

# Mental health at work:

## guidance for policymakers

15% of working-age adults live with a mental disorder. Governments and employers have a responsibility to safeguard people's health, including their mental health in the workplace, and to ensure that everyone has equal opportunity to participate in work.

Work can be a protective factor for mental health, if safe and healthy working conditions are in place. Decent work provides an income, and also offers a platform for structured routines, positive relationships, and for gaining a sense of purpose and achievement. For people with severe mental health conditions, employment can promote recovery and is associated with improved self-esteem and better social functioning. For all workers, safe and healthy working environments are a

fundamental right and are more likely to enhance work performance and productivity, improve staff retention and minimize tension and conflict.

Conversely, poor working environments can be a source of stress and pose a risk to mental health. Without the right support in place, the impact of poor mental health can affect a person's capacity to enjoy their work and to do it well. Every year, 12 billion workdays are lost to depression and anxiety alone, at a cost of US\$ 1 trillion per year in lost productivity. Lack of understanding about mental health conditions can leave those experiencing them vulnerable to stigma, discrimination, and exclusion in the workplace, or even stop them from gaining work in the first place.

## Responsibility to act

Diverse international instruments create obligations for countries and employers to uphold workers' rights to a safe and healthy working environment, fair treatment in the workplace, and equitable opportunities for employment and vocational rehabilitation. These include among others:

- ◇ ILO conventions on occupational safety and health, discrimination, and violence and harassment;
- ◇ WHO strategies and action plans on health, environment and climate change, and mental health; and the
- ◇ UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.



# What policy-makers can do

In consultation with employers' and/or workers' organizations:



## 01

### **Prevent** workers from experiencing mental health conditions by preventing mental health risks at work.

- ◇ Work with employers' and workers' organizations to develop new, or review and revise existing, employment and occupational health and safety laws, policies and guidance to include provisions on mental health in parity with those on physical health.
- ◇ Build capacities for psychosocial risk management among occupational health services, to prevent, monitor and propose remedial action for harm caused by psychosocial risks, especially where such capacity may not be available for lower-resourced employers.



## 02

### **Protect and promote** mental health at work, by strengthening capacities and opportunities to recognize and act on mental health conditions at work.

- ◇ Develop frameworks to require or encourage the use of effective interventions to protect and promote mental health.
- ◇ Provide guidelines and quality assurance standards for training and other interventions used by workplaces.
- ◇ Build capacities within primary care, occupational health and mental health services to recognize and respond to mental health conditions in the context of work, and to support lower-resourced employers.



## 03

### **Support** workers with mental health conditions to access, participate and thrive at work.

- ◇ Align employment laws with international human rights instruments and protect workers with mental health conditions from discrimination.
- ◇ Establish pathways between health, social and employment services to facilitate supported employment initiatives and return-to-work programmes.



## 04

### Create an enabling environment for change, through:



**Leadership:** commit to mental health at work by raising awareness, advocating for action and leading policy development.



**Investment:** secure sufficient funds and resources to design and deliver mental health at work policies and interventions.



**Rights:** uphold people's rights to participate in work fully and fairly.



**Integration:** integrate action to protect, promote, and support mental health at work across relevant sectors.



**Participation:** engage workers and people with lived experience of mental health conditions in decision-making about mental health at work.



**Evidence:** mobilize the strengthening of evidence on prevalence of risks and effectiveness of interventions.



**Compliance:** establish regulatory processes to guide employers and strengthen uptake and compliance with relevant laws, regulations and recommendations.

More information

- ▶ Guidelines
- ▶ Policy Brief
- ▶ ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work