

Mental Health at the Workplace – What the evidence shows and what organisations can do

Why this matters

Mental health is a major determinant of employee wellbeing and productivity. Evidence shows that mental health at work is shaped not only by individual resilience but also by how work is organised, managed and supported. When organisations address psychosocial risks and support employees effectively, they can significantly reduce stress, depression and sickness absence.



Working conditions matter

Research shows that adverse psychosocial working conditions—including job strain, effort–reward imbalance, job insecurity and poor psychosocial safety climate—significantly increase the risk of depression and other mental health problems (Niedhammer et al., 2021; Lunen et al., 2023; Mathisen et al., 2024;). Effective workplace strategies therefore focus on improving the organisation of work itself, including managing workloads, increasing employee autonomy, ensuring fair recognition and reward, and preventing workplace harassment and other forms of interpersonal mistreatment (Rugulies et al., 2023; EU-OSHA, 2022).

Leadership makes a difference

Supportive supervisors and psychologically safe workplaces are associated with lower levels of mental distress, depression and burnout. A strong psychosocial safety climate—reflecting organisational commitment to workers’ psychological health—is linked to reduced stress, depressive symptoms and sickness absence (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). Training managers to recognise early signs of distress and communicate openly with employees can improve managerial support and reduce mental-health-related sickness absence (Milligan-Saville et al., 2017; Gayed et al., 2018). Leadership engagement is therefore central to effective workplace mental-health strategies (WHO & ILO, 2022).

Five Practical Actions for Organisations

1. Assess psychosocial risks: Identify stressors such as excessive workload, role ambiguity and low autonomy using tools such as the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ) or the HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool (EU-OSHA, 2022).
2. Train managers in supportive leadership: Equip supervisors to recognise stress, support employees and foster psychologically safe workplaces (WHO & ILO, 2022).
3. Improve job design: Increase employee control, clarify roles and ensure realistic workloads (Rugulies et al., 2023).
4. Prevent workplace harassment: Implement clear policies and reporting mechanisms to promote respectful workplace cultures (EU-OSHA, 2022).
5. Provide accessible mental health support: Offer counselling, Employee Assistance Programmes and digital interventions such as WHO Step-by-Step (OECD, 2021).

Mental Health Promotion in the Construction Industry

The Construction workplace has a number of features that can make it difficult as a setting for implementing WHP. They vary hugely in size, location and degree of complexity; they are temporary in nature and undergoing rapid development as construction develops. Workers are often self-employed, on temporary contracts and working for small employers.

Construction sites are amongst the most hazardous of workplaces – in many countries they produce the highest rates of industrial deaths as well as having a wide range of occupational health hazards. Recent years have also led to a major concern about the mental health of construction workers. Findings from many surveys indicate that rates of mental health problems, as well as suicide rates are amongst the highest in the economy.

In Ireland, there has been a significant development in the area recently. The Cáirde programme (Friends in the Irish language) has published a report on the conceptualisation, development and piloting of a mental health and suicide prevention programme in the sector. This programme has the support and involvement of a wide range of stakeholders including the public health authorities, representatives from industry and labour representatives and a number of other players.

The main findings from this work are far reaching – there is a need to address in an inclusive way the large-scale health need in the area, the response should involve both raising awareness of the issues and providing the skills for both employers and employees to effectively address mental health issues. Two training/awareness programmes have been developed and piloted – the GAT (General Awareness Training) which is aimed at the construction worker population and Connector Training which is targeting anyone on building sites that have a health and safety or managerial responsibility.

The growth of Workplace Health Promotion

In this year of the 40th anniversary of the Ottawa Charter (in many ways the birthplace of health promotion as a public policy), a recent publication has thrown light on the growth of health promotion in the workplace over the past decades. Using a bibliometric approach, where the relevant literature is searched and classified, a number of key findings were observed:

Between 1983 and 2024, there has been a steady and dramatic increase in research publications in the area - only 1 study was identified in 1983, while a peak of 54 were identified in 2006. Overall, an average of 40 publications per annum were observed.

- Studies came from 76 countries, with the US being the most prominent. However, European countries featured heavily on the top 10 countries.
- The content of published studies has evolved over the years, with more emphasis in recent times on more comprehensive approaches to WHP and on a broader range of health issues
- There is an ongoing and strengthening link between health and safety and WHP in many studies.
- The review concludes by making some recommendations on key research areas for the future. These include examining how training and education impact WHP, work-life balance, healthy ageing and the role of workplace culture.

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Spring 2026 Newsletter

The content for the next newsletter has not yet been finalized. We are always on the lookout for articles for our newsletter, so if you have a good practice example or some new WHP research you would like to share please let us know.



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