



Is work good for your mental health?

Ma Te mahi Ka tino ora

('Work brings health', Maori proverb)

Work, whether paid or unpaid, is an important part of life. For many of us it is central to our happiness.

What work gives us

- social contacts and support
- a way of structuring and occupying our time
- physically and mental activity
- an opportunity to develop and use skills
- social status
- a sense of identity and personal achievement
- money and other resources needed for material well-being.

Studies show that work is generally good for health. As well as a financial reward, it gives many of us self-esteem, companionship and status.

There is good evidence that being out of work or 'workless' is bad for your health.

People who are unemployed

- have poorer physical and mental health overall
- consult their GP more
- are more likely to be admitted to hospital
- have higher death rates.

The figures are stark: people who are unemployed for more than 12 weeks are between four and ten times more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety.

Unemployment is also linked with increased rates of suicide. People who are ill are also more likely to be unable to work. But, the consensus is that being 'workless' is the cause, and poor health is the effect.

Some studies go so far as to conclude that the risk to health of being out of work, in the longer term, is greater than the risk of other killer diseases such as heart disease.

Returning to work after a period of illness, including mental ill-health, helps recovery and is the best way to prevent long-term sickness. The health status of people of all ages improves when they move off

benefits and into work. This is true for people with mild or severe mental health problems. It is not surprising then that the vast majority of people who are out of work, and use mental health services, want to return to or to start work.

This assumes that your work is safe and satisfying. Some workplaces are unhealthy, and may have helped to contribute to or exacerbate mental ill-health in the first place. So returning to work or starting to work after a period of mental ill-health has to be the right work, in the right place, with support from colleagues, carers and health professionals.

'Everyone has a right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.'

Article 23 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights

resources

Health and Work: Changing how we think about common health problems

Kim Burton and Gordon Waddell, 2007

This leaflet is aimed at helping employees get back to health and work. It includes some common myths and the realities of the links between work and health as well as practical advice on overcoming obstacles to recovery and work.

Building a career of your choice

Waghorn, G., Harris, M., Cleary, C., King, J., and Lloyd, C. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2008.

This booklet was developed at the Queensland Centre for Mental Health Research in Australia. It was written for people with severe mental illness, their friends, carers and health professionals. The booklet addresses common questions about employment and mental ill-health.

Rethink

Rethink is a mental health membership charity which works to help everyone affected by severe mental illness to recover a better quality of life.

This section of the website contains lots of links and information on **living with mental illness and how this impacts on work.**

MIND – for better mental health

Mind is a mental health charity in England and Wales which aims to help people take control of their mental health, by providing high-quality information and advice, and campaigning to promote and protect good mental health for everyone. For example, MIND run two telephone help lines:

- [Mind Infoline](#) provides information on a range of topics and can also put you in touch with help

and support in your area.

- Their [legal advice service](#) provides legal information and general advice including discrimination/equality and human rights advice relating to mental health issues.

Healthy Working UK – promoting well-being

This website is primarily aimed at health professionals. However, the leaflets and guidance section of the website contains lots of information for patients. There are resources which are specifically for people with different health conditions, including mental ill-health, who are returning to work.

Work Life

This website was developed for people with chronic fluctuating health conditions. Although it is aimed explicitly at people with Multiple Sclerosis, cancer, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, Parkinsons and arthritis, many of the resources may be useful for people with mental health problems.

Please note that we are unable to offer advice on individual cases. Please see our [FAQ](#) for advice on getting help.