

The mental health benefits of employment: Results of a systematic meta-review

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Abstract

Objective: The literature on mental health in the workplace largely focuses on the negative impacts of work and how work may contribute to the development of mental disorders. The potential mental health benefits of employment have received less attention.

Method: A systematic search of reviews or meta-analyses that consider the benefits of work in regards to mental health was undertaken using academic databases. All relevant reviews were subjected to a quality appraisal.

Results: Eleven reviews were identified as meeting the inclusion criteria, with four deemed to be of at least moderate quality. The available evidence supports the proposition that work can be beneficial for an employee's well-being, particularly if good-quality supervision is present and there are favourable workplace conditions. The benefits of work are most apparent when compared with the well-documented detrimental mental health effects of unemployment.

Conclusions: The potential positive effects of good work and the role work can play in facilitating recovery from an illness and enhancing mental well-being need to be highlighted and promoted more widely. Future research should aim to further investigate what constitutes a 'good' workplace or a 'good' job in terms of mental health outcomes.

Keywords: work, mental health, benefits, depression, anxiety

It is widely recognised that mental illness is a leading cause of work impairment,¹ sickness absence,² and longer-term disability.³ As a result, there has been increased interest in the relationship between work and mental health,^{4,5} with a substantial amount of research focused on identifying workplace risk factors that may be harmful to a worker's mental health.⁶ While such research is warranted, it is also important to consider the mental health benefits of work.

Most individuals with mental illness, even those with severe mental health problems, generally wish to engage in meaningful work.⁷ Paid employment not only provides financial security; it can also give daily structure, a sense of worth and regular supportive social engagement.

Given this, it is not surprising that a number of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have found that engagement in the workforce is associated with better mental well-being, lower prevalence of depression and lower incidence of suicide.^{8,9} In line with such evidence, Waddell and Burton, in their landmark 2006 report for the UK Department of Work and Pensions, concluded

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that work is generally good for health and well-being and that in most situations the benefits of work outweigh the risks.¹⁰ Despite this, much of the popular narrative around the links between work and mental health has continued to focus on the potential negative influence work can have on mental health.¹¹ Dame Carol Black's influential review of the health of working people in the UK concluded that a 'greater public engagement on the benefits of work for health' was an important step in altering perceptions about fitness for work and enhancing individual's functional recovery.¹²

The present study aims to complete an overarching meta-review that collectively examines how work may benefit an employee's mental health. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first meta-review that focuses specifically on the benefits of work with regard to mental health.

Method

A meta-review is a method of systematically appraising the results of existing reviews and represents a methodological means of evaluating a broad field of academic work.¹³ Systematic searches were conducted using Medline, PsychInfo and Embase using a search strategy tailored for each database (see the Supplementary Table, available online), as well as Cochrane Collaboration Summaries. The systematic search was part of a larger meta-review into workplace mental health, with only the papers that considered the mental health benefits of work presented here. Grey Literature was also searched using the literature database 'Open Grey' and the reference lists of all the included reviews were examined to identify any reviews that had not been considered. In addition, subject matter experts were contacted with a request for any reviews which they thought might be relevant to this topic. The final search run in all databases was completed on 3 October 2012.

The criteria used for inclusion in this meta-review were:

1. Publication considered mental disorder, in particular depression and/or anxiety disorders and/or symptoms of mental disorder;
2. The role of work, in particular the protective benefits of work was considered;
3. Was a literature review, systematic review or meta-analyses;
4. Published in the English language;
5. Published after 1 January 1990.

Studies that only considered volunteer work were excluded from this review. By operationalising mental ill-health as symptoms of common mental disorder, specifically depression or anxiety, we acknowledge that broader concepts of mental well-being are not included. While the focus of this paper was on common mental disorders,

we also acknowledge the alarmingly high unemployment rate for those with severe mental illness,¹⁴ and that work can serve as an important component of rehabilitation for this population.⁷ We have attempted to discern the benefits of work by seeking reviews that examine the benefits of employment compared with unemployment and also reviews that focus on the particular aspects of the work environment that can contribute to good mental health. The mental health benefits were examined in terms of level of symptoms within the general working population and symptomatic benefits of those already diagnosed with a mental illness.

