
The boss, not the workload, causes workplace depression

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It is not a big workload that causes depression at work. An unfair boss and an unfair work environment are what really bring employees down, new study shows.

A huge pile of unfinished work is not the main reason why employees become depressed, concludes an extensive new Danish study.

Surprisingly, the study indicates that a heavy workload has no effect on whether or not employees become depressed.

Instead, it is the work environment and the feeling of being treated unfairly by the management that has the greatest effect on an employee's mood.

"We may have a tendency to associate depression and stress with work pressure and workload; however, our study shows that the workload actually has no effect on workplace depression," says one of the researchers behind the new study, psychologist Matias Brødsgaard Grynderup, PhD, of the Department of Clinical Medicine at Aarhus University.

"This suggests that the risk of workplace depression cannot be minimised by changing the workload. Other factors are involved, and it is these factors that we should focus on in the future."

The findings were recently published in three articles in the scientific journals *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* [10], *Psychoneuroendocrinology* [11] and *The Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health* [12].

A study of 4,500 public employees

The researchers handed out questionnaires to 4,500 public employees at Danish schools, hospitals, nurseries, offices, etc. They also conducted personal interviews with most of the participants to determine who suffered from clinical depression.

They also examined the concentrations of the stress hormone cortisol in the participants' saliva.

From the questionnaires, the researchers could determine the sense of justice that the employees felt in their workplaces. The feeling of justice in this context includes the feeling of being heard by one's manager and the feeling of everyone being treated on equal terms in the workplace.

Asked why people still tend to associate work pressure with depression, Grynderup says:

"When high levels of work pressure and depression appear to be linked in people's consciousness, it is not

because a heavy workload increases the risk of depression. Or that's not what we found in our study. Instead, depression can make work assignments appear insurmountable, even though the depression was not caused by the workload.”

High cortisol levels do not cause depression

The study also looked at the link between cortisol levels and the risk of developing depression.

Previous studies have indicated a link between work pressure, high cortisol levels and the risk of developing clinical depression. The new study, however, points in the opposite direction:

“Our results actually show that high cortisol levels are associated with a low risk of developing depression. This means that we may be able to use cortisol measurements as an indicator of the risk of developing depression.”

How to avoid workplace depression

The new findings can be used as a guide for future focus areas when stress and depression become a part of the workplace.

The study suggests that looking at the employees' own assessment of the work environment and possible changes to the work environment has a much better preventive effect on depression than reducing the workload.

”When the employees' sense of justice plays such a central role in minimising the risk of depression, this is probably the area that the preventive work should focus on,” says Grynderup.

“I recommend a management style in which there is a clearly expressed wish to treat employees properly – combined with a transparent organisational structure.”

[Read the Danish version of this article at videnskab.dk](#) [13]

 [The development of workplace depression has surprisingly little to do with work pressure. The sense of being treated unfairly by the boss, on the other hand, is closely associated with the risk of becoming depressed. \(Photo: Shutterstock\)](#) [14]

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Fact box

The Danish study differs from similar international studies in that the findings are not based on the individual's experience of the work environment, but rather on the aggregate experience of the healthy employees in a given work department.

In this way, the results are not affected by depressed employees who, as a result of their illness, often have a negatively tainted experience of their work environment.

Our results actually show that high cortisol levels are associated with a low risk of developing depression. This means that we may be able to use cortisol measurements as an indicator of the risk of

developing depression.
Matias Brødsgaard Grynderup

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