



Employees'
mental health
-A critical
business asset

Issue 2025



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Executive summary

Mental health issues have become alarmingly widespread, and companies now have a greater need than ever to support the mental well-being of their employees. This is due to various factors, such as increased workloads and the need to adapt to constant changes. Organisations need to understand the risks that employees' mental health problems can pose to their business.

Employee well-being is directly linked to an individual's performance and commitment to work, both of which mental health issues can significantly impair. Furthermore, these issues can lead to extended periods of sick leave, disability pensions, and an increased likelihood of accidents, resulting in significant costs for companies. Therefore, investing in mental health can yield substantial long-term savings, not to mention improving the employees' quality of life. Additionally, organisations that prioritise the mental health of their employees attract more motivated and qualified workforce. Addressing mental health issues by employers is now a strategic advantage that sets forward-thinking organisations apart from their competitors.

How can companies succeed in supporting the mental health of their staff? This White Paper focuses on providing recommendations for precisely that.

- Prevention is key. Companies are recommended to proactively identify factors within job tasks that can contribute to mental strain and reduce their impact. Preventative measures also include building psychological safety, strengthening resilience, offering mental health training, and supporting healthy lifestyles.

- Despite preventive measures, mental health issues may still arise, and they can be handled within the organisation, especially by supervisors. When early signs of strain are noticed, they can be addressed through open dialogue, and the need for measures to support work ability, such as work modifications, are recommended.

- Sometimes an employer may need support from professional counselling services.

- Organisations are recommended to regularly measure the impact of their mental health initiatives and learn from past challenges to develop practices that support mental health within the organisation.

Addressing mental health issues in the workplace requires a clear process, resources, and investments. Open discussions about mental health are the first step towards a healthier and more productive workforce. It is essential for organisations to take immediate action to reduce mental health issues, and create a supportive and psychologically safe working environment for their employees.

1. Introduction

+40%

increase in mental health issues in Norway in the recent years.

€11B

the estimated annual cost of mental health disorders in Finland.

Mental health issues have become increasingly prevalent in recent years, causing significant concern at both the corporate and societal levels. Nordic countries, often considered among the world's happiest nations, are not immune to this concern, with mental health issues being the most common cause of work disability in the Nordic region (Finnish Centre for Pensions, 2021). In Finland, for instance, mental health-related reasons became the most common cause of temporary or full work disability pensions in 2019 (TTK, 2021; Työeläke, 2023).

The role of psychological well-being is crucial in societies relying on innovation and expertise (Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022). The Nordic countries can be classified as economies based on innovation development, making the support of psychological well-being a critical societal focus. In Norway, mental health issues have increased by an alarming 40% in recent years, while in Denmark, nearly one-fifth of individuals aged 16 to 24 experience mental health issues. In Sweden, nearly 20% of young women experience significant nervousness and anxiety in their daily lives (The Guardian, 2018). Approximately one in five Finnish adults is estimated to suffer from some form of mental health disorder annually, one of the highest rates in Europe (Mieli ry, 2021).

In Norway, work, mental health and sickness absence research by STAMI (The National Institute of Occupational Health in Norway) estimates that 15% of long term sickness absences is due to known psychosocial risk factors, and 25% of mental health problems among workers could have been avoided if known psychosocial risk factors would have been eliminated. This underlines the importance of working towards a good psychosocial working environment.

There is broad evidence in research (for example; Waddel&Burton (2006) and Rueda (2012) that work is good for our health, including our mental health, however a good (psychosocial) working environment is required to achieve these effects.

The concerns around mental health in the work environment are not limited to the Nordic countries but extends across Europe, with mental health issues steadily increasing in recent years, incurring significant costs for businesses and society as a whole (European Commission, 2018). The estimated annual cost of mental health disorders in Finland alone is roughly €11 billion, while at the European level - taking into account reduced productivity, healthcare burdens, social security, and unemployment - mental health issues cost approximately €600 billion annually (Kela, 2019; European Commission, 2023).

The full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mental health is still uncertain, but mental health-related disorders are a serious public health and economic problem, similar to some physical illnesses.

Addressing mental health issues and their associated costs is not solely the responsibility of the healthcare sector. Given the alarming trends in mental health issues, every workplace must take proactive measures to promote mental well-being. Simply complying with legislation is no longer sufficient in the current situation. Understanding mental health as an integral part of work and working life is crucial, both for the current workforce and the workforce of the future (Mieli ry, 2023a). However, concrete measures on how to support the mental health of employees, are often unclear.

This White Paper explores on mental health from an organisation perspective and the factors in the workplace that contribute to mental health issues. The primary focus of this White Paper concentrates on preventive mental health work that can be implemented within companies.

2.

Terminology related to mental health

Understanding mental health-related terminology can be challenging and distinguishing between mental health disorders and normal reactions in everyday life, such as occasional responses to disappointment or sad news, can be difficult. For instance, feelings of sadness and anxiety are a part of everyone's life, but in these cases, they do not constitute a mental health disorder. Drawing the line between a healthy and an unhealthy mind can be complex, which is why mental health disorders are categorised based on the presence of concurrent symptoms (Mehiläinen, 2023).

2.1. Mental health issues and disorders

"Mental health is a state of well-being in which we are able to recognise our own capabilities, cope with life's challenges, and participate in workplace activities" (Ojanperä, 2023). Mental health can also be defined as a balance in one's psychological life, where social situations, mood, thinking, and emotions are in harmony (Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022).

Mental health issues can vary in duration, nature, and cause. Mental health issues typically refer to a temporary state that may cause stress or anxiety, but may not necessarily require medical treatment. Different mental health issues can affect a person's ability to perform their daily tasks. In the context of the workplace, work ability refers to a person's capability to perform a specific job or task, and mental health also influences this capacity. Mental health disorders, on the other hand, refer to various diagnosed illnesses, such as the most common afflictions including anxiety disorders, depression, psychosis, personality disorders, and eating disorders (Table 1), diagnosed by healthcare professionals (WHO, 2019).

Although mental health disorder and mental health issue are two different concepts, they are often used interchangeably. The mental health status of each individual is unique, meaning that even if a person does not have a diagnosed mental health disorder, their mental health may be poor in poor condition.

Conversely, living with a mental health disorder does not necessarily mean that an individual's overall mental health is in poor condition. To clarify, in this White Paper, the term "mental health issue" is used to encompass both short-term and long-term issues, as well as possible diagnosed disorders.

The most common disorders in the population include anxiety disorders and depression. Symptoms of mental health disorders are related to disturbances in behaviour, thought processes, and emotions (Me-
hiläinen, 2023). Mental and behavioural disorders are classified under the ICD-10 disease classification under the F-diagnosis category (F00-F99).

MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER	TYPICAL SYMPTOMS
Anxiety disorders, F40–41	Excessive worry and tension, panic attacks, fear of social situations, obsessive-compulsive symptoms
Depression, F32	Low mood, severe loss of feelings of pleasure, loss of interest, fatigue, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, feelings of inferiority and worthlessness, memory problems, inability to concentrate, indecisiveness
Eating disorders, F50	Disturbed attitude towards food and weight, feeling in control through eating, binge eating, craving to lose weight
Personality disorders, F60–62	Abnormal personality traits that cause significant distress and interfere with normal functioning and relationships
Post-traumatic stress disorder, F43	Repeated memories of the traumatic event, nightmares, and fears, resulting in avoidance of trauma-related situations
Psychosis, F21–24	Disturbed sense of reality, delusions, hallucinations, confusion, abnormal behaviour

Table 1. Typical mental health disorders, symptoms and their ICD-10 disease classifications. (Komulainen, Lehtonen & Mäkelä, 2012)

Problems and symptoms vary from person to person, making it difficult to classify and identify them. The effectiveness of a particular treatment depends on individual characteristics, which is why no single treatment can be universally defined.

According to Thomas Tobro Wøien, Chief Psychologist at Vertikal Helse, Norway; "For a diagnosis to be made, mental health problems often have to be of a certain duration, and also involve a loss of function over time on important life areas. If an employee is diagnosed with a mental disorder, it is vital to understand that this person is much more than their diagnosis, there is so much this diagnosis doesn't say anything about, for example, such as resources the employee has, their possibilities, how they are as a friend, as a colleague, and so on."

3.

Risk factors for mental health issues

Mental well-being is a complex entity composed of various individual and environmental characteristics. Genetic factors and disruptions in brain chemistry play a role in the likelihood of developing mental health disorders. Our genetics can influence our susceptibility to certain mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety. Although we cannot change our genetics, understanding them can help us identify potential risks and make informed choices to support our mental health. Another significant factor is individual temperament and personality. Some of us may be more prone to stress, perfectionism, or excessive worry, which can increase the risk of mental health issues. By recognising our own traits, we can learn to manage them more effectively and reduce the impact of stress and anxiety.

Biological sex and age are also known to affect the risk of developing issues with mental health. Mental health issues are more common in women, and some mental health disorders, such as depression, also exhibit gender differences in prevalence. Age is also identified as one component that influences the risk. Young people are more susceptible to the development of mental health disorders and issues than older individuals. Challenges in the work ability of young people have become increasingly prominent in recent years.

There are also vulnerability factors in a person's living environment that can predispose them to mental health issues (see Figure 1). These factors can contribute to a person's vulnerability – but people may compensate for them when life is good. However, such factors can make you more vulnerable for developing mental health issues when facing difficult periods, stress, traumas, high workloads, and so on.

Meanwhile, triggering factors could refer to adverse life events happening here and now – stressors, traumas, conflicts, etc., that can bring on the onset of a mental health issue. In relation to work, certain industries have stressors that, when uncontrolled, expose individuals to psychological disorders. It may be difficult for employers to address or approach factors affecting an individual's mental health in their personal life. However, it is a fact that one's personal life influences their work, and conversely, work impacts one's personal life.