Two researchers (MM and SJ) independently analysed each individual title, abstract and, where appropriate, full text against the inclusion/exclusion criteria. In order to maintain methodological rigour, the same two researchers (MM and SJ) independently assessed the quality of each included review using the Assessment of Methodological Quality of Systematic Reviews (AMSTAR),¹⁵ a tool that aims to assess the methodological quality of each review selected for inclusion. This tool is able to distinguish between low, moderate and high-quality reviews. The AMSTAR has been shown to have excellent reliability ($R^2=.96$) and construct validity.¹⁵ Any disagreement regarding a study's inclusion or quality rating was referred to a third senior researcher (SBH).

Results

The initial systematic search identified 5179 potential academic papers. Of these, 11 were found to meet the study inclusion criteria, but only three systematic reviews and one meta-analysis were found to be of at least moderate quality.^{10,16-18} The complete study selection process is summarised in Figure 1, with the details and results of reviews meeting the inclusion criteria outlined in Table 1.

The four studies of moderate quality, which were prioritised when answering the research question, reported that work can be beneficial to an employee's mental health for a number of reasons. Firstly, a qualitative metasynthesis reported that individuals with mental ill-health identify various meanings and benefits from employment.¹⁶ These include greater autonomy, status and acceptance within society, opportunities for personal development and a sense of well-being. Secondly, a large-scale report that considered primary research and meta-analyses found that employment meets important psychosocial needs and is able to facilitate recovery from mental ill-health and, the corollary of this, that unemployment is associated with decreased psychological well-being and increased psychological distress.¹⁰ Thirdly, a systematic review of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies found that employment is associated with reduced psychological distress in women.¹⁸ These findings support the enhancement hypothesis, that role involvement provides access to resources (i.e. affirmative social supports) that may help one cope with demands, as opposed to the

