engagement and cognitive involvement with stories can be stimulated by for
535 example more in-depth interaction with patients or by giving them exercises to actively think
536 about desired PFWS.

537 **Conclusion**

538 Improving the sustainable employability of individuals with a chronic illness is highly
539 important for society, for employers and for the ill individuals concerned. Our study shows
540 that reading narratives about successful fellow patients may contribute to sustainable
541 employability. Moreover, our study shows that it is essential that such a narrative is
542 personally relevant for the individual and promotes identification with the main character in
543 the story. A positive narrative may then increase motivation and perceived ability to work
544 until retirement as the narrative enhances a positive future work self.

545

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752 **Supporting information**

753

754 S1 Illness Narratives Stimuli

755 S2 PFWS Question text

756 S3 Sustainable Employability scale

757 S4 Fig. 1 Conceptual model of the impact of story on sustainable employability

758 S5 Fig. 2 Interaction between type of story and identification with main character in relation to
759 sustainable employability.