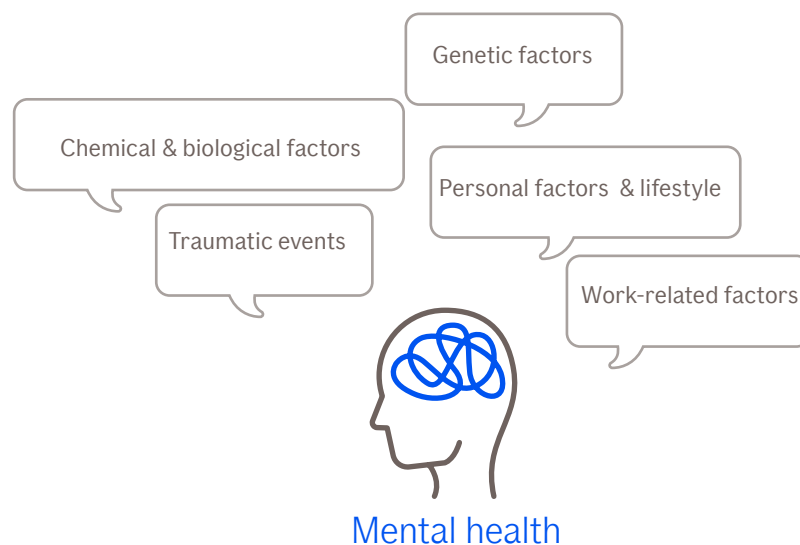


Figure 1. Factors Affecting Mental Health.
Adapted from IOSH (2018).

3.1. Age as a factor

The sickness allowance based on mental health issues has recently been on the rise, with the most concerning trend observed among young adults. In the case of younger age groups, approximately 80% of disability pensions for those under 35 are attributed to mental health issues. Young adults appear to be more susceptible to mental health issues in their workplaces, compared to older employees (Finnish Centre for Pensions, 2022; Centre for Mental Health, 2017), with about 65% of young people aged 18-29 in the Nordic countries reporting occasional stress negatively affecting their daily lives (If P&C Insurance Ltd, 2024). There are many factors contributing to why the most significant mental health challenges are directed towards young employees entering the workforce. Exhaustion, anxiety, and depression are increasingly prevalent even during the academic phase, which also affects the transition into the working world. Uncertainty about one's competence in the early stages of a career can lead to anxiety, and educational institutions may not necessarily provide sufficient preparation for the demands of the professional world, making these demands seem overwhelming.

An excessive workload combined with excessive responsibility early in one's employment can trigger burnout in young workers. In the spring of 2023, If P&C Insurance organised a workshop for 28 university students addressing factors related to the work ability of young people. Based on the gathered material, it became clear that at the start of a new job, there is a substantial influx of new information, which takes time to internalise, and applying all this knowledge is not easy at the beginning. Consequently, being burdened with too much responsibility exposes young workers to high performance pressures and may distort their perception of what they should achieve and what demands they can meet. On the other hand, having too little responsibility renders the work meaningless, which is a stress-inducing and commitment-reducing factor. According to the workshop, young people's expectations of the working life include meaningful work, a low hierarchy, a fair working community, fair pay matching their skills, work-life balance, and approachable managers. If the preconceived expectations of the working life are not met, and the daily realities of work turn out negatively, this is reflected in high staff turnover, decreased work performance, and increased sick leave.

Given the labour shortage in many fields, it is crucial to pay attention to the work ability and well-being management of young adults, as they need to be capable for working to address the labour shortage (Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, 2023a).

3.2. Gender-related factors in mental health issues

Mental health issues seem to manifest somewhat differently between the sexes. When broken down by age groups, women's mental health issues have been slightly more prevalent than men's, a trend also observed among young people in the Nordic countries (Kela, 2019; Kela, 2022; The Guardian, 2018). Men are more susceptible to mental health issues related to substance abuse (such as alcoholism and drug problems) and are 3.5 times more likely to commit suicide than women (Chang et al., 2019; WHO, 2002; Eurofound, 2020). On the other hand, women are more prone to anxiety disorders, depression (twice as common as in men), and stress, often associated with the balancing act between family life and work (THL, 2020; If P&C Insurance Ltd., 2024; Mielen-terveystalo, 2023).

In Finland, women more frequently receive sickness allowances based on mental health issues than men, and anxiety disorders are an ongoing trend among women (Kela, 2019; Kela, 2022, see Figure 2). Moreover, women are more likely than men to seek treatment for their mental health issues, so men's experienced problems may not always become part of the statistics.

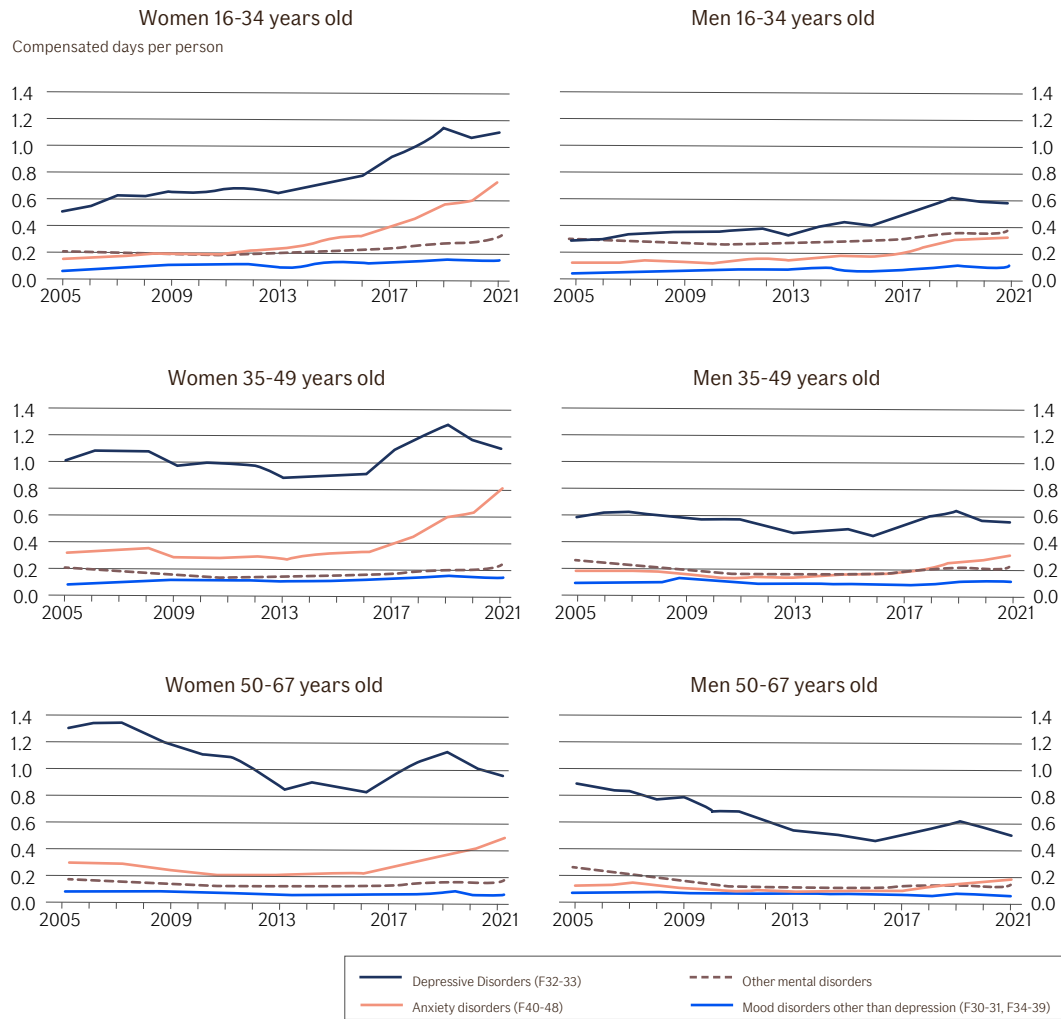


Figure 2. Sickness allowance days paid based on mental health issues by diagnostic group (Men, Women) for different age groups, per non-retired individual in the years 2005-2021. Cited from the source Kela (2022).

3.3. Personal factors and lifestyle

In order to influence the susceptibility to mental health issues, a deeper understanding of how personal factors and lifestyle choices contribute to mental well-being. There are certain factors we can more easily influence through our choices, while others we may not be able to influence at all. Personal and lifestyle-related factors that affect mental health include:

- Sleep quality
- Substance abuse issues
- Nutrition
- Physical activity and physical health
- Financial situation
- Socioeconomic status
- Relationships
- Cultural factors
- Gender identity (experience of discrimination or uncertainty about one's identity)

While we cannot change our genetic makeup, we can make conscious choices regarding our diet, exercise, sleep, stress management, and social support. Through these choices, we can strengthen or, conversely, weaken our mental well-being and impact the risk of mental health issues.

Mental health can also be influenced by various chemical or biological factors such as radiation, different toxins, or inflammation caused by pathogens. (Mehiläinen, 2023; IOSH, 2018) Individuals may be exposed to these factors in the context of their work tasks, which must be carefully considered in the workload assessment.

3.4. Workload and industry

Every workplace has its own stressors that affect the mental health of employees. Careful consideration should be given to the assessment of stressors because their effective management can result in improved productivity, fewer absences, and greater employee commitment. When discussing stress, it's important to remember that stressors, such as appropriate work-related stress, can, at their best, also support work capacity and provide a sense of meaningfulness in work. Certain stressors may feel burdensome to one individual but manageable to another (Mieli ry, 2023a).

Common psychosocial factors related to work that have been identified to negatively impact mental health are depicted in Figure 3.

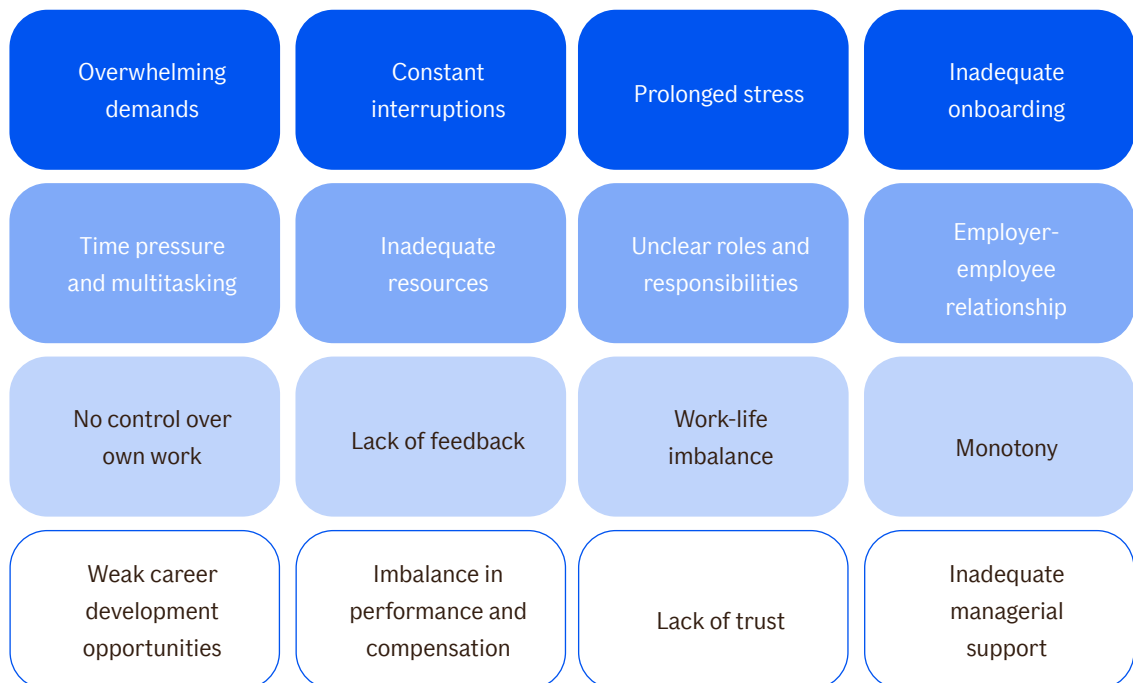


Figure 3. Factors Related to Work That Impact Mental Health. (Mieli ry, 2023b; Mehiläinen, 2023; IOSH, 2018; Juvani, 2019; Kela, 2022; Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022)

Thomas Tobro Wøien, Chief Psychologist at Vertikal Helse in Norway notes that, some concrete examples of psychosocial factors with negative impact include lack of social support (from both managers and colleagues) as well as bullying or harassment, and finally conflicts in the workplace."

