

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

# Guidance for workplaces on how to support individuals experiencing mental health problems

Summary

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Additional good practice resources were provided by experts nominated by EU-OSHA's network of National Focal Points.

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## Why be concerned about mental health at work?

Mental health problems are very common — they affect about 84 million people across the EU.<sup>1</sup> In addition to personal suffering, mental health problems have financial implications for our society. Work can impact mental health. ‘Stress, depression or anxiety’ is the second most common type of work-related health problem in the EU,<sup>2</sup> with nearly 45% of workers reporting facing risk factors for their mental wellbeing at work. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work’s (EU-OSHA) OSH Pulse survey 2022 shows that 27% of workers experience stress, anxiety or depression caused or made worse by work.<sup>3</sup> And 10% of workers report feeling burned out.<sup>4</sup> There is a lot of stigma around mental health and those experiencing mental health problems too often face exclusion from work, despite mental health problems being so common.

On the other hand, good-quality work is good for health. With the right accommodations, many workers experiencing mental health problems can continue to work. These accommodations are often simple and low-cost.

**This report<sup>5</sup> aims to share practical information for workplaces** on how to support individuals who are experiencing a mental health problem to stay in work or successfully return to work following sickness absence. It includes examples of workplace accommodations and cases, tips and a checklist for small businesses, a list of resources and some additional advice on suicide. The report supports the European Commission’s Comprehensive approach to mental health.<sup>6</sup> It also supports the Commission’s Disability Employment Package.<sup>7</sup> It is based on the results of research conducted to identify and review good practice information for providing support<sup>8</sup> and previous EU-OSHA publications covering return to work and working with health problems.<sup>9,10,11,12</sup>

**Workplaces should address mental health in a comprehensive way** and have written mental health and return-to-work policies. The overall goals are to: promote good mental health; take preventive action to remove psychosocial risks for all workers; support workers to deal with work stress; encourage early intervention for any work stress or mental health problem; and support workers who are experiencing a mental health problem — including by making reasonable adjustments to enable people experiencing a mental health problem to work and providing effective rehabilitation and return-to-work plans.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.oecd.org/health/health-systems/OECD-Factsheet-Mental-Health-Health-at-a-Glance-Europe-2018.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat (2021) EU labour force survey 2020 module on accidents at work and other work-related health problems. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-statistical-reports/-/ks-ft-21-007>

<sup>3</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *OSH Pulse - Occupational safety and health in post-pandemic workplaces*, 2022. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/facts-and-figures/osh-pulse-occupational-safety-and-health-post-pandemic-workplaces>

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2018/burnout-workplace-review-data-and-policy-responses-eu>

<sup>5</sup> The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/user/login?destination=/en/publications/guidance-workplaces-how-support-individuals-experiencing-mental-health-problems>

<sup>6</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on A Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health COM (2023) 298. [https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/com\\_2023\\_298\\_1\\_act\\_en.pdf](https://health.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/com_2023_298_1_act_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1597&langId=en>

<sup>8</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *A review of good workplace practices to support individuals experiencing mental health problems*, 2024. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/user/login?destination=/en/publications/review-good-workplace-practices-support-individuals-experiencing-mental-health-problems>

<sup>9</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Return to work after MSD-related sick leave in the context of psychosocial risks at work*, 2021. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/return-work-after-msd-related-sick-leave-context-psychosocial-risks-work>

<sup>10</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Research review on rehabilitation and return to work*, 2016. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/research-review-rehabilitation-and-return-work>

<sup>11</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Working with chronic musculoskeletal conditions - Good practice advice report*, 2021. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/working-chronic-msds-good-practice-advice>

<sup>12</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Analysis of case studies on working with chronic musculoskeletal conditions*, 2020. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/analysis-case-studies-working-chronic-musculoskeletal-conditions>

A workplace approach to mental health should cover:

1. preventing work-related psychosocial risk factors and promoting wellbeing;
2. supporting workers or teams more exposed to work-related psychosocial risk factors;
3. supporting workers experiencing a mental health problem or work-related stress to continue work or return to work;
4. promoting mental health and wellbeing in the workplace; and
5. consulting and involving workers and their representatives over policies and actions.

Prevention (1) and consultation (5) are prerequisites for the success of the other items.

The workplace should not cause ill health or make existing conditions worse. Employers have **legal duties** under safety and health legislation to assess psychosocial risk factors and the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities and to take measures to control that risk. Employers also have duties not to discriminate against someone with a disability and provide reasonable accommodations. Precise requirements to support return to work after sickness absence vary between countries. Ensuring data protection of medical information applies in all countries,

**Work-related psychosocial risk factors** include, for example, excessive workloads, conflicting demands and lack of clarity, lack of involvement in decisions that affect the worker, lack of influence on the way the job is done, poorly managed organisational change, job insecurity, ineffective communication, lack of support from management or colleagues, psychosocial and sexual harassment, and third-party violence.<sup>13,14</sup>

## Interventions to support workers experiencing a mental health problem

**Return to work** involves all procedures and initiatives that aim to facilitate the workplace reintegration of individuals with a reduced work capacity.<sup>15</sup> Making *reasonable accommodations* at work concerns adapting work environments to fit the worker's current needs and work capacity.

