

Background sheet: Promoting mental health in the working population

Problem statement

The workplace can have an important positive or negative influence on the health of people. It can also be used as a medium for health promoting and preventive measures.

Mental health problems account for an increasing share of work absenteeism and disability pensions. Estimations of the ILO suggest that they cause a loss of 3-4 % of the EUs GDP, mainly through lost productivity.

Indicators to be considered

A number of statistics from Member States show an increase in mental health problems as a cause of work absenteeism and disability pensions:

Proportion of work absenteeism because of mental health problems:

- In the Netherlands there has been a steady increase of work absenteeism because of mental health problems over the past 30 years. In 2003, 35% of work absenteeism was due to mental health problems (Source: Mental Health Economics European Network).
- According to the European Working Conditions Observatory, in Germany the number of long-term sick due to mental health problems increased by 74 % between 1995 and 2002, compared to just a 10 % increase in sickness absence due to musuloskeletal or respiratory problems.
- In Sweden, during the last five years the number of sick leave because of burnout symptoms and stress related depressive disorders in the labour force has increased dramatically (Source: IMHPA country stories report).

Proportion of disability pensions because of psychiatric disorders:

- In 8 out of 9 countries for which data are available, psychiatric disorders account for at least 20% of disability pensions, in two countries (Netherlands and Finland) it accounts for more than 30%.(Source: MINDFUL-project database)
- In Austria, between 1985 and 1999 work disability because of psychiatric disorders increased by almost 250% whereas work disability for other health problems remained relatively stable or decreased (Source: Katschnig, Heinz et al: Österreichischer Psychiatriebericht 2001)

Objectives

To create healthy work places which contribute to promoting the mental wellbeing of the working population and increasing the productivity of individuals and employers.

Possible Actions (examples derived from Commission Green paper, WHO Action Plan on Mental Health and IMHPA-Action Plan):

- Adopt a participative management and workplace culture
- To establish mental health as a management priority, and to integrate it into management cultures, quality management schemes and occupational health systems

- Implement preventive interventions at the workplace that include job redesign, modifications in ergonomics, time and workload, social support and role clarification
- Implement anxiety, stress and burn-out prevention and management programmes for employees at risk and early detection and brief intervention programmes for employees to deal with alcohol, drug or mental health problems
- Identify and support workplaces and sector where employees are especially at risk for mental disorders.
- Engage trade unions in informing about and managing mental health in an organisation

Some activities in Member States (source: IMHPA-country stories report)

- Several: Network of Workplace Health Promotion
- Austria: Mental Health promotion plays a rather neglected role in *policies* on safety and health at work. Following the Act on Health and Safety at Work, mental health needs to be considered especially for screen workers, and employers have to ensure that psychological support is available for staff if needed. *Action* is carried out by a number of actors.
- Belgium: Brochures have been issued by the Ministry of Employment, Work and Social Dialogue. By law, each employer must appoint an internal or external prevention advisor, specialised in the psychosocial aspects of work (including violence and moral or sexual harassment at work). There are also initiatives at regional level.
- Finland: Mental health aspects are included in our national legislation on occupational health and safety. In the recent reforms to the Occupational Health Services Act and the Occupational Safety and Health Act special attention was paid to psychosocial overload. In addition, large national research and action programmes have been launched. Social partners recognise the importance of prevention of work stress there are also NGO-activities.
- Italy: The National Centre of Epidemiology, Surveillance and health promotion developed and validated a questionnaire to assess the psychological wellbeing in health professionals.
- Ireland: Health promotion workplace initiatives include the implementation of workplace stress reduction programmes and work life balance initiatives.
- Luxembourg: Health promotion programmes at the work place include projects to prevent mobbing and to promote well being.
- Malta: Workplace mental health is currently not provided by state agencies, although non-government organisations like Caritas and the Richmond Foundation provide certain services.
- Norway: The National Programme for Health Promoting workplaces has a significant mental health promoting impact.
- Poland: A Prime Minister's ordinance on mental health promotion and mental disorders prevention activity and implementation addresses the implementation of educational programmes in working places.
- Portugal: Programmes or strategies for the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental disorders are partially available in workplaces. In workplace settings there are some local programmes on stress management.

- Sweden: In workplaces there are a number of programmes addressing stress at the working place. The number of occupational healthcare services has been reduced during the 1980's and there is now a growing awareness that occupational health care services must be developed again. New programmes to prevent burnout syndromes and stress related depressive disorders in the labour force are being developed.
- United Kingdom: The New Deal programmes supporting people back to work and the Pathways to work Programmes have also had mental health outcomes. There are programmes supporting work-life balance and enhanced interest in programmes supporting healthy workplaces and broader corporate responsibility. Scotland has a national award programme "Scotland's health at Work" and a new commendation award for mental health and wellbeing has been established.

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