Certain job tasks and the nature of work can increase the risk of developing mental health issues, especially if the work involves traumatic experiences, frequent distressing situations, constant stress, or performance pressure. However, stressors vary across different industries and individuals.

Individuals working in the following sectors or roles are more likely to experience high levels of stress and mental strain that can predispose them to the onset of mental health issues:

- Service industry employees
- Humanitarian workers
- Healthcare professionals
- First responders
- Veterinarians
- Construction workers
- Teachers
- Lawyers

(Jansson, 2017; WHO, 2022; Business Insider, 2019)

For example, approximately 40% of young employees in the service industry feel they lack the skills for adequate recovery from their work, which can be attributed to factors like challenging social interactions and constant time pressure. Additionally, veterinarians, construction workers, teachers, and lawyers are professional groups that stand out in depression and suicide statistics. Veterinarians work in an emotionally challenging setting as they make difficult decisions on the fate of people's pets. Construction workers face issues related to high alcohol consumption rates and elevated suicide rates. In the education sector, teachers are prone to depression due to repeated mental and emotional strain. Lawyers commonly experience problems such as burnout and prolonged stress due to tight schedules and long working hours. (Jansson, 2017; WHO, 2022; Business Insider, 2019).

4.

Manifestation of mental health issues in the workplace

Mental health issues have a significant impact on the well-being at work, but also on the economy of the organisation. Long periods of absence from key personnel are a relevant risk to organisations' business, as are increased risks of accidents and injuries. It is therefore important to be able to identify all the ways in which impaired mental health of staff can manifest itself in the day-to-day life of a company, so that it can be addressed. Safe and healthy working conditions, both physical and mental, are a right for all and also support performance and productivity. (WHO, 2022) When the mental wellbeing of staff deteriorates, the effectiveness, quality, meaningfulness and safety of work suffer.

4.1. Economic impact

Mental health issues have a significant cost impact, both nationally and at a company level. For example, it is estimated that it costs around 120 times the monthly salary of a 30-year-old employee to retire on disability (Mehiläinen, 2023). This cost is allocated to the company and the individual, depending on the country in question. In 2019, mental health issues were the second most common cause of sick leave, accounting for 16% of all sick leaves. The most common causes of sick leave benefits paid on the basis of mental health are anxiety disorders and depression, and the increase in these disorders has also been the most visible in recent years (Kela, 2019). In Finland, Norway and Denmark, around 200,000 - 300,000 people suffer from depression in each country every year, and in Sweden up to 400,000 - 500,000 (World Population Review, 2023; If P&C Insurance Ltd, 2024).

In terms of the length of sick leave, the average length of daily sick leave for mental health issues was 62 days in 2018, which was longer than the average length of sick leave for musculoskeletal disorders. (Kela, 2019; European Commission, 2023) The average absence rate in Finnish companies is around 4.5%, which corresponds to around 10 days of absence per year. For example, for a company with 1,000 employees and average staff earnings of around €3,000/month, the cost of one day of sick leave is around €476. In this case, if absenteeism can be reduced by even 10%, this could save just under half a million euros a year. (Varma, 2023)

“Investing in managing mental health, pays back to the organisation.”

–MIELI ry

Today, for example in Norway there is a focus on the increase in sick-leave due to mental health problems, but also that the amount of people receiving disability pension due to mental disorders (now 36% in the country) is increasing more than any other group of diagnoses and disabilities due to mental disorders. Thomas Tobro Wøien, Chief Psychologist at Vertikal Helse, notes that increasingly, "these diagnoses occur at a younger age, leading to more 'lost working years' than the whole group of cancer and cardiovascular diseases combined."

4.2. Key personnel risks

Long periods of sickness absence due both to mental health and potential disability are not the only areas where mental health issues generate costs. Indirect costs arise from the overtime and substitute arrangements that have to be made as a result of absences, which in turn can put stress on other employees. The challenges in the working ability of critical and hard-to-replace key personnel can also pose a significant risk to a company's business. Certain specialists, CEOs or other key personnel may have a wealth of skills and knowledge that maintains important customer relationships or production processes, the loss of which to a long period of sick leave or to a competitor would cause severe setbacks to the business. This does not mean that only their wellbeing should be invested in, but highlights the importance of supporting and promoting preventive measures in companies.

As it is difficult to replace key personnel, the company should, in addition to good quality management of wellbeing at work, minimise the risks associated with key personnel, by transferring their knowledge to others and ensuring that the undocumented knowledge and working practices are available to others. In this way, the company is less vulnerable when business continuity does not depend solely on one key person, which is true not only for sick leave but also for when key personnel retire. In addition, the workload of key personnel is often heavy and the role stressful, increasing the risk of fatigue and mental health issues, so sharing information with others will also help to reduce the burden. (SRHY, 2023) For example, workers close to retirement age have ac-

accumulated a huge amount of knowledge that may not be documented at all. Systematic efforts should be made to transfer this knowledge to younger employees in order to minimise any negative impact on the company's business after a key person has left.

4.3. Presenteeism

On the mental health side, depression and work fatigue are connected to presenteeism. Presenteeism is the phenomenon whereby an employee is working despite illness (physical or mental), which leads to a decrease in productivity at work. In fact, the cost of presenteeism is estimated to be around 1.5 times higher than sickness absence, making it a major economic area of focus alongside the management of well-being at work. The phenomenon is even suspected to be more prevalent than absenteeism due to illness (Juvani, 2019). Moreover, workplaces that experience an increase in presenteeism are more likely to report stress-related absenteeism and to notice an increase in staff mental health disorders (Robertson Cooper, 2023). In Finland, the cost of presenteeism has been estimated at up to €3.4 billion (Juvani, 2019) In Norway and Sweden, it is estimated that more than half of employees have worked while sick in the past year (Johansen, 2013). On the mental health side, depression and work fatigue are identified as the main causes of presenteeism. Particularly stressful work and limited influence on one's own work are identified as factors associated with presenteeism (Juvani, 2019).

Presenteeism is difficult to notice, which is why many employees can stay at work and work unproductively for a long period of time before the topic is addressed. Because of this, it is important to be able to recognise early signs of mental health deterioration by superiors and colleagues, because it affects the smoothness and performance of work. In 2022, a survey commissioned by Terveystalo (2023) noted an interesting decrease in mental health-related sickness absences, which can be explained by a phenomenon called persistence. Persistence is typically observed when going from one crisis to another, such as from the pandemic to the war in Ukraine, which changed the security situation in Europe and people's everyday life, both in terms of the sense of security and from the point of view of economic effects. Persistence is more common in 30-40-year-olds living busy years, who do not necessarily recognise issues in terms of their own coping. (Terveystalo, 2023)

4.4. Burnout and stress

Stress is a normal reaction of the body that everyone is familiar with, which at best helps a person adapt to different situations and solve problems. Stress reactions can be triggered by a physical or mental threat that causes the same type of stress reaction regardless of the type of trigger. Work stress is known to be one of the most significant causes of diseases. About 60–80% of doctor visits are estimated to have connection to stress, and about 84% of Nordics experience negative stress in their everyday life. Whereas occasional psychological symptoms in the form of stress are common, prolonged work stress has a triggering effect on, for example, sleep disorders, spirals of infection, depression, heart disease and work burnout. Employees experiencing work stress are estimated to be 20–30% more prone to depression. (Juvani, 2019; Venho, 2018; If P&C Insurance Ltd, 2024) Long-term work stress can have serious consequences. One of the most well-known consequences is burnout, i.e., work exhaustion, the background of which is the same body reactions as in short-term stress reactions. (Juvani, 2019)

Simultaneous stress on the nervous system, psyche and immune system can become such a serious disorder that full recovery from it is slow. Because of this, attention should be paid to the prevention of work burnout.

A tired employee is usually initially a motivated employee in bad conditions, in terms of well-being at work. An overburdened person may not be able to recognise the situation themselves, because the state of overload can become the new normal of everyday life, which only triggers burnout after months or years. The formation of long-term stress can be prevented with sufficient sleep and recovery (Venho, 2018; Uusitalo-Arola, Tuisku & Rossi, 2022).

Personal factors can also play a part here, employees with high inner standards, can be prone to think that they are not good enough. Employers could contribute in collaboration with such employees, providing them with help to set limits, provide them with clear expectations, clear feedback when something is good enough, for example.

Work stress is caused by e.g., lack of support at work, low wages, poor opportunities for influence, large amount of work and workload. These factors can lead to stress reactions, which can be divided into physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural. Physiological stress reaction is the transition of the body to the so-called alert state. Emotional reactions include worry, sensitive frustration, and irritability, while cognitive reactions include decreased ability to concentrate, problems with working memory, and understanding the whole. Stress also causes various changes in behaviour, such as exposure to an unhealthy diet, the use of substances and reduces the desire to exercise. (Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022; Juvani, 2019) The effects and prevalence of work stress can come up in the workplace, for example, in connection with personnel surveys.

4.5. Linking mental health and occupational safety

Mental health issues have a connection to workplace accident and property damage risks. Employees suffering from mental health issues and, in general, higher psychological stress during the workday are more prone to work accidents (AustraliaWideFirstAid, 2022; Skogstad et al., 2013; Hilton & Whiteford, 2010; Mieli ry, 2023a).

