

Information sheet about the work program "Protection and fortification of health in the case of work-related mental load" of the Joint German OSH Strategy 2013 – 2018:

Background

The prevention of accidents, a safe place of work, protection against hazardous substances and the safe handling of work equipment are essential components of company occupational safety and health. However, effective prevention must embrace a lot more in order to meet the demands of today's world of work. Above all against the background of the demographic change and the rising age of retirement, it is becoming increasingly important for workers to be able to work longer in a healthy condition and remain efficient. In addition to musculoskeletal disorders, illnesses due to mental loads are becoming ever more evident.

There is general consensus about the fact that mental load factors are rising with the change in the world of work. Such trends are for example:

- increasing mental work and rising demands on qualifications and continuous further training (trend towards a services and knowledge society),
- persistent acceleration of production, service and communication processes,
- increased use of new technologies which permit permanent availability, increasing work interruptions and "blurring of the boundaries" between work activities,
- greater self-responsibility of the workers with increasing complexity of the work requirements,
- non-continuous employment, rising demands on mobility and growing professional uncertainty, for example in the context of restructuring processes,
- increasing instability of social relationships.

Mental disorders are generally due to a multiplicity of circumstances. It can basically be assumed that, in addition to the individual disposition, psychosocial stress factors, e.g. from the world of work, but also major events in life play a role.

Mental and behavioural problems may - similar to musculoskeletal disorders - be effectively reduced by measures involving the humane design of work and the strengthening of resources (activities of health promotion, skills promotion, stress management methods etc.).

Working conditions

In the BIBB/BAuA worker survey in 2006¹, almost a third of the approx. 20,000 workers surveyed – converted to the Federal Republic of Germany, that corresponds to over 10 million workers – stated that they frequently had to work under strong pressure from time and that they felt under stress from this.

This problem is also seen by the management. All in all, 79% of European employers regard work-related stress as an important health problem. With regard to the factors which contribute to mental risks, managers attach the greatest importance to "pressure from time" (52%) and "dealing with difficult customers, patients, pupils etc." (50 %).²

The company and worker survey³ conducted by TNS-Infratest as part of the evaluation of the Joint German Occupational Safety and Health Strategy (GDA) produced similar results. Mental loads due to high time pressure or organisational problems are stated by 20% of the companies and 31% of the workers. Major importance is attached to the mental loads owing

¹ BIBB/BAuA worker survey (Federal Institute For Vocational Education and Training/Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health)

² European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) 2009/2010, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

³ Company and worker survey as part of the GDA umbrella evaluation, results not yet published, contracting authority: General Office of the National Occupational Safety and Health Conference (NAK) at the BAuA

to dealing with difficult groups of people in the health and social services sector by 41% of the companies and 42% of the workers, in the field of administration and education, the figures are 32% of the companies and 34% of the workers.

Absenteeism rates and costs

The BKK Health Report⁴ of 2011 documented a continuous rise in days lost due to mental disorders. In 1991, these disorders accounted for 3.8% of all days lost due to illness and were in the seventh place of all causes of illness resulting in days lost. Today, mental illnesses are the fourth largest illness group. Among women, this cause of illness comes second (15.5%) as regards days lost due to absenteeism, among men, this cause is in the fourth place at 9.0%.

53.5 million days lost due to illness attributable to mental disorders were registered in 2010. That is a rise of more than 80% compared with 1997.

The loss of production caused by absenteeism due to mental loads totalled € 5.1 billion in 2010.⁵

Activities of the Joint German Occupational Safety and Health Strategy

In order to help companies and workers to counteract possible health risks caused by work-related mental loads, the GDA bodies will be concentrating their activities on the work program „Protection and fortification of health in the case of work-related mental load“ in the years 2013 – 2018.

Initially, the aim will be to develop activities and tools which permit early detection and assessment with regard to health hazards. In addition, preventive, work organisational as well as health and skill-promoting measures are to be developed and implemented to reduce work-related mental loads and to turn the prevention of psychological strain at the workplace into a „normal“ subject for the OSH.

The work program „Protection and fortification of health in the case of work-related mental load“ has 11 work packages in 5 major subjects:

Information, sensitization and motivation

- To inform employees and employers.
- To motivate employers to prevent or optimize work-related mental load.
- To inform the public via newspapers and other media.
- To create a central homepage covering all aspects of work-related mental load.

Qualification

- To qualify all 6000 German labour inspectors in the field of psychological stress and strain at work. Important is the „outcome“ (the competences they need to support and supervise enterprises with regard to these themes).
- To qualify occupational physicians and Health and Safety Officers (OSH) responsible for consulting enterprises.
- To organize an exchange of experiences between the specialists for work-related mental load in the labour inspectorates.
- To qualify employers and employees in measures carried out by their organisations (trade unions, employers' associations, but also by social accident insurance institutions).

⁴ BKK Health Report 2011, BKK Bundesverband

⁵ Sicherheit und Gesundheit bei der Arbeit 2010, BAuA

Support

- To create guidelines for suitable procedures for assessing the working conditions – also about psychological stress.
- To collect and disseminate examples of good practice about prevention of work-related mental load.
- To work out practicable instruments for measuring psychological stress and strain at the workplace.
- To identify functions and occupations with a high risk of work-related mental load.

Control

- At least 10.000 enterprises will be reviewed between 2015 and 2017. The main subjects of the reviews will be:
 - o the integration of mental load in the assessment of working conditions,
 - o long working hours or work in the night,
 - o the risk of traumatization by accidents or violence.

Evaluation

Evaluation of processes and results

One key element in this is the activation and inclusion of companies, social partners and other cooperation partners, e.g. the health insurance funds and the trade associations /federations of company doctors and specialists for occupational safety and health. The health insurance funds in particular can provide extensive experience as a reduction in mental and behavioural disorders has been one of their top-priority goals in prevention in the world of work since 2008.

The basis for all activities and action is a common understanding of all those involved for determining and evaluating mental loads and on the need for action and possibilities of action of occupational safety and health.

On the basis of this common basic understanding, information and training materials are to be developed for specific groups which the relevant participating partners, in particular employers' associations, trade unions, the government, federal states and accident insurance funds will/should disseminate and implement among their own ranks.

More information on www.gda-portal.de

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