Factors Contributing to Psychological Distress in the Working Population, With A Special Reference to Gender Difference - A Population-Based Study

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Abstract

Background

Psychological distress refers to non-specific symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, and it is more common in women. Our aim was to investigate factors contributing to psychological distress in the working population, with a special reference to gender differences.

Methods

We used questionnaire data from the nationally representative Finnish Regional Health and Well-being Study (ATH) collected in the years 2012–2016 (target population participants aged 20 +, n=96 668, response rate 53%), restricting the current analysis to those persons who were working full-time and under 65 of age (n=34 468). Psychological distress was assessed using the Mental Health Inventory-5 (MHI-5) (cut-off value <=52). We studied the following factors potentially associated with psychological distress: sociodemographic factors, living alone, having children under 18 years of age, lifestyle-related factors, social support, helping others outside of the home and work-related factors. We used logistic regression analysis to examine association between having work-family conflict with the likelihood for psychological distress. We first performed the models separately for men and women. Then interaction by gender was tested in the combined data for those independent variables where gender differences appeared probable in the analyses conducted separately for men and women.

Results

Women reported more psychological distress than men (11.0% vs. 8.8%, respectively, p<0.0001). Loneliness, job dissatisfaction and family-work conflict were associated with the largest risk of psychological distress. Having children, active participation, being able to successfully combine work and family roles, and social support were found to be protective factors. A significant interaction with gender was found in only two variables: ignoring family due to being absorbed in one's work was associated with distress in women (OR 1.30 (95% CI 1.00–1.70), and mental strain of work in men (OR 2.71 (95% CI 1.66–4.41).

Conclusions

Satisfying work, family life and being able to successfully combine the two are important sources of psychological well-being for both genders in the working population.

Background

Psychosocial distress refers to non-specific symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression. High levels of psychological distress are indicative of impaired mental health and may reflect common mental disorders, like depressive and anxiety disorders [1]. As psychosocial distress also predicts sickness absences and work disability among the working-age population [2, 3], it is important to understand the factors that contribute to psychological distress among those who are working.

Psychological distress is commonly measured with rating scales like the General Health Questionnaire [4] or MHI-5, derived from the RAND-36 questionnaire [5]. According to previous studies, women in the Western world are more prone to psychological distress, depression and anxiety than men [6–9]. Proposed explanations for the gender difference include biological, psychological and social risk factors [10, 11]. Social factors involve, e.g. different societal roles and expectations for men and women. The roles at work and in the family as well as the challenges in combining them may be one factor contributing to gender differences [12–14]. However, the combination may also create more content and satisfaction in life, including with respect to possible gender differences [15].

Work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict and work-family enrichment load

Contradictions between work and family, a work-family conflict, involves two separate, but related concepts. One is work-to-family conflict, also called work-family interference or work interference with family, which occurs when participation in family life is made more difficult by work-related demands [16]. Family-to-work conflict, also called family-work interference or family interference with work, occurs when family life interferes with work [17]. In contrast, work-to-family enrichment means that the experiences at work improve one's performance and satisfaction within the family [15, 18]. Role accumulation theory claims that multiple roles and meaningful content in life create a positive conception of oneself [19].

Work-family conflict has been found to be more common in women, although the gender difference in European countries is currently small [20]. Women still perform most of the domestic work in families [21]. Both having children and providing informal care to elderly relatives may increase the experience of work-family conflict [20]. According to European statistics, when the time spent travelling between home and the workplace and doing unpaid work are taken into account, women work on average 64 hours a week compared to 53 hours for men. Women spend on average 26 hours taking care of children and elderly relatives, whereas men spend only nine hours [22]. It seems that especially during parenting, women have more problems in coordinating work and family life [17, 23, 24].

According to a 2010 European Social Survey, mothers and higher educated employees report the highest rates of work-family conflict [25]. Highly educated parents tend to experience more work-family conflict than less educated parents because of longer working days and greater difficulty in separating work from leisure time. A work position where an individual has much authority and responsibility for making decisions has been found to the increase risk of psychological distress [26].

Other work-related factors

According to a meta-analysis [27], a low level of job satisfaction is associated with a higher risk of psychological distress, burnout, anxiety and depression. Significant gender differences in job satisfaction have not been found, although women are less likely to work in managerial jobs and their salary is commonly lower [28, 29, 30].

Mental and physical work strain may affect mental health. Mental strain is common in human service work, but while working in these professions may increase the risk of emotional exhaustion and psychological distress, it may also provide meaning in work [31]. Physical work strain has been found to have a stronger effect on mental health in men than in women [32].

Social support, loneliness and other social environmental factors

Perceived social support refers to a person's sense that emotional or practical support is available from others when needed. A lack of social support from one's partner and close relatives, parents and friends is a risk factor for psychological distress [34]. There are indications that it operates in different ways for men and women [33], such as the fact that emotional support is more protective against depression for women than for men [34]. Women benefit from support more than men in both work and family contexts [35] and have more supportive networks than men do [36]. In contrast, women seem to receive less support from their spouses than men do from theirs [37].