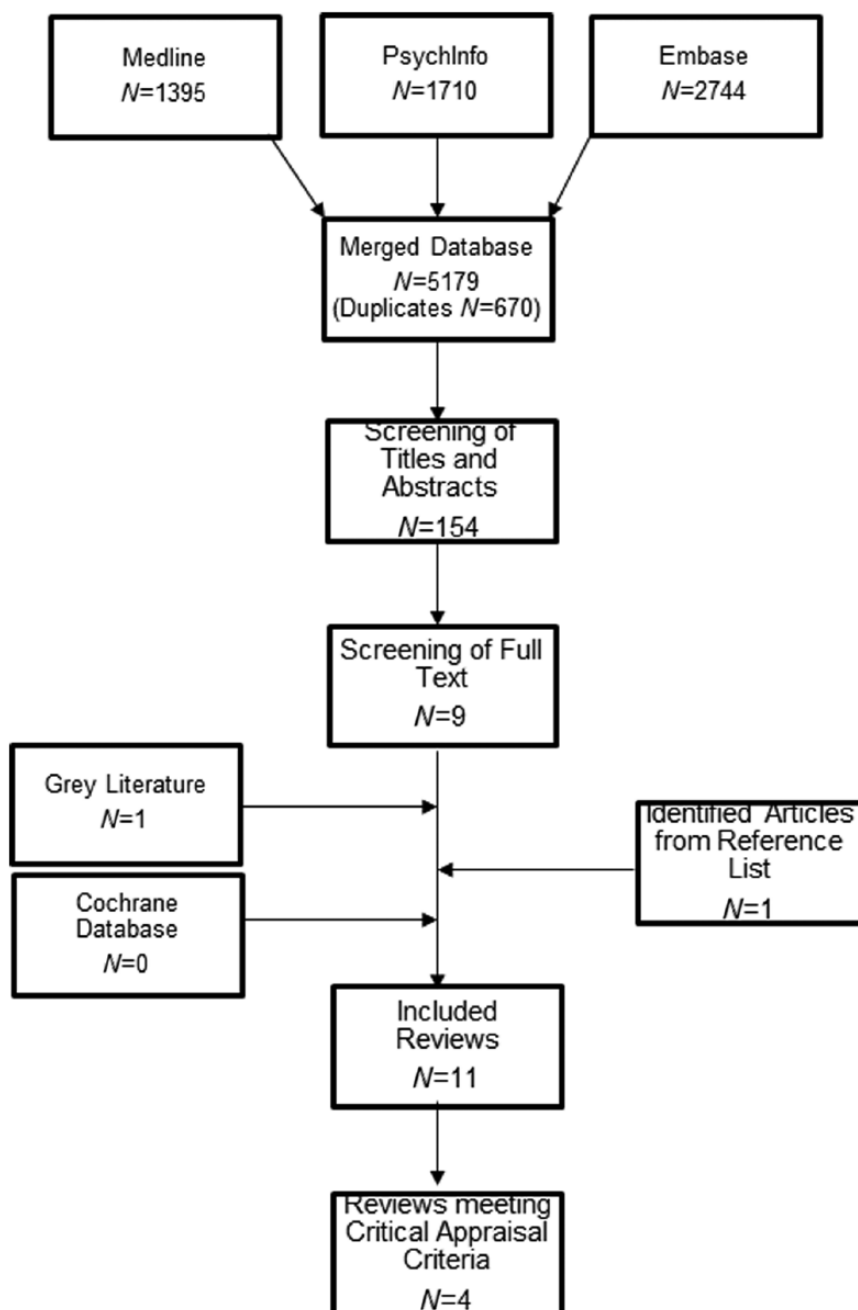


Figure 1. Flow diagram demonstrating the outcome of the systematic literature search and quality assessment.

occupational stress hypothesis that additional roles reduce an individual's well-being. Lastly, a meta-analysis of cross-sectional studies focused on health and social service workers suggested that work may be particularly beneficial for an employee's mental health if supportive supervision is present. Specifically, there were correlations of moderate effect sizes between the supervisory dimensions of task assistance, social and emotional support, and supervisory interpersonal interaction with a combined measure of benefits, which included reduced levels of depression and anxiety symptoms.¹⁷

The search strategy also identified seven other reviews that were deemed to be of low methodological quality, mainly due to a lack of a systematic search strategy^{19,20} or significant flaws in the analysis techniques used.²¹⁻²⁵ All seven of these additional studies were focused on the mental health impacts of unemployment. They described a substantial body of evidence demonstrating a cross-sectional association between unemployment and increased rates of depression, anxiety and reduced well-being. Four of the reviews identified examined the evidence for a prospective relationship between becoming

Table 1. Reviews that address the benefits of work with regard to mental health

Author	Year	Country	No. of studies included	Type of review	Quality score^a	Results
Barak et al.	2009	USA	27	Meta-analysis	8	Moderate effect sizes between the supervisory dimensions of task assistance, social and emotional support, and supervisory interpersonal interaction with beneficial outcomes for workers. These worker outcomes may include satisfaction, well-being, organisational citizenship behaviour, and reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression.
Dooley et al.	1996	USA	-	Narrative review	0	Poor mental health can lead to job loss via poor work performance; however, it is reported that studies that control for such selection effects are limited. Unemployed workers tend to exhibit increased psychiatric problems such as depression and substance abuse.
Fossey and Harvey	2010	Australia	20	Qualitative metasynthesis	4	People with mental ill-health identified that being employed has benefits of greater autonomy, status and acceptance within society, a sense of purpose, feelings of being productive, affirmation of ability and opportunities for personal development. Gaining employment is associated with a sense of well-being and helps an individual with mental illness to initially feel better, enabling more positive appraisals to be made, and is also associated with greater optimism. Positive social interactions at work generate a sense of being welcome, respected and supported.
Hammarstrom	1994	Sweden	-	Narrative review	0	Reported that there is a consistent relationship between youth unemployment and minor psychological disorders. Unemployment has a probable causal effect on health and health-deteriorating behaviour.
Jin et al.	1997	Canada	46	Systematic review	1	Reported association between unemployment and a greater risk of morbidity, including mental illness, at both population and individual levels.
Klumb and Lampert	2004	Germany	140	Systematic review	5	Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies both found that employment is associated with reduced distress in women. This supports the enhancement hypothesis.
McKee-Ryan et al.	2005	USA	104	Meta-analysis	4	Unemployed individuals have lower psychological well-being compared with their employed counterparts. Unemployment duration and sample type (school leaver vs. mature unemployed) moderated the relationship between mental health and unemployment. Significant improvements in mental health were found when workers became reemployed.
Murphy and Athanasou	1999	Australia	16	Meta-analysis	2	Longitudinal studies report that job loss on average has a negative impact on the psychological well-being of the unemployed. Moving from unemployment to employment produces a significant increase in mental health.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Author	Year	Country	No. of studies included	Type of review	Quality score^a	Results
Paul and Moser	2006	Germany	27	Meta-analysis	1	Both unemployed and employed individuals show high mean levels of employment commitment. Thus, unemployed individuals are in an incongruent situation between their employment commitment and their employment situation. Incongruent levels of employment commitment are significantly associated with psychological distress.
Paul and Moser	2009	Germany	324	Meta-analysis	2	The average percentage of persons with psychological problems among the unemployed is 34%, compared with 16% among employed individuals. Meta-analysis findings demonstrate that unemployment causes distress. Moderator analyses demonstrated that gender, type of job, a country's economic position and duration of unemployment moderate the relationship. Intervention programmes for unemployed people were found to be moderately effective.
Waddell and Burton	2006	UK	Not reported	Best evidence synthesis	6	Employment is the most important means of obtaining adequate economic resources. Work meets important psychosocial needs in societies where employment is considered to be a social norm. There is a general consensus that work is important in promoting mental health and facilitates recovery from mental health problems. Unemployment is associated with poorer mental health, decreased psychological well-being and increased psychological distress. There is limited evidence, however, to clearly define the psychosocial and physical characteristics of work roles and work environments that are 'good' for health.

