

EVIDENCE SUMMARY



MENTAL HEALTH AND EMPLOYMENT

Key messages

- Positive mental health is considered to be the foundation for the development of well-being.
- Workplace mental health interventions have focused on promoting change in individuals and/or been used to modify work practices & culture.
- There is a growing body of evidence that workplace interventions can promote, maintain or improve individuals' mental health.
- The more effective interventions include those with elements that are consistent with an empowerment process, such as increasing employee control over work and decision making.
- Interventions are more likely to be successful if they combine work with individuals with work with an organisational focus such as improving the work environment or changing the organisational culture.
- Gaining the support of managers and supervisors is important for achieving positive outcomes.
- More evidence is needed to understand how interventions work and the factors that can facilitate or inhibit their success.

What is this evidence summary about?

This evidence summary outlines the evidence base for workplace interventions related to mental health. It has been produced for Altogether Better, a five-year programme funded through the BIG Lottery that aims to empower people across the Yorkshire & Humber region to lead healthier lives.

Raine, G., Robinson, M. and South, J. (2010) Mental health and employment: Evidence summary. Leeds, Centre for Health Promotion Research. A full report is also available that presents detailed findings from this evidence review and includes review methods and a full reference list.



About Altogether Better

A five year regional collaborative programme.

Launched in 2008 and awarded £6.8m from the BIG Lottery Well-being fund.

16 locally delivered flagship projects, testing out different community health champion approaches in a range of settings.

Aims to recruit, train and support around 13,000 community and workplace health champions passing on their knowledge, skills, and experience.

Includes a Learning Network aimed at sharing intelligence, experience, and learning across projects.

Works to build a systematic approach to community empowerment as a means of tackling health inequalities.

Expected to reach 13,000 direct beneficiaries who it is estimated will indirectly benefit a further 70,000 people.

Altogether Better is based on an empowerment approach – this means equipping members of the public with the knowledge, confidence and skills to make a difference in their communities and workplaces. This evidence summary sets out the evidence base on work based initiatives that promote mental health and has been written for anyone involved in commissioning, planning, delivering and evaluating this type of intervention.

What is mental health?

Mental health is commonly defined positively in terms of well-being. It is seen, for example, as being able to realise your ability, cope with life problems, work productively and engage in positive relationships with others. A healthy workplace environment is recognised to be critical to individual well-being.

The term ‘empowerment’ is not often used in relation to mental health and employment interventions, nonetheless aspects such as raising people’s self esteem or sense of control are linked to improved mental health.

Empowerment in the workplace setting is about changing work-place structures, procedures and cultures as well as taking account of individuals’ attitudes, coping skills and involvement in decision making.

How has mental health been promoted in the workplace?

A wide range of interventions related to mental health have been used in the workplace. They can be viewed in relation to various characteristics including:

- **type of intervention:** whether the intervention is primary (preventing problems), secondary (focused on at-risk groups still in employment), tertiary (recovery focused) or a combination;
- **target:** whether the target of the intervention is on an organisation’s structures/procedures, on individuals, group processes or a combination.
- **problem:** whether the intervention focuses on stress prevention and management, common or severe mental health problems (such as anxiety and depression) or a combination.

Strategies that are used to target the individual include: training in coping skills; improving time management & communication skills; exercise & relaxation; counselling & cognitive behavioural therapy; and employee assistance programmes. Approaches that operate on an organisational level aim to improve the work environment. This can include making alterations to aspects such as job design and workload as well as changes to the physical environment in terms of space, safety and comfort. Interventions can also address individuals’ interpersonal relationships and their degree of control over work & decision making. Participatory approaches can be used within interventions; for example, establishing co-worker support groups or bringing together employees and management staff in order to jointly develop strategies aimed at promoting mental health and fostering a positive work culture.

Are workplace interventions related to mental health effective?