Social support, especially emotional support, is often related to leisure-time activities, such as hobbies or cultural activities, and women tend to gain more benefit from social participation than men [34, 38]. It seems that leisure-time activities are associated with better mental health, especially when they include social contacts, and this is true particularly for men [39].

Emotional loneliness is the absence of someone to turn to in times of need, while social loneliness is the absence of a social network [40]. Loneliness, which women report experiencing more commonly than men in the general population, co-occurs with mental disorders and psychological distress [41, 42], and its association is partly independent of perceived

social support [43]. Accordingly, emotional loneliness is more strongly associated with distress and mental disorders than social loneliness [42]. Among college students, loneliness has a greater impact on women's mental health than it does on men's [44], but differences between genders have not been found among community dwelling adults [45].

Marital status appears to be a significant feature in loneliness. Marriage, compared to widowhood and divorce, has been found to be associated with better mental well-being in both genders [46, 47], while becoming widowed has more long-term effects among men than among women [48]. Living alone has mostly been associated with a greater risk of experiencing mental health problems [49], in some studies particularly among men [50], and men especially experience greater mortality rates from mental disorders than do women [51]. However, findings, especially among elderly people, have also shown that living alone is not associated with reduced mental health [52, 53].

Studies on parenting and mental health have mainly focused on how parental stress and depression affects children [54] and a depressed parent's behaviour as a parent [55]. Parenthood itself as a risk or protective factor has been studied less often. Some studies have found that parenthood is associated with less mental health problems [56, 57], whereas no association between mental health and parenthood has been found when different types of family statuses, like single parenthood and divorce or living alone, have been taken into account [58].

Other factors

Harmful lifestyle factors, like smoking and heavy alcohol intake, have been found to be associated with an increased risk for depressive symptoms [59–62]. Cigarette smoking is more common in lower socioeconomic groups and among people with mental disorders [63]. The comorbidity of substance use disorders with anxiety and depressive disorders is nevertheless common, and it is partly explained by shared genetic liability [64, 65].

Financial difficulties have been found to be a risk factor for reduced mental health [66, 67]. It is not just poverty that causes psychological distress, but also the stigma associated with receiving public assistance [68]. The risk of suffering common mental disorders, e.g. depression and anxiety disorders, among men and women appears different when viewed by income category; women's risk is greater than men's risk in all other categories except the lowest one, [69], whereas financial difficulties in covering household costs seem to have equal negative effects on mental health both in men and women [70, 71].

Informal caregiving, e.g. helping elderly parents, may increase psychological distress, and a recent study has found this to be true for women but not for men [72]. However, other studies have not found an association between informal caregiving and mental health [73].

The aim of the current study was to investigate factors contributing to psychological distress among those working full-time, with a special reference to gender differences. We were particularly interested in how factors related to work, family and conflicts in their coordination are associated with psychological well-being when other factors associated with mental health are taken into account.

Methods

Design and population

This cross-sectional study used data from the ATH Study [74]. The ATH was a questionnaire survey of health, well-being and service use targeted at the population of Finland aged 20 years or over, implemented annually from 2010 to 2016. A stratified random sampling design, described in detail by Härkänen et al. [74], was used, and the sampling was done without replacement. Inverse probability weighting was used to account for missing data [74]. Data used in the present study are from nationally representative samples collected in the years 2012–2016 (n = 96 668). In the present analyses, we used answers from participants aged 65 years or younger and who were working full-time (n = 34 468) (Fig. 1). The respondents

returned the questionnaire either by mail or online, and it was possible to answer in four languages: Finnish, Swedish, Russian and English. The ATH Study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.

Methods

Psychological distress was assessed using the MHI-5 [3, 5]. The MHI-5 consists of five questions: 'How much of the time during the last month have you: 1) been a very nervous person, 2) felt downhearted and blue, 3) felt calm and peaceful, 4) felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up and 5) been a happy person? The six possible responses to the questions were scored between 1 and 6. Items 3 and 5 ask about positive feelings and their scoring was done in reverse. All scores were then converted to fit a range from 0 to 100, with low scores indicating more psychological distress. We used the cut-off point of 52 points or less for assessing the presence of clinically significant psychological stress in participants [75].

Work-related variables

Potential work-family conflict was assessed using the following question: 'Are the following statements about home and work accurate for you?' The respondents were then asked to agree or disagree with six statements. One statement was considered protective: 'I have more energy to be with the children when I also go to work'. Another statement was considered neutral: 'When I come home, I stop thinking about my work'. Work interference with family was assessed via three statements: 'I feel I am neglecting domestic issues because of my work', 'I sometimes ignore my family when I am wholly absorbed in my work' and 'I feel inadequacy as a parent'. Family interference with work was assessed with the statement 'I often find it difficult to concentrate on my work because of domestic issues'. The answers were divided into two classes: agree and disagree/cannot say.

