

R Rugulies et al. American Journal of Epidemiology (2006) Vol. 163#10 p 877 – 887
Psychosocial Work Environment and Incidence of Severe Depressive Symptoms: Prospective Findings from a 5-Year Follow-up of the Danish Work Environment Cohort Study

It seems likely that having low influence at work and low support from a supervisor is predictive of new onset severe depression in women on a five year timescale. The risk is approximately double for each exposure variable. But is a failure to offer social support or not to allow the worker to determine their own job a breach of duty?

4,133 men and women (49%) employees were surveyed twice at 5 year intervals. Those with severe depression at baseline were excluded from analysis. The psychosocial environment at work was assessed by questionnaire at baseline. Work status at follow-up was not reported. Depression status was also assessed by questionnaire. Relative risks were corrected for depression score at baseline.

Psychosocial work characteristics at baseline included quantitative demands, influence at work, possibilities for development, social support from supervisors and co-workers, and job insecurity.

In women, new onset depression after 5 years was predicted by low influence at work [RR = 2.23 (95% CI = 1.27 to 3.92)] and low support from supervisor [RR = 2.05 (95% CI = 1.22 to 3.46)]. Quantitative demands, promotion prospects, job insecurity and support from peers were not predictive.

In men, new onset depression after 5 years was predicted by job insecurity alone. RR = 2.04 (95% CI = 1.02 to 4.06).

Overall the rate of new onset severe depression at the end of the five year period was 2.5%. Highest rates were among people now out of work. The number not in the labour market at the end of the five year period was over 2000.

Comment

Prospective studies of diagnosable degrees of mental ill health are very rare. This study found significant predictive effects for women with low influence at work and low support from their supervisor.

The time taken to go from no severe depression to severe depression is not known; a five year study period seems reasonable but some cases may have come and gone in that time.

The reporting is not sufficiently clear to determine whether or not job insecurity is a useful measure of predictive risk. Being out of work is clearly a risk factor for severe depression but what proportion of those with job insecurity at baseline are actually out of work five years later when re assessed?
