



The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 847386



Making room for Mental Health: Recommendations from Psychologists to Managers

December 2022



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITA DI BOLOGNA



Technische
Universität
Braunschweig



The
University
Of
Sheffield.



UNIVERSITAT
JAUME I



Karolinska
Institutet



UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology



QED GROUP



SERVIZIO SANITARIO REGIONALE
EMILIA-ROMAGNA
Azienda Unità Sanitaria Locale di Bologna



OPENGROUP



ENWHP

Executive Summary

This policy brief is part of the EU-funded H-Work project, and aims to provide practical guidance for managers in effectively addressing mental health at work, from the perspective of psychologists.

It is based on the outcomes of the project and makes the case for and provides practical recommendations which will enable managers to:

- Create an enabling environment with cross-cutting actions to improve mental health at work through engagement, knowledge, leadership, and participation.
- Take action to prevent work-related mental health conditions, to protect and promote mental health at work, and to support all workers to participate fully and equitably in work.

A general introduction provides the background to and context of the brief. This is followed by a headline overview of why this topic is considered relevant.

Finally, a set of practical recommendations, linked to the work of the H-Work project is provided.

Introduction

This policy brief is part of the outputs of the H-Work Project, funded by the EU's Horizon Europe Programme, which aims to promote effective mental health at work by designing, implementing, and validating multi-level assessment and intervention toolkits, and evaluating individual and organisational outcomes of measures taken.

The Project defines Mental Health Promotion as being ‘the process of enhancing protective factors that contribute to good mental health’.

More specifically, the project is developing practical tools that will

- Analyse mental health and well-being of employees: the H-Work Assessment Toolkit – (HAT)
- Test and validate a set of interventions: the H-Work Interventions Toolkit (HIT)
- Verify and monitor the interventions and their economic impact on the organisation involved: the H-Work Evaluation Toolkit (HET)

The H-Work project specifically addresses the role of managers in creating and fostering a 'mental health friendly' work environment as it has found thatⁱⁱ

Managers play an essential role in the implementation and sustainability of organisational interventions. However, in practice, their involvement in these interventions is generally considered as inadequate.

In existing literature, concrete suggestions as to how senior management can be supported to facilitate organisational health interventions are lacking (Nielsen & Noblet, 2018).

Key issues:

- Mental Health Promotion is defined as being “the process of enhancing protective factors that contribute to good mental health.”
- Managers play a critical role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their staff, however more work is required to better understand the mechanisms by which this happens.

While managers have a key role in 'making or breaking' organisational interventions, little is known about the factors that make them do so

The number of studies addressing the influence of managers' attitudes and actions regarding interventions and how that affects the outcomes of the intervention is limited (Lundmark, et al. 2017).

In addition, the project has developed a series of policy briefs, containing concrete recommendations for action for employers, occupational health professionals and policy makers. *'Making room for mental health at work - Recommendations from psychologists to managers'* is one of these briefs. It specifically addresses the role of managers in ensuring a 'mental health friendly' and 'mentally healthy' work environment, from the perspective of psychologists.

It focuses on the specific issues of managers to be aware of

1. The importance of mental health as an integral element of a healthy work environment
2. The need to facilitate recognition of this importance and to take practical actions to enhance a 'mentally healthy' work environment
3. The need to promote mental health at work (i.e., prevention of mental ill health) and cater for the needs of those that are affected by mental ill health.

In other words, action should address two different aspects of mental health at work, i.e., ensuring a working environment which is conducive to mental health (prevention of mental ill health/promotion of mental health) as well as cater for workers that are affected by mental health issues (support).

This briefing proposes several practical recommendations for action to effectuate a 'mentally healthy' work environment, based on the H-Work outcomes. A second briefing will address ways to support and better integrate workers that are affected by mental health problems.

- Action on mental health at work needs to address prevention and support, by building a "mentally healthy" work environment and by supporting workers experiencing mental ill health.

Headline Research and Analysis: why address mental health at work?

Decent work is known to have a positive impact on mental health. It provides the means to an income, offers a framework of structured daily routines as well as relationships with colleagues and can foster a sense of purpose and achievement.

Work and mental health are closely linked. A safe and pleasant working environment supports mental health, and in turn, good mental health enables people to work productively.

However, as referred to by the H-Work project, 'the probability that workers in poor mental health report a decrease in productivity at

Key issues:

- Decent work is an important foundation of good mental health.
- Good mental health is an important foundation of productive work.

work is about six times higher than for workers in good mental health^{iv}.

One quarter of the EU working population is expected to experience a mental health problem during their lifetime, such as depressive episodes, anxiety symptoms, adjustment reactions, burnout syndrome^v. Accordingly, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work^{vi} reported that common mental health problems, absenteeism, unemployment, and long-term disability can be directly linked to work-related stress and are dramatically growing across EU Member States.

A substantial body of evidence on the importance of and need to address mental health at work is underlined by the H-Work concept paper, published in 2020^{vii}. This research clearly shows that currently, there is not enough room for mental health at work, and that action needs to be taken to ensure that managers better address these issues as a matter of urgency.

As said above, the H-Work project addresses this urgency, underlining that 'although 79% of European managers say that they are concerned about stress and mental disorders in their workplaces, less than 30% of workplaces in Europe have procedures in place to deal with them effectively.'

The project therefore asserts that one of today's main challenges is to support organisations and their representatives in recognising psychosocial risk factors as a critical issue that needs to be addressed by concrete measures.