Employees suffering from depression or anxiety may be less focused on their tasks and ignore the risk factors in their work environment, which increases the risk of an occupational accident (Barger et al., 2005). In addition, sleep disorders or lack of sleep, which often occur in connection with mental health issues, increase the number of mistakes and the resulting injuries at work. The connection between insufficient recovery and mental health is known as both a cause and a consequence of mental health issues. (Kaleva, 2022)

Certain mental health issues are known to have an effect on the ability to take risks and, for example, if a disorder involves strong fluctuations in emotional levels, it can be seen as impulsive risk-taking (Tull, 2022). The effects on the ability to take risks can also be seen, for example, as repeated and deliberate neglect of the safety instructions.

Work-related stress is known as one significant factor that weakens mental health, which also worsens existing disorders or problems. It has been established that intense work stress and stress reactions do not only lead to work productivity problems, but also increase bad decisions, work management problems, lower concentration and working memory. The contribution of these to the probability of human errors can range from an increase in personal and property damage risks to even cyber security risks. (Juvani, 2019; IOSH, 2018; Giorgi, Leon-Perez & Perminienė, 2015) In addition to general work efficiency, presenteeism can weaken judgement at work, which can lead to accidents. (Robertson Cooper, 2023)

4.6. Shift to work ability management

The promotion of mental health is part of a broader whole of work ability management, which includes measures and strategies related to the maintenance of employees' health and work ability. The focus of work ability management is shifting from the promotion of physical work ability to a more comprehensive work ability management, where the importance of mental resources for work ability must also be recognised. Good mental health can be said to be the basis of work ability (Mieli ry, 2023a). In cases of mental health sick leave, the longer the leave, the less likely it is that the employee will return to work. Only about a quarter of people are able to return to work fully capable to work after a prolonged mental health-related sick leave. Even a month or two of mental health-based sick leave makes it difficult to return to normal work. (TTK, 2021; World Population Review, 2023; If P&C Insurance Ltd, 2024)

It is especially difficult to return to work, if the main cause of the issues has been work-related and no changes in work that would facilitate the return have taken place or are taking place. Early detection and treatment of mental health issues are often challenging, as access to public mental health services can be slow and difficult due to really long queues. Access to public mental health services also requires a lot of effort and initiative from the person suffering from mental health issues, which is a difficult situation. Because of this, it is estimated that up to a third of those suffering from mental health issues do not get help when they need it (THL, 2020). The longer the wait to get help, the slower the recovery from mental health issues can be (Mieli ry, 2021).

This highlights the importance of support from family, friends and also the workplace. Mental health competence can be said to be one of the most important working life skills today (Mieli ry, 2023a). Employers must understand that even if employees are doing well at a certain moment, people can develop mental health disorders at any point in their careers. Without existing plans and practices for maintaining mental well-being and responding to symptoms, the risk of developing issues, especially in stressful work, is always higher.

What is the current situation regarding the promotion of mental health in companies? About 91% of employees value mental health as important as physical health, but only a good half rate their workplace as safe for their mental well-being (TNS, 2014). Only 18% of employees strongly believe that they receive enough support for their mental well-being at work. For their part, around 40 percent of HR managers strongly felt that their organisation provides resources to support employees' mental well-being. (SHRM, 2021) Thus, there would seem to be a very large difference in the perception of an adequate support process between the employees' and the employer's perspectives.

Another drawback relevant to the topic is the lack of education related to mental health. It is estimated that around 57% of companies do not offer training related to mental well-being to managers, and of those that do, 79% of the training is voluntary (IOSH, 2019). The voluntary nature of the training itself already indicates that the topic is not necessarily considered important enough compared to, for example, trainings that promote occupational safety.

Companies that focus on promoting the mental health of their personnel and preventive measures against mental health issues, are more likely to succeed in a competitive setting. Extending careers and consistently productive work throughout the working career can be achieved with work ability management that takes into account not only physical health but also mental health. Change begins when management commits to improving mental health and takes the promotion of mental health as part of its own strategy and talking about it is normalised. Organisations should therefore discuss which factors in their business and decisions can affect the mental health of their personnel. (Mieli ry, 2023a)

According to
the If Nordic Health Report,

only 2%

of employees with mental health problems think they have received sufficient support from their employers, suggesting there is a need for more knowledge on mental health among managers/employers.

5.

Recommendations on promoting the mental health of employees

It is possible to prevent mental health issues and prevent their worsening in the workplace with the process shown in Figure 4. The process can be thought of as layers of different degrees of measures that can prevent the development or worsening of mental health issues. The process extends from prevention and early intervention to the right response, treatment and return-to-work plans. (Mieli ry, 2021) The mental health activities of companies can also be systematically developed and evaluated based on previous successes or failures.

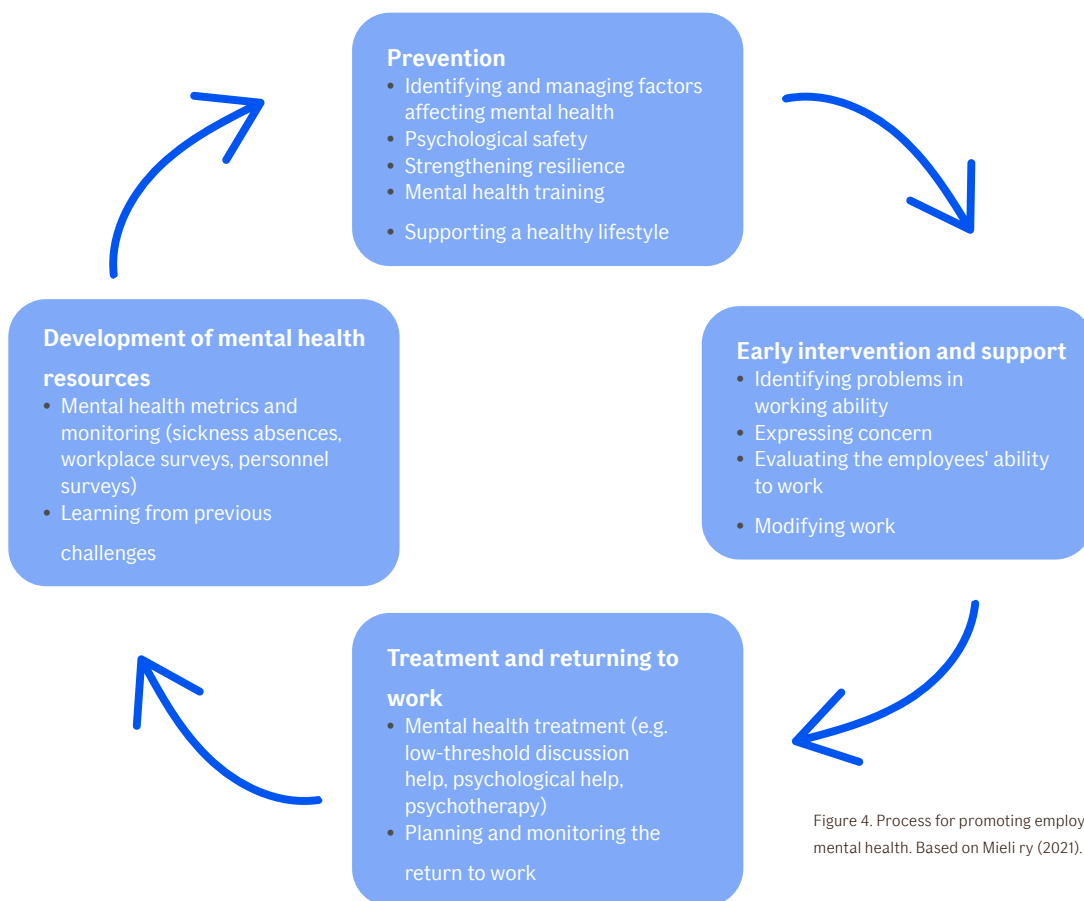


Figure 4. Process for promoting employees' mental health. Based on Mieli ry (2021).

5.1. Prevention

Preventive measures and practices can include proactively identifying mentally taxing factors and appropriately managing them, fostering a culture of psychological safety and resilience, and providing training on mental health and stress management for the entire workforce. Supporting healthy lifestyle is also an important but often overlooked preventive measure in this context.

5.1.1. Identifying and managing factors affecting mental health

Proactive reduction of mental health issues is one of the key principles in supporting mental health. At the workplace, it is essential to identify the psychosocial conditions related to work (see Figure 3) that affect mental health, similar to how physically taxing factors are identified and their impact minimized. These factors can become apparent through performance and task analyses, daily discussions, or regular employee surveys, among other data sources. Checklists, questionnaires, development discussions, working time records, job satisfaction and well-being surveys, or occupational health statistics can also be used as data sources. The most important thing is actively seeking signs of stressors and utilising the collected information for the future development of mental health work (Mieli ry, 2023a). Problems with the work atmosphere and feedback from departing employees can also provide valuable insights into workplace issues and mentally taxing factors.

Workload can be managed by strengthening employees' resources. The realisation of psychological basic needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work, significantly affects employee well-being. When these basic needs are met, work is perceived as meaningful, and motivation towards work increases. Mental health issues and symptomatology do not have a direct impact on work ability but are part of individual resources (health). The demands of work can be seen as consisting of workload factors such as workload, time pressure, social demands, or physical requirements (Mieli ry, 2023a).

Work resources are motivating factors for employees, including:

Support from the work community and the manager	Clear objectives
Fair leadership	Feedback on work
Challenging and changing work	Development and influence opportunities at work

Defining and strengthening motivating work resources is one way to reduce stress and thereby promote employee mental health. Individual resources include competence level, overall health, and perceived meaningfulness and engagement in work (Mieli ry, 2023a; Lausmaa, Paukkunen, Mattila-Holappa, 2022). The most crucial factor for preserving working ability is maintaining a balance between work demands and resources.

The influence of work resources, individual resources, and work demands on each other varies over the course of a career. For example, in the case of young employees starting their careers, their individual resources and skill levels may not be as developed as those of colleagues who have been in the field longer. To achieve balance, work demands should not be excessively high, and more support from the work community may be needed.

Work ability can be viewed as a dynamic whole, meaning it fluctuates depending on how work demands, and personal resources vary. Therefore, employers cannot be certain that employees' work ability will remain the same when the organisation and work demands undergo significant changes. It is crucial for a company to understand how work changes due to specific decisions, what kind of expertise is needed in the work community to maintain job meaningfulness, and how work resource factors can be strengthened during and after changes (Lausmaa, Paukkunen, Mattila-Holappa, 2022).

