

MANAGEMENT REVIEW

Management without theatre.

PEOPLE

MENTAL HEALTH AT WORK

What the WHO guidelines of 2022 put first, how many working-age adults live with a mental disorder, six places to act, how strong the evidence is, what German law asks, and a card for one strain.



12 bn

working days are lost every year to depression and anxiety, costing the global economy nearly US\$1 trillion.

WHO & ILO, 2022

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NO. 75 · PEOPLE

In this issue

Mental health at work is often handled as a matter for the individual: an app, a course, a hotline. The WHO guidelines of 2022 start somewhere else, with workload, control and how people treat each other. This issue asks what that means for a manager.

In 2022 the WHO estimated that 15% of working-age adults had a mental disorder in 2019, and that depression and anxiety cost about 12 billion working days a year. Its guidelines recommend changing the work to reduce psychosocial risks and, for the first time, training managers. The evidence for manager training is the strongest; for changing the work it is very uncertain, probably because such changes are hard to study. German law already asks employers to assess psychological strain. The issue describes evidence; it is not medical advice.

Stiven Janaqi EDITOR · STIVEN CATALYST

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HOW TO READ THIS ISSUE

Figure

Every figure has its source and year at the foot of its page.

Our reading

Where the editors interpret rather than the research, it says so.

Practice

The steps and the card are proposals to try, not research results.

COVER STORY

From the person to the work

On 28 September 2022 the WHO published its guidelines on mental health at work, together with a policy brief written with the International Labour Organization. They begin with the conditions of work.

Risks at work the WHO names

1. excessive workload or work pace, understaffing
2. little control over job design or workload
3. violence, harassment or bullying
4. discrimination and exclusion
5. job insecurity

The launch named what was new in them:

“For the first time WHO recommends manager training, to build their capacity to prevent stressful work environments and respond to workers in distress.”

OUR READING

Workload, control and behaviour are decided at work, often by the manager. That is where the WHO starts.

Sources: World Health Organization, 2022; World Health Organization & International Labour Organization, 2022; World Health Organization, 2024

The list shortens the WHO fact sheet; translations are ours. Burnout is No. 29, psychological safety No. 4. This issue describes guidelines and evidence; it is not medical advice.

THE NUMBERS

Three in twenty

The WHO's World Mental Health Report of 2022 estimated that nearly a billion people lived with a mental disorder in 2019, and that close to 15% of the world's working population has one at any given time.

THE WORKING POPULATION WORLDWIDE, OUT OF 20



3 in 20

have a mental disorder ($\approx 15\%$)

17 in 20

the rest

≈ 12 bn

working days lost each year
to depression and anxiety

$\approx \$1$ tn

the yearly cost to the global
economy

35%

of countries reported
national programmes to
promote mental health at
work

OUR READING

In a team of twenty, three people living with a mental disorder is the average expectation, not a rare case.

Sources: World Health Organization, 2022; World Health Organization & International Labour Organization, 2022

Global estimates, not counts. A disorder is a diagnosis, not the stress of a hard week. Days, cost and the 35% are as the WHO and ILO gave them in 2022; the WHO's fact sheet of 2026 gives 16% for 2023.

THE MODEL

Where to act

The guidelines recommend action in these areas. They run from the work itself, through the people who lead it, to workers who live with a mental health condition.

01	Organisational interventions	reduce psychosocial risks such as bullying or low job control
02	Manager training	knowledge, attitudes and skills; not meant to turn managers into therapists
03	Worker training	mental health literacy and awareness
04	Individual interventions	psychosocial support or physical activity, as one part of a wider programme
05	Return to work	work-directed care, such as a phased return, with ongoing clinical care
06	Gaining employment	supported employment for people with severe conditions

OUR READING

Help for the individual is on the list, but as one part. It does not replace changing the work that strains everyone.

Sources: World Health Organization, 2022; Aiysha Malik, José Luis Ayuso-Mateos, Gergő Baranyi, Corrado Barbui, Graham Thornicroft, Mark van Ommeren & Aemal Akhtar, World Psychiatry 22(2), 2023; World Health Organization, 2024

Rows shortened from the guidelines and Malik et al. (2023). The guidelines also recommend reasonable accommodations, such as flexible hours or extra time for tasks. On screening workers, the WHO made no recommendation.