In addition, it is heartening to note the recent attention of organisations such as ILO and WHO on this topic. Both organisations, jointly as well as separately, advocate the 'need to train managers to support their workers' mental health, to improve managers' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours for mental health and to improve workers' help-seeking behaviours.'^{viii}

This is in line with H-Work's reference to the fact that managers often lack training on mental health issues and can hardly rely on the support of specialists^x.

- Poor mental health is a growing problem across the EU.
- EU economic cost of mental health: One European in six experience mental health problems. On average, mental illness costs EU countries more than 4% of GDP.
- A important part of the solution to this is wider training for managers on the issue of mental health and wellbeing. a useful example: [Mental Health Knowledge for Managers - MHFA England](#)

Recommendations for Managers

1 Regularly 'test the water' in terms of the state of mental health in your organisation by means of the HAT

The H-Works Assessment Toolkit (HAT) can be helpful in determining overall and individual levels of mental well-being and can show the way towards actions to address a range of eventual issues. The outcome of (this type of) survey can also form the basis of individual or group discussions. Moreover, the assessment obtained is linked to the H-Works Intervention Toolkit (HIT) which offers a range of practical solutions addressing certain specific issues related to mental health at work. It integrates state-of-the-art interventions derived from the consortium expertise and best practices.

2 Enroll in training courses to improve communication and people management skills.

Basic good people management, the use of empathy and common sense lie at the heart of 'mentally healthy' work environment. However, specific mental health training will strengthen the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of managers and can help install a sense of confidence and trust on the side of workers.

NB It is important to point out that training is not intended to turn managers into mental health care providers: managers cannot and should not take the place of mental health care professionals. The intention is to equip them with the right skills to know when and how to direct workers to appropriate sources of support as well as with a willingness to promote and advocate mental health at work. Moreover, managers should be enabled to develop an understanding of the type of psychosocial risks that can affect mental health and know how to prevent and address them.

3 Embed mental health as a 'normal' part of the work environment

Be available to your staff, making efforts to know how they are getting on and encouraging them to talk about their mental health. A good working relationship, built on mutual trust, will also help detect early warning signs of mental distress and changes in typical behaviour. Once poor mental health is suspected or disclosed, identify, and implement appropriate support, in consultation with the person concerned.

4 Ensure a positive management culture

This entails openness, mutual respect, communication, and consultation. Offer positive reinforcement and praise, offer possibilities for training and development, embed employee engagement in decision making and create opportunities for coaching, learning and development. The H-Work Innovation Platform contains a specific example of a Positive Leadership Development course.

5 Set the right example in your own day to day employment,

A good example in practice will be more stimulating than a written or stated intention. Set an example e.g., sticking to the stipulated working hours, taking breaks, ensure a good work-life balance - and make staff aware of their 'right to disconnect'.

6 Ensure a good 'fit' between the person and the job

Employing the right person for the right job is essential to prevent stress and promote good wellbeing. This starts with the job and person specifications of the job, where a distinction should be made between those requirements that are essential and those that are desirable. A proper induction process is also important.

7 Be aware of and address psychosocial risks

There are various well-known – and sometimes obvious - instigators of stress, anxiety, and depression at work*. In many instances, simple measures can lessen or remove these risks, supporting mental health at work; examples of such measures are flexible working arrangements to enable workers to

combine their home- with their employment responsibilities. Other examples relate to actively involving workers in decisions about their jobs and the way they conduct their tasks.

8 Support workers with mental health conditions to participate fully and equitably in work

This can be done by providing reasonable accommodation at work, dedicated return-to-work programmes, and supported employment initiatives. A separate policy briefing is devoted to this topic.

9 Seek the advice and support of specialist mental health care providers

(Organisational) psychologists and psychotherapists can help analyse the level of mental (ill) health or organisations, determine what (type) change is required and plan/guide processes towards mentally healthy workplaces, change/improve communication, break through stigma as well as provide individual psychological support. These health workers can also ensure appropriate training for managers.

Conclusions

Managers have a vital role to play in preventing mental ill health and protecting and promoting mental health at work. They should be enabled to help increase mental health awareness and install a 'mentally healthy' work environment, strengthen capacities and involvement of workers, recognise early warning signs, recognise psychosocial risks and act swiftly on mental health conditions at work. The H-Work project has developed a helpful tool to assess the state of play of mental health within organisations and companies, linked to potential solutions and ways to address specific issues. These tools can make a useful contribution towards actively addressing and ensuring good mental health at work.

Reference

ⁱ [H-work – Mental health in SMEs and public workplaces](#)

ⁱⁱ Mental health promotion: a literature review, Pollett H., 2007

ⁱⁱⁱ H-Work presentation European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology, 2022: "The senior managers' perception of their role in implementing H-WORK interventions for mental health and well-being".

^{iv} H-Work Project: Multilevel Interventions to promote Mental health in SMEs and Public Workplaces, International Journal of Environmental research and Public Health 2020

^v [Mental health at work \(who.int\)](#)

^{vi} <https://osha.europa.eu/en/facts-and-figures>

^{vii} H-Work Project: Multilevel Interventions to promote Mental health in SMEs and Public Workplaces, International Journal of Environmental research and Public Health 2020

^{viii} Policy Brief Mental Health at Work, ILO/WHO, 2022

^{ix} IGLOO, An integrated framework for sustainable return to work in workers with common mental disorders, Work Stress, 2018

^x Policy Brief Mental Health at Work, ILO/WHO, 2022

Contact

info@h-work.eu



The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 847386

Disclaimer: The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of the authors, and in no way represents the view of the European Commission or its services.