There is a growing evidence base that workplace approaches can promote, maintain or improve mental health. Much of the research comes from outside the UK and has tended to focus on the impact on individuals rather than organisational outcomes. On the basis of the available evidence the following key observations can be made:

- Interventions that increase workers’ sense of control over their work & decision-making and levels of support can have important benefits for the development of positive mental health and may reduce health inequalities.

- Empowerment-related elements such as high self-esteem are important in moderating the effects of environmental stressors on an individual's mental health.
- Combined approaches which work at organisational and individual levels appear to work well and may be more sustainable than single target approaches.
- Culture change affecting the attitudes and practices of individuals across organisational roles and hierarchies is an important dimension contributing to the success of interventions.
- Programmes that include participatory approaches appear to work well, as do those that combine primary preventive approaches with secondary or tertiary measures.
- Cognitive behavioural approaches can have a positive effect on employee attitudes and are widely effective for addressing common mental health problems. Such approaches can be more effective than alternatives such as relaxation.

How can the evidence base be built?

There is a need for more studies, particularly from the UK, that use high quality designs to explore further what works best and why. Certainly, the evidence base is stronger on outcomes than on process issues about the way an intervention is delivered, and a better understanding is required on how interventions work, and the factors that can facilitate or inhibit their success. Local evaluations can help build an evidence base on empowerment approaches in workplace settings. The findings of this review suggest that local evaluations need to:

- look at what works best, for whom and under what circumstances and how the different parts of the project work together.
- be explicit about what empowerment means in the project and how it can be measured.
- examine the longer term impacts, particularly on organisational structure and culture, as well as the impact on individuals.
- consider the cost effectiveness of workplace mental health interventions.

What are the implications for policy and practice?

There is growing evidence to support the use of the workplace as a setting for mental health promotion. Work based interventions can be beneficial to the mental health of employees. Overall, a number of key points emerge from this evidence review for policy and practice:

1. Simply focusing on the individual alone may often not be the most effective way to address mental health issues in the workplace. Interventions that work best also include a focus improving the work environment and changing the organisational culture.
2. Support and commitment from management and supervisors is important if interventions are to achieve meaningful change.
3. The more effective interventions include those that increase employee control over work and decision making, address both individual and organisational/ environmental factors and include participatory approaches. These are all consistent with an empowerment process.
4. Enhancing employees' control over their work may be of greatest benefit to those from more deprived socio-economic groups for whom lack of control is particularly common.
5. The effectiveness of some participatory approaches suggests that involving people in decision-making in relation to action around mental health may be as important as any initiatives implemented as a result.
6. There can be practical and cultural barriers to the use of participatory or empowerment based approaches in the workplace. Empowerment as a term may be considered outside the scope of many organisational change programmes and a poor 'fit' with a company's core aims. Careful consideration should be given to the language used in relation to interventions.
7. Realistic consideration should be given to the climate within which organisations operate and their priorities when setting project targets, timescales and methods.

Key references

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH. (2009) *New horizons: A shared vision for mental health*. London: HMSO.

NICE. (2006) *Workplace interventions that are effective for promoting mental wellbeing. Synopsis of the evidence of effectiveness and cost effectiveness*. London: National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

Seymour, L., Grove, B. (2005) *Workplace interventions for people with common mental health problems*. London: British Occupational Health Research Foundation.

Hill, D., Lucy, D., Tyerse, C. and James, L. (2007) *What works at work? Review of evidence assessing the effectiveness of workplace interventions to prevent and manage common health problems*. Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies.

How was this evidence summary produced?

This evidence summary was developed by the Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Metropolitan University. It summarises the results of a rapid review of evidence on promoting mental health in the workplace that drew on 23 reviews. A full report is available that presents detailed findings from the evidence review and includes review methods and a full reference list.

Two further evidence reviews were undertaken as part of the Altogether Better evaluation. These are:

- community health champions
- empowerment and health & well-being

All evidence reviews and summaries can be downloaded from the Altogether Better website www.altogetherbetter.org.uk



Further information

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