

# Training in mental ill-health a determinant of managers' preventive actions

October 31 2019, by Margareta G. Kubista

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Monica Bertilsson, Senior Lecturer in Public Health Science at Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg. Credit: Photo by Cecilia Hedstrom

Managers who have received training in mental health issues, and whose workplaces run general information campaigns on mental health, are significantly more likely to work preventively in this area vis-à-vis their subordinates, a study shows. This applies irrespective of organization

size and managers' own experiences of mental ill-health.

"It's important for organizations to take overall prevention and information measures, and to help managers learn about [depression](#) and anxiety," says Monica Bertilsson, Senior Lecturer in Public Health Science at Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, and the study's corresponding author.

Mental [health](#) issues are the prevalent reason for sick leave in Sweden. Under the Swedish Work Environment Act, managers are responsible for the employees' health and safety, for preventing ill-health, and also for rehabilitation to a far-reaching extent. Nevertheless, few studies have examined managers' efforts to prevent common mental disorders like depression and anxiety among their coworkers.

The current study, published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, is based on a web questionnaire of 4,737 managers, recruited through the Citizen Panel at the Laboratory of Opinion Research, University of Gothenburg, and HELIX Competence Centre at Linköping University. Of the 3,358 respondents (71 percent), 2,921 were included in the study. For inclusion, they had to answer the questions about preventive actions, and their managerial role had to cover subordinate staff.

Over the past two years, half (50 percent) of the managers in the study had reviewed their coworkers' job duties and situation with the intention of preventing mental ill-health in the workforce.

Fifty-seven percent of the managers had initiated discussions on the subject to gain greater understanding of anxiety and depression. This had usually taken place in individual conversations with staff members, but also on a whole-group basis.

There were two key determinants of whether the managers had conducted staff reviews and discussions. One was whether they had received management training that included knowledge about depression and anxiety; the other was whether their organization had conducted general information campaigns on mental health issues. These factors were more influential than whether the manager had work-environment responsibility, and also outweighed the difference between female and male managers.

"The likelihood of a manager actually holding preventive discussions about anxiety and depression is 84 percent higher if the manager works in an organization that offers general measures, such as stress counseling and lectures on depression and anxiety, compared with the organization not doing so," Bertilsson states.

In organizations that had carried out general actions, there was also a 79 percent higher likelihood of the managers reviewing employees' job duties and work situation with the aim of preventing mental ill-health. In the group of managers who had received management training that included knowledge about depression and [anxiety](#), the likelihood of reviews was 56 percent higher, and of discussions 61 percent higher, than among managers who had not gained this knowledge from management training.

"It's easy to suppose that larger organizations do more, but we've taken size into account and adjusted for it in the study. Similarly, we've adjusted for [managers'](#) own personal experiences of mental ill-health, or of other people's, and whether they've looked after people with [mental health issues](#) during their working lives. So that kind of knowledge did not outweigh for instance the [mental health](#) knowledge they received through managerial training" Bertilsson says.

"The study is based on a questionnaire, extensive material, and many

variables controlled for one another, which makes the results extremely strong. One weakness is that [random selection](#) wasn't used but, compared with other studies, this is relatively broad, with respondents from highly diverse sectors, and both the private and the public sphere," she concludes.

**More information:** Iris van de Voort et al, Determinants of Managerial Preventive Actions in Relation to Common Mental Disorders at Work, *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* (2019).  
[DOI: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000001629](https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000001629)

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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