



### YOUNG PEOPLE, MENTAL HEALTH AND WORK ABILITY

Mental health problems are a particular threat to the work ability of young people. In 2023, nearly 40,000 people aged 16–34 had long-term sickness absences due to mental health reasons. Mental and behavioral disorders are also increasingly the cause of disability pensions among young people. Varma's data shows that people under the age of 35 have exceeded those aged 35–45 in the number of disability pension applicants.

## Strengthening the mental health of young people requires proactive and multi-level measures

Underlying mental health challenges are a number of factors relating to society, culture, working life and the individual's resources and background. No single factor alone explains the issues. Different factors can also affect individuals differently. Even though many mental health problems are not work-related, a lot can be done at the workplace to support young people's mental health and work ability.

## SOLUTIONS



### Talk positively about work.

It is important to talk positively about work and working life. Work is a significant resource, also from the point of view of mental health. Work offers opportunities to utilise one's own competence, learn new things, social networking, experiences of meaningfulness and financial security, for example. When work is properly dimensioned, work also supports mental health.

### Support young people at the beginning of their careers.

The supervisor plays a key role in supporting young people. Comprehensive induction into work, the work community and the work environment support young people's attachment to work. It is important to discuss the goals and expectations of the work and the key work tasks with the young person. In induction, it is also important to discuss working life practices, workplace methods for promoting work ability and work-related challenging situations, and to discuss ways of solving them together.

### Strengthen community cohesion.

The experience of inclusion and belonging to a community, as well as appreciation, supports the young person's motivation and work ability. Make sure that the young person can smoothly become part of the work community, also in hybrid work. The supervisor plays a key role in building a good working atmosphere and team spirit, but it is equally the responsibility of all members of the work community.

### Strengthen job resources.

Interesting tasks, good leadership, smooth organisation of work, support, appreciation and feedback, as well as opportunities to influence the work, support the young person's work ability. It is also important to ensure that young employees have a sufficient sense of control in their work. Identify the physical and psychosocial workload factors and reduce excessive workload.

### Provide sufficient support for work ability.

Make sure that the young employee is familiar with the workplace practices for supporting work ability, such as early support and support measures for returning to work. Make sure that the young employee knows where to seek support if they are worried about their own work ability. If the young person has limitations in their work ability, work should be adapted to match the young person's work ability. Work can be rehabilitative when it is well-balanced with the individual's resources. If necessary, it is a good idea to make use of the expertise of occupational health care in matters related to work ability. Your pension insurance company can also provide support for the development of work ability management in the workplace.

## Mental health disorders are by far the most common cause of disability among young people

~700

Number of Varma's new disability pension applications by people under the age of 35 in 2023

85%

for those under 25 years of age

83%

for those aged 25–34

Share of disability pensions granted in 2023 on the basis of mental and behavioral disorders

Source: Varma, 2024

## What do we know?

Challenges related to mental health are common among young people. In 2023, almost 40,000 young people received sickness allowance due mental and behavioral disorders (Kela, 2024). The number of young people applying for disability pension has also increased significantly in recent decades. Varma's data shows that people under the age of 35 have exceeded those aged 35–45 in the number of disability pension applicants. Underlying the increased work ability challenges, there are a number of factors relating to society, culture, working life and the individual. Therefore, solving the problem requires multi-level measures.

## Why is this important?

Young people's disabilities are costly for workplaces and society, which is why it is important to take care of their work ability early in their careers. Good work ability is also important for the young person's own future. If the problem is not addressed now, we will see a significant increase in disability pensions in the future.

## What should be done?

Many root causes of mental health and work ability challenges are related to different social and cultural situations and factors, and this means that solving them also requires social measures and solutions. It is important to create a workplace atmosphere in which people feel they can openly discuss issues related to mental health. It is also important to talk positively about work and working life. Work is a significant resource, also from the point of view of mental health. It would also be a good idea to detach from the culture of individualization related to mental health. It is important to strengthen communities and social support – both at work and outside of work.

The solutions may also relate to supporting young people at different stages of their careers, strengthening job resources and providing adequate work ability support when young employees have limitations in their work ability. Proactive measures that involve the entire work community and tackle individual situations are necessary in the workplace.

It is important to talk positively about work – work also supports mental health!

### TIPS FOR SUPERVISORS ON SUPPORTING YOUNG EMPLOYEES

- Ensure that the young employee is well inducted into work, the work community and the ways of working.
- Encourage the young person, identify and word their strengths. Encourage the young person to also take responsibility for their own work and make independent decisions.
- Listen, be present and talk to the young employee on a regular basis. Open interaction builds trust and encourages the young employee to bring up challenging issues.
- Give feedback and support the young person. Let the young person know when they have succeeded in their work. Be supportive when the young person needs it.
- Make sure that the young employee has a sufficient sense of control in their work. Meaningful and appropriately sized work tasks motivate young employees.
- Prepare together for challenging situations and setbacks in advance. Discuss the solutions together.
- Raise your concerns about the young person's work ability in good time. Refer the young employee to occupational health care, if necessary. Also remember to take care of your own work ability.

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### HOW THE BUSINESS BRIEF WAS PREPARED:

The solutions are based on Varma's report *Mielenterveyskoetuksella? - ratkaisuja nuorten työkyvyn tukemiseen työpaikoilla* in the publication series "Tietoa työkyvystä" (in Finnish), which examines young people's mental health and work ability, the root causes of symptoms and workplace-level solutions for strengthening the work ability of young people.

Read the report [on our website](#) (in Finnish).

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