^aFor meta-analyses, a score of 0–4 reflects low-quality research, 5–8 moderate and 9–11 high-quality. Given that the AMSTAR tool comprises two questions specific to meta-analysis, systematic reviews without meta-analysis have adjusted cut-off scores to reflect the fact that they could not receive points on these two questions. For systematic reviews, a score of 0–3 was deemed low-quality, 4–7 moderate and 8–9 high-quality.

unemployed and various mental health outcomes including general mental well-being, depression, anxiety and psychological distress.^{21–24} Of these, the meta-analysis that scored highest on the quality assessment, albeit still in the poor-quality range, reported significant increases in depression and anxiety symptoms following job displacement ($d=-0.38$), and significant reduction in symptoms following re-employment ($d= -0.89$).²¹

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first published systematic meta-review to consider the mental health

benefits of work. Our findings indicate that work can be beneficial to an employee's mental health. Accumulated quantitative and qualitative evidence demonstrates that having a job is associated with a greater sense of autonomy, improved self-reported well-being, reduced depression and anxiety symptoms, increased access to resources to cope with demands, enhanced social status and unique opportunities for personal development and mental health promotion.

Strengths of this study include use of a comprehensive and systematic search strategy and the rigorous quality assessment by independent reviewers. However, a

limitation of meta-review methodology is that it only allows reporting on literature that has been encompassed in the existing reviews, meaning that recently published primary research studies that have not yet been summarised in a review cannot be commented on. A second limitation is that our search strategy focused on mental disorders, namely depression and anxiety, meaning that studies focused on more broad concepts of well-being may not have been captured. Finally, establishing causation in any relationship between employment and mental health is complicated, as mental ill-health may be both a cause and a consequence of a change in employment status. In order to reduce uncertainty around the direction of causation in any relationships we report, we have, where possible, focused on and highlighted the results of prospective studies.

The occupational health literature has focused on the detrimental effects of work on mental health outcomes. However, for scientific balance, the benefits of work need to be ascertained and clearly described. In addition, it should not be assumed that a mentally healthy workplace can be created merely by eliminating known risk factors. Our results highlight unique protective factors, such as good-quality supervision, which may be important in helping work to be as health promoting as possible. Further research is required to gain greater clarity about which factors create a 'good' job and a 'good' work environment with regard to mental health outcomes. Furthermore, at present it is unclear whether it is the process of working per se or factors associated with the workplace (interactions with others, daily structure and financial reward) or the unique combination of both that serve as protective factors against mental illness.

Conclusions

Results of this meta-review indicate that employment can be beneficial to an employee's mental health. The benefits of work and factors that will enhance these benefits need to be promoted among employers in order to allow them to develop more mentally healthy workplaces. Additionally, a greater understanding among clinicians of the potential benefits of work should facilitate a move towards better integration of clinical care and occupational recovery and enhanced confidence in promoting return to work as part of a recovery plan.

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