The importance of recovery has grown in the workplace where stressors have increased. Consistent breaks during the workday are a crucial starting point for mid-day recovery, whether it is sedentary work or physi-

cally active work. Several factors can hinder recovery and should be addressed such as for example, constant interruptions and time pressure. Attention should also be paid to recovery during the workday. Often, various efficiency projects aim to reduce so-called "waste time" from work, which is entirely justified in process improvement. However, it is essential to remember that individuals need a certain amount of "waste time" during their workday to stay alert (Mieli ry, 2023a).

Ensuring recovery should be a planned part of organising work, considering the physical and cognitive demands of tasks, as well as the effects of working hours on employees' rest opportunities, so that there is enough time for relaxation and sleep. One suggestion, is to organise breaks in a way that allows the employee to move away from the immediate work area. The possibility of uninterrupted rests is crucial for recovery. In the case of knowledge work, breaks should be cognitively restorative, meaning they should take individuals away from computer screens and provide activities different from their actual work tasks. Staggered breaks are a good way to ensure that each employee has time to rest without being interrupted.

Digitalisation and easy accessibility can improve communication but challenge the boundary between leisure time and work. Certain flexibilities regarding the timing and duration of working hours are recommended as a part of preventive measures and stress management. Employers can offer flexible working hours, the use of accumulated days off, and remote work options to allow employees more autonomy in managing their daily lives and recovery (Mieli ry, 2023a; TTL, 2018; TTK, 2023).

As remote and hybrid work become more common, both positive and negative effects on mental health may emerge. The positives of remote work often relate to increased freedom and flexibility. Remote work provides an opportunity to save time and energy on commuting, which can improve the balance between work and leisure time, benefiting mental health. Additionally, remote work reduces the harm and safety risks associated with commuting. However, remote work can also bring its own challenges. Employees may have increased responsi-



bility for their work environment, ergonomics, and time management, which can be stressful. Community and social support are essential for mental health, and remote work can lead to feelings of social isolation. Employers can help by striving to find a balance between remote and on-site work that considers working conditions and individual needs. This may involve adopting a hybrid model that allows for flexible work while promoting mental health and well-being (TTL, 2023b; Mieli ry, 2023a).

Looking at hybrid work, challenges could also include unclear boundaries between work life and private life. Additionally, employees will have less contact with managers, with possible consequences also being less clear expectations, role unclarity, less feedback from manager and so on. With hybrid work, ensuring a good psychosocial working environment is still very important, even though this is possibly more challenging for employers.

5.1.2. Psychological safety

Psychological safety means that employees feel they can ask questions, share ideas, express concerns, or admit mistakes without the fear of being embarrassed, facing a negative reaction from their manager, being punished, or being ostracised at work. Psychological safety also plays a crucial role in a company's development and occupational safety when it comes to being able to bring forward ideas for change and addressing issues in the workplace (Great Place to Work, 2022). If the workplace culture regarding psychological safety is poor, employees may, according to a survey done in 2023, claim to have illnesses like stomach bugs or the flu as reasons for their absence when the actual cause might be a decline in mental health.

Creating a psychologically safe culture means people feel they can speak up without being judged or ridiculed. Sometimes bringing up difficult issues can lead to conflicts but maintaining a civil and respectful tone during discussions fosters a sense of psychological safety. Psychological safety is known to promote well-being, reduce stress, and boost employees' self-confidence (Great Place To Work, 2022). Therefore, psychological safety is an essential component in the workplace that needs to be in place for addressing and seeking support for factors that affect mental health (Mieli ry, 2023a). In the case of young adults, it's a positive sign that trust in managers appears to be higher than in older generations, making it easier to establish a confidential relationship and seek help in a timely manner (TTL, 2023a). Fear of stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to addressing mental health challenges. In a psychologically safe culture, it's possible to discuss mental health-related issues without the associated stigma.

Regarding leadership culture, emotionally intelligent and empathetic leadership is a good style for creating an open communication culture in the workplace (Vuori et al., 2018). The workplace should focus on generating positive emotional energy by emphasising appropriate working methods, clarifying meeting or task objectives, and addressing elements of intrinsic motivation such as competence, community, and autonomy at work. A leader can support a positive atmosphere through verbal and non-verbal communication. A positive atmosphere also provides space in the workplace for addressing challenging issues. A leader does not have to deal with mental health issues alone; it's essential to seek guidance and support, for example, from human resources or occupational health services on how to manage mental health-related matters in the workplace.

“How are you? costs nothing.

–MIELI ry

Employees spend a lot of time together in the workplace, and showing genuine interest in colleagues, asking about their well-being, and getting to know them foster an atmosphere of care and make it easier to address difficult issues. Every employee has a responsibility for their own actions and for being a good colleague and building a positive and psychologically safe atmosphere. In practical terms, each employee can contribute to psychological safety in the workplace by:

1. Take the time to get to know your colleagues, engage with them and pay attention to how they are doing. By doing so, you will build trust and a good basis for cooperation.
2. Provide employees with support, feedback and recognition. Make it a good habit to do so on a regular basis, not just on special occasions.
3. Make it safe to speak your mind at your workplace, be ready to accept suggestions and opinions in a positive manner to help foster an encouraging and psychologically safer working environment.
4. Share knowledge and experiences! We learn from each other by sharing our experiences – both of what worked well and what went wrong
5. Ask for feedback, advices and offer to help! Ask for other people's opinions on your work sometimes. Accept both positive and negative feedback in a good way.
6. Admit mistakes and that you are uncertain at times! None of us are experts in every domain. Be honest about what you find difficult, when you are uncertain, or when you have made mistakes.
7. Respect your colleagues' privacy and personal boundaries.

In the If Nordic Health Report, it was found that only about 20 % of employees turn to their managers to ask for help when something is difficult. Managers should therefore clearly communicate to their team members, from the start, and repeatedly, that employees “please come to me if something is difficult, and I will do what I can to support you”.

In building an atmosphere that supports mental health, clear responsibilities and effective management serve as the foundation. When the basics are in place, conflicts are reduced. Conflicts can occur in any workplace from time to time, so it is important to have established rules of conduct that everyone knows, enabling conflicts to be resolved appropriately and preventing inappropriate behaviour. Moreover, in fostering working relationships, even simple forms of spending time together, such as breaks and recreational activities that allow for socialisation, can prove important for mental well-being. The workplace can support this by encouraging shared leisure time and highlighting colleagues' achievements, even small ones, to create a positive and encouraging atmosphere (Mieli ry, 2023b).

5.1.3. Strengthening resilience

A term significantly related to mental well-being and the prevention of problems in this context is resilience, which refers to an individual's or a whole community's psychological coping ability and flexibility that helps them deal with everyday stress and challenges. In the case of resilience, coping with challenges doesn't mean that the experienced difficulties or stress cannot be overwhelming, but rather that individuals can move forward from them with renewed resources.

Several factors influence resilience in the workplace, including the workplace atmosphere, the functionality of the work community, and cultural factors. This involves whether the well-being of individuals is perceived as a concern for the entire community or if it is entirely outsourced to individual responsibility.

It's possible to enhance one's or a work community's resilience by focusing on four aspects:

1. Seeking and offering help
2. Trusting in coping and flexibility
3. Emphasising a healthy lifestyle
4. Reflecting on past successes

One doesn't have to navigate life's challenges solely relying on their own resources. Therefore, seeking and offering help is crucial for resilience. Peer support and problem-solving are more effective when done together rather than in isolation. During crises, it's essential to conserve resources and trust that individuals and communities can adapt and cope. Understanding personal boundaries and capabilities becomes particularly important in managing one's workload and being able to say no when necessary. A healthy lifestyle is paramount for both building resilience and preventing mental health disorders. Sufficient rest, exercise, and a balanced diet help maintain energy levels, making it easier to deal with challenges. Interpersonal relationships, both at work and in leisure time, are protective factors for mental health. In the workplace, it's also essential to remember past successes and the lessons learned from them, as they serve as examples of overcoming crises and instill confidence in facing new challenges. (Mieli ry, 2022a)

Research findings into resilience show that social support seems to function as a buffer against work-related stress. Thomas Tobro Wøien, Chief Psychologist at Vertikal Helse, Norway comments that "this helps enable people to cope better with such stress, e.g., when facing high demands at work, as highlighted for example, in the demand-control-support work stress model introduced by Karasek & Theorell."

5.1.4. Mental health training

According to Mieli ry, mental health training should be available to all employees to help raise awareness about mental health issues and enabling staff to recognise and manage their own stress level. These training sessions may include topics such as stress management, relaxation techniques, and emotional regulation. According to one study, the themes of the necessary training depend on the stage of mental health management within the organisation.

Training can be directed towards both employees and managers, covering various mental health-related themes. Some of the themes that can be addressed in different training sessions include:

- Emotions at work
- Strengthening resilience
- Stress and recovery
- Psychological safety
- Mental health-promoting leadership

(Mieli ry, 2023a)

Especially managers should be trained to recognise and address mental health issues and psychological symptoms among employees and to create a safe and open atmosphere in the workplace (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1989). Only 31% of managers feel they have received sufficient training to recognise deteriorating mental health in their employees (IOSH, 2019). This leads to difficulties in implementing preventive measures or early intervention effectively. Consequently, emerging issues may easily go unaddressed until they escalate into problems that result in a sick leave.

Below are some considerations for managers:

- How to recognise that an employee is struggling
- How to approach employees who struggle mentally
- Common mental health problems and consequences at work
- Common mental health problems: useful accommodations at the workplace
- Psychosocial factors that can affect the risk for health problems and sickness absence.
- How to build psychological safety at the workplace

5.1.5. Supporting a healthy lifestyle

The decline in physical fitness also manifests as issues with mental well-being. Concerns about the general physical fitness of the workforce exist across all age groups, and with current trends continuing, it is predicted that an increasing number of working adults will have such poor physical fitness that coping with normal work routines will be challenging. Especially, the endurance and muscle strength of young students have significantly deteriorated in recent years (TTL, 2022c; UKK Institute, 2023). Knowing the inseparable connection between physical health and mental health, investing in physical health also becomes an activity that promotes mental health.

