



Good employee mental health requires co-operation

Our population is ageing and there is a shortage of workforce. At the same time, incapacity for work due to mental health disorders has increased alarmingly. Systematic co-operation between mental health services and occupational health care and preventive measures by workplaces can provide Finland with more days with good work ability.

OUR POLICY BRIEF

1. Co-operation between occupational health care and other operators in the social welfare and health sector must be strengthened when it comes to treating mental health disorders of the working-age population
2. Supporting work ability and the positive effects that work has on mental health must be taken into account when treating mental health disorders in the working-age population
3. Mental health competencies of occupational health services and other operators in the social welfare and health care sector must be strengthened
4. The promotion of mental health must play a greater role in work ability support measures
5. Workplaces' and entrepreneurs' competencies and measures for strengthening mental health must be supported



THIS POLICY BRIEF IS AIMED AT

- political decision-makers
- wellbeing services county decision-makers and operators
- work life developers



Image. Taking mental health into consideration and treatment of mental health disorders is carried out in co-operation between many parties.

1. Co-operation between occupational health care and other operators in the social welfare and health sector must be strengthened when it comes to treating mental health disorders of the working-age population

Sickness absences due to mental health disorders have increased at an alarming rate over the past few years. Sickness allowance periods granted by Kela due to mental health and behavioural disorders have increased by as much as 72% between the years 2016 and 2022 (Kela sickness insurance statistics 2022). Mental health and behavioural disorders are clearly the most common group of diagnoses among recipients of disability pension (Finnish Centre for Pensions).

There are many participants in the treatment of mental health disorders of the working-age population, such as occupational health care, public mental health services and private service providers. Successful treatment of mental health disorders and promotion of work ability require co-operation between the various parties.

Assessing and promoting work ability are among the areas of expertise of occupational health care. Occupational health care is the only health care operator with a direct connection to the patient's workplace. Occupational health care is well positioned to support work ability and the opportunities of returning to work when an employee falls ill as well as reviewing the measures for adapting workload to match the functional capacity reduced by the illness in collaboration with the employee and employer. Occupational health care can also help the workplace and work community identify solutions that promote mental health.

A co-operative model between public sector mental health services and occupational health services has been built in several regions in Finland. The model is aimed at steering the person with a mental health disorder to occupational health care in order to receive an individualised work ability assessment and support measures. The objective is to enable support measures by occupational health care and the workplace before the incapacity for work becomes prolonged.

Implementation of the model is promoted by well-functioning co-operation between psychiatric care and occupational health services and enabling psychiatrists to provide digital referrals to the patient's occupational health care. It is also important to identify the patients who the co-operative model can benefit.

2. Supporting work ability and the positive effects that work has on mental health must be taken into account when treating mental health disorders in the working-age population

A prolonged sickness absence predicts permanent incapacity for work. It has been estimated that only half of all people with depression whose sickness absence continues for longer than six months will return to work life. Of those people whose sickness absence lasts more than a year, only one in four are able to return to work.

Supporting work ability and the effects that work has on mental health must be taken into account when treating mental health disorders in the working-age population. It is often possible to continue working with mild or moderate depression. Appropriately proportioned work can be a rehabilitative factor for a person recovering from a mental health disorder. Employing efficient work ability support measures already before the sickness absence becomes prolonged is of key importance. Occupational health care and the workplace must consider in co-operation the opportunities for adapting work in ways that allow the employee to continue working without long sickness absences and provide efficient support for returning to work after the sickness absence. The stigma related to mental health disorders can pose challenges to work ability support measures at workplaces.

Even part-time work can help the employee stick to their routines and maintain a sense of engagement despite the illness. Work and participation have a significant impact on both the life of an individual employee as well as the availability and productivity of labour in Finland.

It is often possible to continue working with mild or moderate depression. Appropriately proportioned work can be a rehabilitative factor.

3. Mental health competencies of occupational health services and other operators in the social welfare and health care sector must be strengthened in order to better take into consideration work ability perspectives related to mental health

Mental health competencies of operators in the social welfare and health care sector must be expanded beyond just treatment of mental health disorders. Mental health competencies also include information and understanding of mental health as a resource an area of health, ways of strengthening mental health and protective and risk factors related to it.

The competencies of occupational health care and other operators in the social welfare and health care sector along with co-operation between them must be increased. Supporting mental health and the related work ability assessment and support activities must also be taken into consideration in training of occupational health services and other operators in the social welfare and health care sector.

4. The role of promoting mental health in work ability support measures must be strengthened

Mental health plays a significant role in maintaining work ability and preventing incapacity for work. Proactive promotion of mental health at workplaces is a cost-effective way of reducing sickness absences and disability pensions due to mental health reasons. Investing in the promotion of mental health supports the continuation of careers at the beginning, middle and towards the end, which has a positive effect on the employment rate.

The promotion of mental health refers to the creation of structures and working conditions that are favourable to employees' resources, flow of work and the functionality of the work community. The earlier you invest in the promotion of mental health, the more measures you have available for strengthening mental resources and preventing problems. This also reduces the overall costs mental health disorders cause to workplaces.

Co-operation between the workplace and occupational health care is of key importance in strengthening mental resources and promoting mental health. The promotion of mental health should be brought up when planning occupational health co-operation.

The earlier you invest in the promotion of mental health, the more measures you have available for strengthening mental resources and preventing problems.

5. Workplaces' and entrepreneurs' competencies and measures for strengthening mental health must be supported

Good mental health at work supports employees' psychological and social work ability and functional capacity. It is important to promote the mental health of the working-age population and prevent increases in psychosocial workload. Both information and practical measures are needed to promote mental health.

Our society and work life both need a better understanding of the significance of mental health and the measures that can be used to strengthen mental health at work and prevent mental health issues caused by work. National programmes (such as the WORK2030 – Work and Well-being at Work Development Programme) provide a national framework for the promotion of mental health in work life.

Entrepreneurs, companies and public sector workplaces need help in choosing the appropriate measures for strengthening mental health and psychological resiliency. Support is needed with mental health competencies and practical tools as well as in implementing operational models. This support brings daily routines and operational models that promote mental health into the mainstream at workplaces and among entrepreneurs.

Finally: Good co-operation, competence and early intervention improve employee mental health

- Mental health should be promoted, resources increased and issues dealt with promptly at workplaces and in the daily lives of work communities. This requires competence, effective measures and developing the workplace practices and management.
- The promotion of mental health should be taken into consideration in co-operation between the workplace and occupational health care.
- When an employee develops a mental health disorder, seamless co-operation between occupational health care and other actors in the social welfare and health care sector ensures the effectiveness of support measures for work ability and returning to work.
- The model of co-operation between psychiatric units and occupational health care enables support measures by the workplace before the incapacity for work becomes prolonged.

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