[More in the essay](#)

Leadership without a title

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

How strong the evidence is

With the GRADE method the WHO rates each recommendation twice: how strong it is, and how certain the evidence behind it is.

01	Manager training	strong recommendation, moderate certainty
02	Organisational interventions for all	"may be considered": conditional, very low certainty
03	Mental health training for workers	conditional, very low certainty
04	Leadership-oriented training	no recommendation: no clear effect on health
05	Screening workers	no recommendation: unclear if benefits outweigh harms

OUR READING

Weak evidence for changing the work is not proof that it fails. Such changes are hard to study, and the law does not wait for the trials.

Sources: World Health Organization, 2022; Aiysha Malik, José Luis Ayuso-Mateos, Gergő Baranyi, Corrado Barbui, Graham Thornicroft, Mark van Ommeren & Aemal Akhtar, World Psychiatry 22(2), 2023

Low certainty means more research could change the estimate. Malik et al. (2023) trace the weak evidence to how hard complex interventions are to evaluate. The grades are as printed in the guidelines.

HOW IT IS MEASURED

What German law asks

Germany's Occupational Safety and Health Act (Arbeitsschutzgesetz) lists psychological strain at work among the sources of hazard for the employer's risk assessment (§ 5(3) no. 6). Read together, four steps:

1

Assess (§ 5)

which hazards come with the work, by type of activity; where conditions are alike, one assessment will do

2

Act at the source (§ 4)

design work to spare physical and mental health; individual measures come after the others

3

Check (§ 3)

whether the measures work, and adapt them when conditions change

4

Document (§ 6)

the result of the assessment, the measures and the result of their review

OUR READING

The law and the WHO point the same way: the work first, the person after. A questionnaire is not yet an assessment; the measures and their review belong to it.

Source: Federal Republic of Germany, Bundesgesetzblatt I 1996 p. 1246, 2025

Our summary of §§ 3–6, not legal advice. The Act prescribes no method for the assessment. We did not check the law in Albania.

TOOL OF THE ISSUE

One strain, one measure

One card per task or team. It asks about the work, not about anyone's health: what strains, where it comes from, what changes at the source, and when you check. Five Whys helps with the third line.

01 Task or team where, which shift, how many people

02 The strain load or pace, control, staffing, behaviour, insecurity: which, how often

03 Where it comes from ask why until you reach something in the work

04 Measure at the source what changes in the work, before training or individual help

05 Who and by when one owner, one date; ask the team what they would change

06 Check and record did the strain go down; where it is written down

Sources: World Health Organization, 2022; Federal Republic of Germany, Bundesgesetzblatt I 1996 p. 1246, 2025

A practice proposed by the editors, after the WHO's order and §§ 3–6 of the Arbeitsschutzgesetz. It is not a diagnosis and replaces neither the formal risk assessment nor medical help.

Open the tool: [5 Whys](#)

stivencatalyst.com/tools/five-whys/

SOURCES AND METHOD

Every figure has a source.

The figures in this issue come from the sources below. The year shows how recent each one is.

WHO guidelines on mental health at work

World Health Organization, 2022

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240053052>

WHO and ILO call for new measures to tackle mental health issues at work (news release, 28 September 2022)

World Health Organization & International Labour Organization, 2022

<https://www.who.int/news/item/28-09-2022-who-and-ilo-call-for-new-measures-to-tackle-mental-health-issues-at-work>

Mental health at work (fact sheet)

World Health Organization, 2024

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work>

World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all

World Health Organization, 2022

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049338>

Mental health at work: WHO guidelines

Aiysha Malik, José Luis Ayuso-Mateos, Gergő Baranyi, Corrado Barbui, Graham Thornicroft, Mark van Ommeren & Aemal Akhtar, *World Psychiatry* 22(2), 2023

<https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21094>

Arbeitsschutzgesetz (Occupational Safety and Health Act), §§ 3–6, as last amended on 22 December 2025

Federal Republic of Germany, *Bundesgesetzblatt I* 1996 p. 1246, 2025

<https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/arbschgf/>

EDITORIAL METHOD

Each figure was checked for its year, its publisher and what exactly it measures. Where the publisher's page could not be opened, the figure was checked against independent summaries and is marked “via”. The editors' interpretation is marked “Our reading”. Figures that could not be confirmed are not in the issue.



MANAGEMENT REVIEW

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Every issue, one management question, checked against the best research.

ALL ISSUES

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