The role of the workplace in promoting an individual's healthy lifestyle may be challenging to grasp, but workplace practices and communal activities can support the three key components of mental resources: sleep, exercise, and diet. The positive development of these three areas promotes health, work ability, reduces overall morbidity, and the risk of chronic diseases, making it worthwhile to support lifestyle choices (THL, 2022b). For well-being, focus, and mood, sufficient and high-quality sleep is a stress and anxiety-reducing priority that should be considered when planning working hours and workload. Employees should have the opportunity to rest before the next work day. Collaborative planning of shifts with employees also helps to better reconcile work and personal life.

Regarding exercise and diet, supporting them can reduce the effects of stress, depressive symptoms, and boost self-esteem and alertness. Physical activity and healthy lifestyles can be supported by the employer, for example in 1:1 discussions or through employee events, by for example:

- Organising common physical activities
- Providing exercise equipment for breaks
- Offering leisure-time exercise vouchers
- Providing an employee benefit for company bicycles
- Allowing a certain amount of exercise during working hours
- Offering healthy snacks at the workplace
- Providing a lunch benefit for healthy options

On the other hand, harmful habits like smoking can be restricted through workplace measures, such as prohibiting smoking in workplace premises and providing support for smoking cessation. While these actions to promote a healthy lifestyle in the workplace may not work for everyone, healthy routines are more likely to become a part of employees' personal lives when supported by the workplace.

Employers can, for example through the above listed actions, help to build a culture where using the benefits involving physical activity are normalised. By encouraging common physical activities, and promoting possibilities to exercise during working hours, employers can lower the threshold for employees to be active.

5.2. Early intervention and support

Early intervention refers to actions aimed at identifying and addressing emerging problems as early as possible, for example by means of modifying work or other support measures, in order to prevent the worsening of mental health symptoms and the risk of sick leave or incapacity for work. Modifying work means adjusting the employee's workload and tasks to match their current work ability.

5.2.1. Identifying problems in working ability

The support of a manager is of great importance when the first signs of a decline in working ability appear. It is the manager's responsibility to monitor signs of impaired work ability. The prerequisite for detecting changes in behavior is that managers really get to know the employees, so they can notice when something is wrong (Mieli ry, 2023a).

Signs of mental symptoms and a decrease in ability to cope at work are:

- Increase in absenteeism and sick leave
- Strong changes in behavior and personality
- Isolation from the work community
- Deterioration of work performance
- Becoming cynic
- Lowered professional self-esteem
- Fatigue and lack of initiative
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sensitivity and sensitivity to crying
- Impaired hygiene

The early intervention discussion should be held with the employee as soon as possible when problems are detected or suspected.

5.2.2. Expressing concern

Once the challenges related to coping have been identified, they must then be discussed with the employee. Talking about mental health issues can seem challenging from both the manager's and the employee's point of view. What makes speaking up challenging? Managers may feel that they do not have the necessary skills or knowledge to deal with issues related to mental health, which is why it is necessary to invest in mental health training for managers. Around 62% of managers feel that they receive insufficient support from the employer to support the mental health of their staff. Regarding employees, about 80% would not like to discuss mental health-related issues with their closest manager, the underlying reasons for which are the fear of giving others an incompetent image and being stigmatised (IOSH, 2019).

In the Nordic countries, only about 16% say that they turn to their manager when they experience a decline in their mental capacity to work (If P&C Insurance, 2023).

There can be many reasons for this, which can also be related to the work culture and the habit of not bringing up mental health issues in the workplace. If the mental health issues are not related to the stress factors at work, then bringing the matter up to the manager may seem pointless. For their part, approximately one third fear that they will receive unequal treatment when they bring up their mental health issues at work. (IOSH, 2019) Whether the main cause of mental health issues is work or private life issues, the problems affect both areas, which is why targeted help from the direction of both private life and work life may be necessary to solve the problems.

Normalising talking about mental health and stressors can be successful, for example, by putting these issues on the agenda of weekly meetings along with other work issues. An open discussion about the factors burdening the team may not start immediately, but when it is on the agenda as a normal thing, talking about them becomes more normalised and thus problem areas can be dealt with in good time (Mieli ry, 2023a).

The challenge is to think about the best way for managers to clarify the matter with the employees, so that they dare to bring things up honestly. A prerequisite for this in general is good psychological safety in the workplace, but guidance is also needed to discuss possible issues with mental well-being (Mieli ry, 2023a).

Managers should ask clarifying and open questions and show genuine interest in the employee's well-being, for example by asking how he or she has hobbies and activities to help them relax and recover during their free time, and ask if they feel work and private life are in balance.

Depending on the situation, a few examples of sentences for mapping the actual situation can be:

- Have you noticed changes in your work ability or in your mood lately?
 - Have you had trouble sleeping lately?
 - Have you been feeling tired recently?
 - Have you had a chance to rest and recover in your free time?
 - Do you have enough time to do your job well?
 - Has the workload felt too heavy lately?
 - Do you feel that your work is impacting your personal life?
 - Are you worried about your work performance?
 - Do you get enough support to do your work?
 - I have noticed that your workload has been heavy lately. What can we do to make it more manageable?
 - I have noticed that you have been less energetic and enthusiastic than usual.
- Is something weighing on your mind?

It is good to talk about concerns and observations the employee has using concrete examples, as sometimes it can be difficult to pinpoint the cause of the workload.

Managers should be prepared and open to the discussion and ensure that employees feel in a safe environment and that the discussion remains confidential. One way to bring up issues related to workload is to bring up examples and experiences of the workload you may have experienced yourself and ways to cope, which lowers the employee's threshold to bring up any concerns. Discussions about issues related to mental health and work ability are recommended to take place face-to-face and show the employee that they have been heard.

In the case of remote working, when face-to-face communication is not possible, one-on-one meetings can be arranged with the camera on, so that it is easier to read the other person's feelings and reactions. Seeing facial expressions and gestures, even in the case of remote work, are an essential part of communication between people. In addition, the fact that someone does more remote work does not reduce the need for an exchange of affiliations or one-on-one meetings between the manager and the employee, which is important to remember in different remote work and hybrid models.

Culture also affects how an employee brings up concerns and feelings related to mental health. Culture, traditions, religion, and social norms influence the perception of mental health, stress and seeking help. In some cultures, mental health issues may be seen as a sign of weakness, in which case bringing out one's feelings is not socially acceptable, while in other cultures, they are seen as a normal part of life and bringing them up to family, friends or, for example, members of the work community is desirable. Understanding cultures is essential. By understanding the individual's background and culture, one can better assess their needs and offer them suitable resources and support for problems. (Therapy Brands, 2022)

5.2.3. Evaluating working ability

Based on the discussion, it is possible to assess the ability to work a little more precisely. A manager can act as a gatekeeper for workload management, as the employee is not always able to assess the impact of the workload on his work ability with the necessary objectivity. Due to the recent changes in working life, remote and hybrid work models have established themselves in several industries, which requires adaptation from the manager when assessing work ability. The manager's awareness of, for example, the projects and tasks that the employee is running gives a better opportunity to assess how much of a combined burden they will be on the employee.

The manager's management skills and actions have a significant impact on the employee's resources. The manager can support the management of the employee's work career and enable experience of work management and ability. The manager's awareness of the time pressure, workload and burdensome situations and failures experienced by the employee is an important prerequisite for early support. (Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022)

When the manager has noticed a decrease in working capacity and a deterioration in mental health, he should clarify the following matters related to the individual employee, but also more broadly to the work community/team:

1. Does the environment support work psychosocially, physically, and cognitively?

- Workplace atmosphere, discussion culture, social relationships, discrimination and bullying, and mental strain
- Workspaces and tools (including digital tools and overuse of technology)
- Working hours, work rotation, work organisation and management

2. Is the work considered meaningful in the eyes of the employees and the work community, and does everyone know the goals set for the work?

- Realistic and attainable goals without excessive workload and long working hours
- Job satisfaction
- Experience of the significance of one's own role

3. Is the workload and competence of the employee and the work community at an appropriate level?

- Checking the level of training and development of employees
- Urgency and deadlines
- Available resources
- Versatility and the ability of the work community to offer support in work tasks

4. Is the employee/employees healthy enough to perform their duties?

- Correspondence of the employee's state of health and functional capacity to the physical and psychological demands of the job

5. Other factors affecting the situation?

- Uncertainty about the future and continuity of work

(Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022)

Even if the problem that came up concerns only one area, it is also worthwhile to examine other areas. In the same way, even if the challenges only concern an individual employee, it is also worthwhile to analyse the factors affecting work ability at the group level, because the first symptom is not necessarily the last. For example, if an employee does not reach the goals, it should be examined whether they and, in general, also other employees have been given the necessary orientation and training so that it is possible to reach the goals.

If necessary, in the discussion after early intervention, contact is also made with health care, and a plan supporting working ability is made in cooperation with the employer, health care and the employee concerned. (Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022; THL, 2023, Uusitalo-Arola, Tuisku & Rossi, 2022; Mieli ry, 2023a)

With regard to managers, one can easily think that they can manage on their own, because the industry typically seeks people who can withstand pressure. However, this should not be the case, managers also have the right and need to receive support from their manager and also from the employees they manage.

The role of a manager is often challenging and the load comes from many directions, so employees also have their own responsibility in reducing the workload of the manager. It is also necessary for senior management to recognise the everyday challenges of frontline work and provide the necessary resources to handle the task.

A bad option is if the job description is not defined precisely enough, and then there is no time left for actual front-line work and good management. When managers feel well, it is also reflected in the daily life of employees. (Mieli ry, 2023a)

5.2.4. Modifying work

Mental health issues are often the sum of many factors from private life and work life. Crises can arise in everyone's private life or things can happen that have a negative impact on mental health. It is difficult to influence challenges related to private life from the workplace, but employers have early intervention methods to reduce work-related factors that weaken mental health.

When problems are noticed in psychological working ability because of one's workload, responsive work modification is an effective way to prevent the problems from getting worse. Modifying the work includes e.g. changes to work arrangements, such as clarifying areas of responsibility and tasks, increasing the flexibility of working hours, the possibility of remote work or customising tasks with another employee on a fixed or longer-term basis.

On the other hand, modifying work can sometimes require modifying entire processes and flaws in broader work arrangements. The possibility of customising the work has been found to relieve stress, and the flexible arrangement of the work enables an easier reconciliation of work and private life, which is one of the pillars of recovery. However, when modifying work individually, it should be taken into account that it does not put too much burden on other employees. (TTL, 2018; TTK, 2023)



Employees should be involved in decision-making regarding work and the functioning of the work community. The possibility to influence one's own work and its organisation is one way to promote well-being in the workplace and it solves one of the factors that weaken mental health, i.e., the inability to have any influence on one's own work. The potential for influence can be considered to consist of two parts: decisiveness and versatility.

