

# Supportive colleagues could be the key to health and fairness at work

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The attitudes and behaviours of colleagues towards people returning to work from sick leave can have a big impact on whether or not a worker feels they are fairly treated by their organisation.

According to a new study by researchers at the University of East Anglia

(UEA) and Stockholm University, there is a clear link between a person's health and their perceptions of fairness at work over time. The most significant factor in that link is the amount of support a worker feels he or she gets from [colleagues](#).

The research, published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, could have implications for how managers help employees return to work following a period of absence, or how they support those struggling to manage long-term health issues while at work.

According to the study, organisations should make sure they have well-designed routines for workers with [health problems](#). However, organisations also need to take into consideration the wider work environment to ensure colleagues can offer social support while the individual settles back into work.

The research team, led by UEA's Norwich Business School, used data from a large-scale population survey that has been carried out in Sweden every two years since 2006. Their results showed a clear pattern: among 3,200 respondents, all in paid employment, there was an association between three health indicators - self-rated health, depressive symptoms and [sickness absence](#) - and social support at work over time. In turn, [social support](#) was also strongly linked to perceptions of fairness in decision-making at work over time.

"It's well recognised that the perception of being treated fairly at work has a positive impact on a person's well-being, but the reverse relationship - between an individual's [health](#) and their perceptions of justice - is less well understood," said Dr Constanze Eib, an expert in organisational behaviour at Norwich Business School, and lead author of the study.

"Our results show a strong association between feelings of unfairness

and the amount of support perceived by colleagues. It could be that when you come back to work you still feel unwell, or more unhappy and your co-workers might pick up on this and feel inclined to keep their distance.

"Added to that, they might have been picking up your work while you were away and all this might contribute to them showing you less concern. That can lead to feelings of being less included in workplace discussions, less valued, and a sense that you are not being treated fairly."

Dr Eib added: "If, on the other hand, you feel supported by colleagues, this will change how you behave at [work](#), and what you think about your organisation. It comes down to managers really caring about their employees. They need to make sure they understand their workforce and can foster a supportive culture between colleagues - as well as taking steps to ensure procedures and decision-making processes are unbiased, robust and transparent."

**More information:** 'Organizational justice and health: Studying mental preoccupation with work and social support as mediators for lagged and reversed relationships', Constanze Eib, Claudia Bernhard-Oettel, Linda L Magnusson Hanson and Constanze Leineweber is published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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