Irrespective of the mental health condition, the following **principles apply when supporting employees to stay in work or return to work after an episode of sickness absence**:

- a culture of awareness and inclusion enabling disclosure of the mental health condition, to develop a sense of a psychologically safe workplace;
- early intervention, i.e. contact with the worker at an early phase of the sickness absence;
- established mental health and return-to-work policy, i.e. there are steps to take that are tailored to each case;
- managers who are trained in supporting workers' mental health and return to work;
- acceptance and support from co-workers and supervisors;
- work accommodations, based on an analysis of work tasks in relation to the worker's current work capacity; and
- follow-up of progress.

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<sup>13</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Psychosocial risks and mental health*, 2023. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-mental-health>

<sup>14</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Healthy workers, thriving companies - a practical guide to wellbeing at work*, 2018. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/healthy-workers-thriving-companies-practical-guide-wellbeing-work>

<sup>15</sup> EU-OSHA – European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, *Rehabilitation and return to work: Analysis report on EU and Member States policies, strategies and programmes*, 2016. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/rehabilitation-and-return-work-analysis-report-eu-and-member-states-policies-strategies>

As with any health problem, **early and regular contact** from the manager during sickness absence is recommended.<sup>16</sup> The focus should be on the worker's wellbeing and a detailed plan for return to work to be developed. A **gradual return to work** is often very helpful for integrating a worker back to work if the Member State's social security/sickness absence system allows for it.

**Addressing stigma and promoting open conversations:** There is stigma around all health problems, but it is worse for mental health. Stigma around mental health prevents people speaking up and seeking help early on, including in the workplace. Addressing stigma is crucial for creating a supportive and inclusive work environment. Employers can do this by showing commitment and ensuring that necessary resources are targeted towards mental health promotion at all levels and by providing resources for work accommodations for those who need them. Specific education and training can be provided to workers and supervisors on mental health at the workplace and mental health literacy. There also needs to be zero tolerance of discrimination. Workers need to feel that they can speak up about their mental health without fear of judgment by colleagues or managers, that support is available and that what they share will be treated in confidence.

**Work accommodations** are modifications of the job or work environment to fit an individual's work ability so that they can perform their job duties. In practice, many accommodations are simple and inexpensive. When supporting the person to return to work, any work-related factors must be addressed. Some examples are given in the box.

#### Examples of simple and low-cost accommodations

- Hours and schedules:
  - Later start – e.g. if sleep disturbed;
  - Allowing breaks for relaxation practice;
  - Time off for medical appointments;
  - Flexible hours and teleworking;
  - Gradual return to work.
- Tasks:
  - Allowing extra time to learn new tasks;
  - More structured tasks, breaking tasks down into smaller tasks, help with task planning;
  - Swapping tasks with colleagues.
- Equipment:
  - Voice-activated software;
  - Apps for timekeeping, planning, organising work.
- Work environment:
  - Quiet area to work, reducing noise.
- ❖ A combination of several measures may be needed.
- ❖ Interventions such as active support from the supervisor, contact with the workplace and early gradual return to work can also be important in supporting return to work.<sup>17</sup>

Employers should **check what services are available** to support themselves and individual workers. These can range from advice to tailored multidisciplinary services to grants towards making workplace accommodations.

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<sup>16</sup> Rules on contact with the employee during sickness absence (with whom and how) varies between Member States.

<sup>17</sup> OSHwiki, *Return to Work after sick leave due to mental health problems*, 2020. Available at: <https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/return-work-after-sick-leave-due-mental-health-problems>

***Inclusive workplaces for a diverse workforce:*** Making a workplace more inclusive for all workers, taking account of diversity, and providing flexibility and adjustability, for example, when buying equipment, planning tasks, workspaces and working hours, reduce the need to make accommodations for individuals and helps compliance with equality law. Workplace inclusivity should be visible in all policies and activities.

## Examples of specific accommodations

The report provides examples of accommodations for specific mental health problems and short case examples.

### **Case example**

A woman with bipolar disorder has a risk of falling ill with relapses once or twice a year and she is sometimes forgetful about taking her medication. Otherwise, the illness does not affect her work. Openness and communication with her manager have been crucial to her continued working — her manager understands her illness and values her work. This is important for her self-esteem. As winter darkness can trigger a depression, she and her manager always make a plan together for how to act if she has a relapse in November, when the risk is greatest. She does not always have a relapse, but a plan made in advance in September is ready just in case.

## In conclusion

Good-quality work is supportive of mental health and most people experiencing a mental health problem want to work. There is an urgent need to tackle stigma around working with a mental health problem. Diagnoses also attract different degrees of stigma which is why people often prefer them to remain confidential. With the right support and accommodations, many more workers experiencing mental health problems could continue to work. The return-to-work process is the same as for physical conditions. There are many different accommodations that can be helpful, many are simple and low-cost and within the means of small businesses. However, the more a workplace is inclusive and takes account of diversity, the less need there will be for individual accommodations and the stigma involved in asking for them. Focusing on preventing risks at source, incorporating adaptability and promoting wellbeing is also part of making a workplace inclusive. Having specific policies for all workers and flexible work arrangements, such as adaptable working hours and teleworking, can support continued working while experiencing a mental health problem or other health conditions.

**The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)** contributes to making Europe a safer, healthier and more productive place to work. The Agency researches, develops, and distributes reliable, balanced, and impartial safety and health information and organises pan-European awareness raising campaigns. Set up by the European Union in 1994 and based in Bilbao, Spain, the Agency brings together representatives from the European Commission, Member State governments, employers' and workers' organisations, as well as leading experts in each of the EU Member States and beyond.

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