

Title

Employers' attitude, opportunities and challenges in supporting employees with depression

Author and co-authors

Cecilie N. Thisted^a, Merete Labriola^{b,c}, Claus V. Nielsen^{b,c}, Merete B. Bjerrum^a

Affiliations

^a Department of Public Health, Section of Nursing Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

^b Department of Public Health, Section of Clinical Social Medicine and Rehabilitation, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

^c DEFACTUM, Central Denmark Region, Aarhus, Denmark

Introduction

Sickness absence due to employee depression has major indirect and direct costs for employers. Recently, workplace practices to prevent work disability have gained attention from researchers and policymakers, and there exist recommendations for employers on how to accommodate depression at work. Nevertheless, depression remains a major challenge for the workplaces, and the need for effective workplace interventions are continually being stressed.

To provide knowledge that can support the employers in managing employees with depression and promote their work participation, there is a need for clarifying employers' attitude, opportunities and challenges in supporting employees with depression.

The aim was to investigate employers' attitude, opportunities and challenges in supporting employees with depression.

Methods

Qualitative interviews were conducted with five employers from private and public-sector organisations. Interviews were transcribed and analysed according to the qualitative methodology of inductive content analysis.

Results

Four descriptive categories emerged from the interviews: 'Knowledge on and attitude towards depression' emphasising that employers' knowledge on and attitude towards depression influence their supportive practices; 'Dilemma of supporting employees with depression and accommodating workplace's needs' revealing that employers are torn between supporting employees with depression, while considering workplace needs; 'Restrained by the employer-employee relationship' capturing that employers' opportunities to support employees with depression are

restrained by the power imbalance between employer and employee; and ‘Work accommodations target the employee’s ability to work’ capturing that work accommodations focus on job tasks and schedule targeting employee’s work ability.

Discussion and conclusion

The transversal comparative analysis of the four categories revealed one explanatory theme: ‘Knowledge on depression enable targeted support, while diverging needs and conflicting agendas poison supportive practices’. The theme explains that specific knowledge on depression may change employers’ attitude to employees with depression, enable targeted support and facilitate employer activities to overcome taboo attached to depression. Furthermore, employers may benefit from a closer collaboration with externals, e.g. municipal social workers. Policymakers may provide initiatives to promote collaboration between vocational rehabilitation stakeholders supporting employers in managing and promoting work participation among employees with depression.