

SC 1 Better health and care, economic growth and sustainable health system - Area 1.2 Preventing disease

Proposed Call: **Mental health in the inclusive workplace**

Challenge

The improvement of mental health at work is a major European challenge. Overall, 6% of all EU workers report to be at risk of suffering mental health problems with more women than men being at risk. While age groups do not differ in reported risk, differences exist across countries, sectors and occupations: for example, the proportion of workers being above the EU average risk is greater for elementary occupations and service and sales workers. Burn-out problems and exhaustion depression are more common in the caring and welfare sector, and in particular at workplaces with a dominating proportion of women. About 20-25% of European citizens have experience of mental illness or psycho-social problems during the life course. Supporting good mental health at work has both an internal and external dimension. The healthy work organization should prevent job strain and mental illness at work and promote good and decent working conditions, but the European workplaces also have to be open, inclusive and adaptive to individuals that have been suffering from mental health problems, depressions or anxiety in various forms caused by outside work.

Sick leave, unemployment and absenteeism caused by mental illness is not only a burden for the individual but also for society and the industrial sector. It does not only lead to increasing healthcare costs and disability claims, but also extensive costs for the enterprises through lost productivity and restrained capacity to meet new demands. Thus, good mental health at work is an indicator and a determinant of a sustainable work organization, decent working conditions and high productivity in working life. Non-optimal social relations and psycho-social factors can be expected to be growing risks factors, considering the transition in work life towards more customer-oriented work task in the service sector and relational tensions in emotional work at large.

Another European challenge is to cope with social and economic determinants of stress at work which is the fastest growing work-related problem in Europe. The current development of a borderless working life, a squeezed leadership, and broadened and sometimes unnecessary job tasks will likely lead to increased job strain and health problems. Several factors play an important role, such as work at high pace or time pressure to deliver work tasks at a short notice, overload due to multiple or simultaneous tasks in combination with insufficient recovery, overtime and irregular working schedules play important roles. The challenge is to eliminate negative stress without losing achievement motivation, work enjoyment and workplace involvement. Furthermore, employers and unions have to deal with the increasing threats of relational tensions at work, including harassment or emotional violence, bullying, physical violence or threats of violence.

Finally, good mental health at work and in the European society at large is a fundamental prerequisite for having a prosperous family life, being active in society and being productive and creative at work. Mental health is influenced by a multitude of factors and work can both improve and impair mental health. Although some promotive factors for good mental health are known, there are crucial knowledge gaps to what really works in terms of interventions at the workplace, or at a societal level.

Scope:

Research activities should address the following areas:

- An analysis of factors improving mental health (which are not necessarily equivalent to those factors impairing mental health) in different work environments, for different age groups, different gender aspects and for persons with different functional impairments, including mental disorders.
- Interactions between organizational, psycho-social and individual determinants of mental health in the context of new forms of work and new work contexts characterized by more flexibility but also by more unsecure employment conditions as well as economic stress
- Intervention strategies improving mental health in small and medium sized organizations/companies.
- Identification of measures of good mental health that can be used for surveillance both in large and small organizations.
- Other fields that call for new interventions and social innovations are the increasing evidence with regard to adverse effects of psycho-social and organizational working conditions on mental health, including sleep disturbance which is important for recovery.
- Models preventing mental exhaustion and depression with steeply increasing costs for long-time sick-leave, disability pension, premature exits from working life. Such adverse working conditions are more commonly found in sectors with a predominance of female employees, thus giving the issue a clear gender aspect.

Expected impact:

- The research is expected to contribute to good mental health which will prolong working life and to improve quality of life.
- The research will advance knowledge of which interventions that will be effective, and which will not.
- The research will give tool for increasing quality of life, decrease early retirement and increase the participation of citizens with poor mental health
- Research-oriented intervention programmes will also present better and more accurate knowledge to prevent lost productivity, absenteeism and social costs at large
- Corporate programmes to promote mental health at work makes jobs more attractive and will thus have positive impact on recruitment of new employees
- The promotion of good mental health at work will call for the design of modern and flexible corporate health care systems as well as more efficient preventive measures and the formation of healthy and sustainable work organizations.

Type of action – RIA

EU added value

This proposal links to the work of DG Employment and DG Sanco as well as to the two European agencies, Eurofound and EU-OSHA

Support

PEROSH (Partnership for European Research on Occupational Safety and Health), ISEE?? PICOH?

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