Decision-making power refers to having the authority to decide upon issues relating to working methods, the pace of work, as well as targets and objectives. Diversity includes work tasks that require different skills and are thus developmental and educational rather than monotonous. The versatility of work has been found to have effects that contribute to well-being at work, but there is more dispersion in the results regarding decision-making power at work. On the other hand, decision-making power related to one's own working hours, such as shift planning, is connected to better job satisfaction and a lower risk of incapacity for work. The balance between work and free time and the sense of control over one's own work, as well as the appropriate level of challenge and workload seem to be the most important factors in terms of opportunities for influence, which is why work processes and work should be planned together with employees. (Joensuu, 2019)

5.2.5. Work-focused therapy

Within work-focused therapy there are three important general factors. When training managers there are some general factors, and some factors more specifically related to depression, anxiety and burnout/stress, to be considered.

Degree of self-determination: this is about how managers can increase the sense of control over the workday/work situation. From research: high demands placed on an employee may be a risk for developing health problems, but if the employee experiences a high degree of control over their work-situation, for example in terms of co-determination, influence, - they will handle the demands far better.

Contact with colleagues is also an important factor. To receive some extra support for a period from a good colleague that the employee trusts, may be valuable. A mentor, that can give feedback, discuss issues, or support the employee in decision making can be valuable, if the employee is suffering from depression. Having lunch with a trusted colleague, can be valuable in cases where the employee suffer from anxiety. Similarly, there may be a need to maintain distance with certain colleagues. This can be an important kind of accommodation for a while for some employees.

Collaboration with managers is also an important point. Its often a good idea to discuss how the cooperation could work in the best way. For example, having a short meeting 1:1 every Monday morning, to go through expectations for the week. Agree on which tasks to perform, what is expected. Who you can turn to for support. Then another short meeting on Friday – evaluate the week. This way, managers can provide feedback, discuss how it went, discuss possible adjustments for the coming week, and to say “nice to see you, good job, have a good weekend, see you on Monday”.

5.3. Treatment and returning to work

In cases where prevention and early invention are not sufficient in addressing the situation, care must be taken to ensure that the path to internal support measures and possible professional help is clear. It is often thought that the treatment of mental health issues belongs entirely to healthcare professionals, but the employer also has a role when the issues require treatment. For example, it is completely possible for an employee to go to work and, for example, to psychotherapy at the same time, if the situation allows it. Returning from possible sick leave should also be planned in such a way that the risk of problems reoccurring is as low as possible.

When having health problems, being able to decide when to arrive at work, which tasks to do at what time, where to sit, and so on, may be helpful when returning to work.

Close collaboration with the employer is normally helpful. As Thomas Tobro Wøien, Chief Psychologist at Vertikal Helse, Norway, notes, "cooperation with the employer is seen as very important when planning to return to work. Partial sick-leave is seen as a far better option than full sick-leave. Ideally, the employee will receive treatment, while at the same time remaining at work in line with their capacity, and (if needed) with accommodations."

5.3.1. Mental health treatment

There can be many causes of mental health issues, and despite preventive measures and early support in the workplace, there is always a risk of developing mental health issues or worsening the existing ones. This is why it is important to plan a clear treatment path and information channels where the employee can get help. Support measures can be organised internally in the company or, for example, with expert partners such as mental health organisations or healthcare professionals. Support activities include, for example, different forms of low threshold counselling and peer support, which can be offered by, for example, managers, HR or counselling professionals. Progression to professional mental health help (see Table 2) such as psychological help or psychotherapy is also part of mental health treatment.

Different types of psychological therapy are available. Research has proven that work-focused therapy is more effective in a randomised controlled trial (RCT) study, patients who received work-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) on average returned to work 65 days earlier than patients who received traditional CBT. (Lagerfeld & Blomk, 2012). Work-focus therapy can also be combined with different types of psychological therapy.

Short-term Psychotherapy	Psychotherapist's help for short-term mental health disorders.	Usually used to treat acute crises, exhaustion, and emerging depressive symptoms.
Psychotherapy	Psychodynamic, solution-oriented, or cognitive.	With the help of a psychotherapist, things that seem heavy and challenging in life are dealt with together with the psychotherapist's treatment and rehabilitation methods. Psychotherapy can be a process lasting years or a few visits, depending on the situation and need.
Psychological treatment	A confidential care relationship with the patient in which support and advice are offered to regulate behaviour and emotional life.	A confidential care relationship with the patient in which support and advice are offered to regulate behaviour and emotional life.
Peer support group	People who have faced the same challenges share their experiences with each other.	The goal is to offer new means of survival and information, to raise self-esteem and reduce the feeling of isolation.
Crisis help	Acute and quickly available help and support for a person who experiences, for example, strong psychological anxiety, despair, anxiety or suicidal thoughts.	Crisis help can include telephone counselling, conversational help, psychological first aid services or other acute care.

Table 2. The most common forms of treating mental health (Mieli ry, 2021; Mehiläinen, 2023).

The wider provision of psychotherapy has been found to reduce sickness absences and accumulated costs for the employer, without forgetting its preventive effect on the risk of early disability retirement. At best, early psychotherapy prevents mental health issues from deepening completely. (MustRead, 2019)

For example, in a study commissioned by Terveystalo (2023), it was noticed that absenteeism related to mental health decreased by approximately 40% after a short psychotherapy period for occupational health clients.

Utilisation of mental health support services has been shown to reduce employees' stress and depression and improve their overall well-being at work (Kunz et al., 2017; Vuori et al., 2018). Mental health resources provided by the employer also promote a positive work atmosphere and reduce sickness absences (Rugulies et al., 2013). Depending on the situation, in addition to the manager and the employee, e.g. occupational health and safety personnel, personnel administration, work ability coordinators and health care representatives can be involved in planning the treatment.

Professionals who help people specifically with mental health issues are e.g. occupational health psychologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses, depression nurses and psychotherapists (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mental health professionals.

Occupational Health Psychologist	Assesses and helps with challenges related to employees' well-being at work.	Handles e.g., factors that impair work ability, such as stress and exhaustion, and provide ways to manage them.
Psychologist	Treats mental health disorders, but does not make diagnoses or prescribe prescriptions.	Offers professional conversational help related to understanding and regulating human behaviour and emotional life.
Psychologist Nurse	Often the first professional contacts are when seeking professional help for mental health issues.	They offer discussion help and concrete means for the treatment and prevention of mental health disorders and problems.
Depression Nurse	Nurses by training.	The task is treatment of people suffering from depression in primary health care.
Psychiatrist	A doctor who specialises in diagnosing mental health disorders and their different forms of treatment.	They especially treat long-term mental health disorders.
Psychotherapist	A healthcare professional who has undergone psychotherapy training.	Treats mental health disorders in longer-term care relationships.

The accessibility of support measures and the communication of their existence should be invested in the communication of companies, as it is estimated that only 35% of employees know about the available resources related to the promotion of mental health. (TTL, 2023a; TNS, 2014). If there is no investment into accessibility of mental wellbeing measures, employees will be less likely to speak about mental health issues or related problems with HR or their managers.

The role of support from colleagues in the prevention of mental health issues cannot be underestimated., because daily interaction situations and sharing of one's own experiences and peer support prevent the accumulation of problems and the emergence of longer-term problems. In addition to managers, the support and open interaction provided by employees to each other promotes not only mental well-being but also job satisfaction (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004).

Workplaces can also encounter acute crisis situations that are not tied to work. In these cases, quick professional help is the priority through local healthcare professionals and national mental health organisations.

5.3.2. Planning and monitoring the return to work

If the recovery of mental ability to work requires sick leave, it is good to plan the employee's return to work together with the manager and possibly a healthcare professional. From the workplace, it is possible to take advantage of work modifying opportunities at this stage as well, so that the return to work is handled as smoothly as possible. Monitoring the development of the return to work is necessary in order to show whether the recovery of work ability still needs additional support from external parties such as health care or the expertise of pension insurers. Returning to work must be planned after periods of absence in such a way that new work modification measures aim to minimise the risk of a recurrence of sick leave. In other words, supporting mental health must be addressed from the perspective of the employer, employee, work, work community and external actors as well as health care (Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022).

Although there are different treatment paths for professional help for mental health issues, supporting the mental health of employees cannot only be outsourced to professionals or the employees themselves. Measures to support mental health and work ability in the workplace may already be sufficient to prevent the need for professional help services. On the other hand, mental well-being and its support not only rest on the shoulders of managers and the employer, but the contribution of each individual in the work community to support their own mental health and develop their own work is key to preventing problems. (Ojanperä, 2023; Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022)

The planning should include concrete measures and accommodations, when needed. The plan ideally focuses on the gradual return to work, with points of evaluations and possibilities for making adjustments included, while aiming for 100% return to work. The plan should also describe how employers and employees can collaborate on reaching this goal, not just include an overview on possible accommodations.

5.4. The development of mental health resources

How can we ensure that the organisation's mental health activities are effective and meet their goals? Answering this requires metrics and a systematic evaluation of operations. With the help of metrics and evaluation, we can not only monitor the factors that burden mental health at workplaces, but also identify which have been the most effective measures to manage them.

”

Absenteeism related to mental health decreased by **40%**
after a short psychotherapy period"
Terveystalo (2023)

5.4.1. Mental health metrics and monitoring

It is necessary to measure the continuity and effectiveness of mental health activities. Metrics can not only help in responding to concerns related to mental health and staff coping, but also to develop proactive methods for problems of occupational well-being (Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022). The most important metrics and sources of information are the development of sickness absences, development discussions, monitoring of working hours, own risk assessment, usage rates of support services, workplace surveys and personnel surveys. (TTK, 2023; Lausmaa, Paukkunen & Mattila-Holappa, 2022)

For example, job surveys, personnel surveys and development discussions can provide a lot of information about risk factors at the entire workplace level (see Figure 3). The anonymity of surveys can encourage employees to share their thoughts more freely. The organisation's own active mapping of mental health risks plays a big and important role, and the collected data must be monitored and analysed regularly.

The impact of support measures on workplace well-being should be monitored so that their functionality can be evaluated and developed in a better direction. Employees can also be asked for direct feedback on current or desirable mental health support programs and practices. "Benchmarking" is also one way in which the organisation can compare the company's results against standards and competitors in the same industry, which can help identify where the company needs to improve. Extensive cooperation with health care is also recommended in monitoring the situation and devising new ways. (TTK, 2023) Things rarely stay the same for a long time in today's working life, so in connection with changing situations, the effects of the change on the work to be done and on the employees must be re-examined, as well as the new load factors that may result from it.

