

Position paper on mental health in the work environment

The European Forum of the Insurance against Accident at Work and Occupational Diseases¹ counts member institutions from 21 countries responsible for the statutory accident insurance in Europe. Their common goal is to promote and safeguard the principles of social accident insurance and to serve as focal point for statutory accident insurance matters in Europe and abroad. Central concern of the European Forum is to enhance the welfare of the insured people. It aims particularly at the preservation and the development of means indispensable for the effective protection of people in their work in view of occupational risks including prevention, rehabilitation, and compensation.

Psychological strain at work can be a risk factor for the health of employees. Study results show that, for example, high work intensity or a lack of social support at work increase the risk of employees becoming mentally or physically ill (Rau et al., 2015, Rothe et al., 2017).

Mental stress has increased significantly in recent years, particularly as a result of the digitalization and / or the rapidly developing changes in our world.

Mental stress alongside with musculoskeletal diseases are the most common health issue in European companies. According to the figures set out in the resolution of the European Parliament of 5 July 2022 on “mental health in the digital world of work”, 25 per cent of EU citizens experienced mental health problems in their lifetime.²¹ The costs of mental ill health across all EU Member States are estimated at more than 4 per cent of its GDP and the costs of work-related depression at 620 billion Euro per year. According to the European Commission, half of EU workers consider stress to be common in their workplace, and stress contributes to half of all lost working days.³

The European Forum is very concerned by the increasing impact on the individual’s health and the national economies caused by mental stress. To avoid stress as well as negative psychological and somatic long-term effects, it is important to deal openly with mental stress in society. That concerns also the work environment. The European Forum thus generally welcomes initiatives to address psychosocial risks in the workplace, proposing a directive on

¹ <https://www.europeanforum.org/>

² Resolution of the European Parliament of 5 July on mental health in the digital world of work ([2021/2098\(INI\)](#)).

³ Communication „EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021 – 2027, Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work“, [COM\(2021\) 323 final](#).

psychosocial risks and well-being at work. It explicitly supports the requirement that mechanisms for the prevention of mental illness and the reintegration of affected employees be established at the level of the work organization and the work environment.

The European Forum members understand that personal leadership behavior of supervisors has a significant influence on employees' health. Health-promoting leadership and design of appropriate working conditions are key. Psychosocial training for managers and support from the companies' management are important steps on the path to change the culture of companies when dealing with mental strain and to adapt work organization practices.

Equally important is the conduct of further research to support more accurate risk assessments on psychosocial risks.

The European Forum fully supports the European Commission's and European Parliament's initiatives to strengthen the prevention of psychosocial risks in the work environment. Several statutory accident insurances in Europe provide comprehensive support for companies in their efforts to prevent anxiety, depression, and so-called burnouts in the work environment, e. g. with the help of prevention experts and prevention services such as counselling and training programs.

While the members of the European Forum fully support strengthening the prevention of psychosocial risks in the work environment and implementing a comprehensive culture of prevention, there are significant concerns about calls, such as those expressed in the European Parliament's resolution, to include anxiety, depression and so-called burnouts in the Recommendation concerning the European schedule as occupational diseases.

The causes of anxiety, depression or burnouts are often manifold and can be rooted in both, the professional and private environment. There is insufficient evidence for the causality of an occupational origin of mental diseases – therefore, it should not be included on the list of occupational diseases for the time being. Extensive research and new medical findings are necessary to establish the needed causal link between mental stress and mental illnesses and work-related factors, enabling to outline and define occupational diseases in highly affected workplaces and populations covered by insurance. The European Forum welcomes research activities on this topic, both for prevention as well as causality.

The relevant medical societies and the World Health Organisation (WHO), however, **define burnout as a syndrome and not as a disease**. The recognition of such burnouts as occupational diseases would entail a departure from applicable regulations and established systems.

Furthermore, the recognition and compensation of occupational diseases fall within the freedom of the Member States to organize their social security systems within the meaning of Article 153 (4) TFEU.

The conversion of this recommendation into a directive with legally binding obligations on the inclusion of diseases in the lists of occupational diseases, as requested by the European Parliament in its resolution on mental health in the digital world of work and its resolution on protecting workers from asbestos⁴.

Such an obligation would impact on the legal requirements for the recognition and compensation of occupational diseases and thus be in contradiction to the principles and financial set-up of the social security system within the meaning of Article 153 (4) TFEU.

To find out more: <https://www.europeanforum.org/activities/working-groups/wg-occupational-diseases/>

⁴ European Parliament resolution of 20 October 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on protecting workers from asbestos (2019/2182(INL)), point 45: "...calls on the Commission to present, after consulting the social partners, a proposal for a directive on the basis of Article 153(1)(a) and (b) TFEU laying down Union minimum standards for the recognition and compensation of occupational diseases, including asbestos-related diseases;"