5.4.2. Learning from previous challenges

Physical accidents can lead to longer or shorter absences from work, which is why they are systematically investigated in companies to prevent similar incidents in the future. However, a similar approach is not used to study mental health issues, even though they lead to longer absenteeism on average than physical accidents.

In the investigation of workplace accidents and damages, the following matters are most often investigated:

1. What has happened?
2. What indirect or direct causes led to what happened?
3. What actions could have been taken to prevent what happened?
4. Implementation of measures happened?

Here is an interesting take on this:

Could it be possible to deal with mental health issues as a similar process, where the underlying causes of the event that led to, for example, work burnout or other mental health-based sick leave or inability to work are clarified and efforts are made to prevent similar events from happening in the future? Safety observations (both positive and negative) are also made for proactive measures that develop occupational safety. The purpose of positive observations is to strengthen already existing operating methods that support occupational safety. (Alanko, 2023)

Regarding negative observations, we will think about how similar ones can be prevented in the future. A similar procedure could also be applied to mental health. Positive findings regarding mental health can strengthen mental health resources and protective factors when repeated. An example of this can be moments of positive feedback or joint events. Regarding negative observations, it can be mapped out whether it could result in burnout, depression, anxiety, or other negative effects on coping at work.

What makes the process of dealing with mental health issues challenging is that the causes are often a multi-dimensional combination of private life and workplace factors, and obtaining detailed information is protected in confidential matters. In addition, employees may feel uncomfortable bringing up the issues in question. However, knowledge of the background causes of a so-called "mental health accident or near miss" that are relevant to the performance of work are important for identifying the root causes and defining corrective measures. (Alanko, 2023)





The costs of mental health issues



€600B

per year in terms of reduced productivity, the healthcare burden, social security and unemployment costs in EU.



approximately

+84%

of people in the Nordic countries experience harmful stress in their daily lives which is known to be one significant risk factor for depression.



200 – 300K

people in Finland, Norway and Denmark respectively, and up to 500,000 people in Sweden per year are affected by depression.



Summary

Understanding the true impact of mental health issues on businesses



Company-level perspective

A 30-year-old's disability pension costs are significantly higher than the cost of a senior employee who goes on retirement. Moreover, mental health-related sick leave is longer in duration, surpassing that of musculoskeletal disorders.



Absenteeism rate

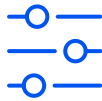
The average absenteeism rate in Finnish companies is around 4.5%, which corresponds to around ten days of absence per employee per year. If absenteeism can be reduced by at least 10% per year in this example case, savings of just under half a million euros could be achieved (Varma, 2023).

Beyond absenteeism and healthcare costs, there is a phenomenon called presenteeism, where employees are physically present but unproductive due to health issues, is a major concern, costing around 1.5 times more than absenteeism.



A holistic approach

Prevention is the first line of defence and is about identifying and managing stress factors, promoting psychological safety, and strengthening resilience among your employees. Offer mental health training to equip your teams and leaders with the knowledge to recognise signs of distress and create a culture where mental well-being is paramount.



6. Discussion and conclusion

We are currently in the midst of a concerning surge in mental health issues, and it's bordering on a mental health crisis. This makes it imperative for every organisation to devise tangible strategies to alleviate the mounting workload. This relief could involve re-evaluating staffing resources, process restructuring, and leveraging technological solutions such as automation. Fortunately, companies today are more conscious of the need to reduce mental stress and are increasingly aware of mental health issues. Nevertheless, the challenge lies in developing functional and effective models of mental health support. Resources, even if available, are often scattered and poorly communicated, leading to minimal utilisation and, ultimately, failing to address growing mental health concerns.

But it is not just about resources; it is also about reshaping the company's mental health culture and behavioural patterns. This requires a joint effort from managers and individual employees. Furthermore, modern workplaces are more diverse, and attitudes towards mental health may vary across different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, generational differences in how workloads are perceived and managed must be taken into account.

Young employees, in particular, often feel uncertain about their skills and career development. Mental health issues that begin during their studies can persist into their working lives. Constant emphasis on performance, inadequate orientation and management, and time pressures contribute to anxiety and stress among young workers.

The competitive nature of today's job market, ongoing changes, the adoption of modern technologies, and digitisation all demand re-

silence from the modern workforce. The incessant flow of information, which spans from work hours into personal time, hinders recovery, a physiological necessity, and can lead to burnout and mental health issues, making it challenging for individuals to return to normal working life after a period of sick leave.

Mental health issues stem from various factors encompassing an individual's personal life, genetics, health, and work life. While mental health issues like depression and anxiety disorders are common, the rise in mental health-based disability pensions and sick leaves cannot be solely attributed to work or job content. Work, and its appropriate challenges, can also serve as a safeguard for mental health, a facet often overlooked when discussing mental health in the workplace.

However, there are work-related factors that can significantly impact mental health, either positively or negatively. Some of the most common work-related factors that negatively impact mental health include high job demands, excessive workload, long working hours, lack of control or autonomy over one's work, poor relationships with colleagues or supervisors, and inadequate support from the organisation in terms of mental health resources and work-life balance initiatives.

Additionally, workplace bullying, job insecurity, and a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities can also contribute to heightened stress and deteriorating mental well-being among employees. The modern work landscape has become more demanding and fast-paced, and thus, more mentally taxing. The introduction of modern technologies can either add to this burden or serve as a solution to reduce it. For instance, the use of artificial intelligence in tasks as the hot topic of today's working life, can streamline workloads, alleviating stress and leading to better results and higher professional self-esteem.

More and more employees are prioritising the meaningfulness of their work and a balance between their professional and personal lives. In today's world, employees expect their jobs to provide more than just a paycheck. Therefore, it is beneficial for companies to be honest in their job advertisements regarding job requirements and role descriptions. Detailed and honest job postings help potential candidates form realistic expectations about the job and whether it aligns with their strengths and skills. This transparency reduces disappointments, stress, and, ultimately, staff turnover. Open communication about workload also attracts applicants who are well-prepared for the demands of the job, fostering a more motivated workforce and enhancing the company's reputation.

The trajectory of work ability management is shifting towards more individualised work solutions, where employee needs and challenges can be better addressed, and support can be tailored to each person. Preventative and reactive measures, such as work ability counselling, mental health training, occupational health professional assistance, mentoring, and flexible work arrangements, can support employees' work ability. If an individual's working capacity declines due to mental health issues or milder problems, a broader examination of the workload within the work community is necessary to reveal potential resource and process-related issues.

€11B

estimated the annual cost of mental health disorders in Finland.

≈84%

of people in the Nordic countries experience harmful stress in their daily lives which is known to be one significant risk factor for depression.

Managers play a critical role in recognising employee work ability and workload. They also implement processes that support mental health as part of their everyday management. Therefore, manager training should comprehensively cover topics related to promoting mental health and supporting mental workability. Making this training mandatory for managers ensures its integration into their management responsibilities.

Organisations can employ process-oriented thinking to support mental health in the workplace. The process (Figure 5) involves various stages:

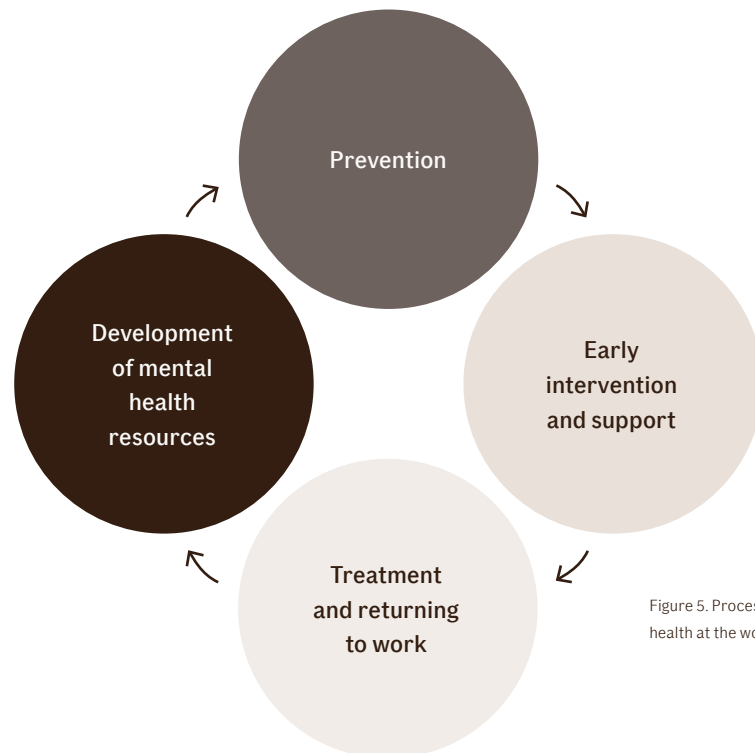


Figure 5. Process for supporting mental health at the workplace.

The steps of the process consist of the following areas, which were discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

- 1. Prevention**
 - Identifying and managing factors affecting mental health
 - Psychological safety
 - Strengthening resilience
 - Mental health training
 - Supporting a healthy lifestyle

- 2. Early intervention and support**
 - Identifying problems in working ability
 - Expressing concern
 - Evaluating working ability
 - Modifying work

3. Treatment and returning to work

- Mental health treatment (e.g., low-threshold counselling, psychological help, psychotherapy)
- Planning and monitoring the return to work

4. Development of mental health resources

- Mental health monitoring (sickness absences, workplace surveys, personnel surveys, benchmarking)
- Learning from previous experiences

As mental health challenges become more pervasive, discussions about mental health and systematic support must become commonplace in all workplaces. Failure to do so risks prolonged absences, key personnel loss, disability pensions, high staff turnover, and damages. While mental health is a private matter that doesn't require anyone to divulge personal concerns to their managers, fostering a culture of complete privacy around mental health can impede problem detection and diminish psychological safety in the workplace.

Promoting mental health in the workplace demands a well-defined strategy, adequate resources, and financial investments. As organisations deliberate these commitments, it's crucial to acknowledge the profound and wide-ranging impact they can wield. Beyond fostering employee well-being, these investments are also gateways to substantial cost savings. It's an established fact that allocating resources to support mental health yields a multitude of positive results for a company, fortifying not only the welfare of its staff but also its financial resilience.

Therefore, it's not just a compassionate imperative; it's a strategic advantage that forward-thinking organisations can't afford to overlook.



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