Job satisfaction was measured using the following question: 'How satisfied are you with your present work?' The responses were divided into four categories: extremely satisfied, fairly satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and fairly/extremely dissatisfied. Mental and physical strain of one's work was divided into three categories: low, moderate and high.

Sociodemographic and other non-work-related variables

The age of the participants was divided into three categories: 20–34 years, 35–49 years and 50–65 years. Education was likewise divided into three categories: less or equal to 12 years, 13–16 years and 17 years or more. Marital status was categorised as married/cohabiting, separated/divorced/widowed and single. Having children under 18 years of age was divided into a yes or no category. Living alone was likewise categorised based on a response of yes or no. All the participants in the analyses had a full-time job.

Those who reported that they smoke on a daily basis were classified as smokers, others as non-smokers. Alcohol consumption was assessed using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C) [76], which included the following questions: 'How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?', 'How many standard drinks of alcohol do you have on a typical day when you are drinking?', 'How often do you have 5 or more drinks on one occasion?'. A total score of six or more for men and five or more for women indicated at-risk drinking.

Subjectively experienced loneliness was divided into two categories: never/seldom/sometimes and often/all the time. Participation in leisure-time activities, such as hobby groups, societies and so forth, was categorised as regular or never/sometimes. Helping parents, children or other people outside the home regularly was defined as occurring at least once or twice a month.

Whether or not respondents received practical support when needed was identified using the following question: 'Who will provide practical help when you need it?' For emotional support, the question was worded as follows: 'Who do you believe truly cares about you, whatever may happen?'. Possible helpers or carers were partner, other next of kin, close friend, close colleague, close neighbours and other persons in close proximity to you. The answers were divided into three categories: no

one helps or cares, 1–2 persons help or care, and 3–6 persons help or care. Financial problems were assessed with the question 'How difficult or easy is it to cover your living costs?'. The responses were divided into two categories: very difficult/fairly difficult and fairly easy/very easy.

Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted using the SAS Enterprise Guide 7.1 [77] and SUDAAN Release 11.0.3. [78]. Weights were used to take into account the sampling design and non-participation, so that the results would be representative of the Finnish working-age population. We calculated the distribution of sociodemographic variables, other non-work-related variables and work-related variables for both genders and the prevalence of psychological distress according to the levels of these variables. Gender differences in the categorical variables were tested using the two-tailed χ^2 test.

We used logistic regression analysis to examine association between having family-to-work or work-to-family conflict with the likelihood for psychological distress (cut-off value < = 52). Sociodemographic factors, other non-work-related factors and work-related factors were included in the model simultaneously. We first performed the models separately for men and women. Then interaction by gender was tested in the combined data for those independent variables where gender differences appeared probable in the analyses conducted separately for men and women.

Results

Characteristics of study variables in men and women

Characteristics of the study variables are presented in Table 1 for men and women separately. Women reported more distress than men, and with most of the other variables also exhibited a statistically significant gender difference. We found no gender difference for the variables living alone, having school-age children or being active in societies and hobby groups. Men and women differed in all but one work-family conflict: 'I have more energy to be with the children when I also go to work'.

Characteristics of the sample by gender (numbers, percentages, means, and 95% confidence intervals)

	Men (n = 15,140)	Women (n = 18,112)	P value
	n (%)	n (%)	
MHI-5 (cut-off < = 52 points)	1,321 (8.8)	1,984 (11.0)	< 0.0001
MHI-5 mean (95% CI)	75.8 (75.6–76.1)	74.4 (74.1–74.6)	
Age (years)	3,496 (28.7)	3,852 (24.5)	< 0.0001
20–34	5,834 (39.7)	6,791 (38.2)	
35–49	6,322 (31.6)	8,087 (37.4)	
50–65	42.4 (42.2–42.6)	43.9 (43.7–44.0)	
Age (mean)			
Education (years)	6,224 (43.0)	4,793 (26.9)	< 0.0001
<= 12	5,367 (33.6)	8,089 (43.4)	
13–16	4,061 (23.4)	5,849 (29.7)	
17+			
Marital status	12,016 (76.1)	13,495 (72.9)	< 0.0001
Married/cohabiting	1,017 (6.7)	2,255 (12.3)	
Separated/divorced/widowed	2,105 (17.2)	2,360 (14.8)	
Single			
Lives alone	2,011 (14.5)	2,703 (14.9)	0.263
Yes	13,641 (85.5)	16,028 (85.1)	
No			
Has children under 18 years of age	1,605 (21.9)	840 (9.7)	< 0.0001
< 3 years old	2,032 (26.2)	1,903 (20.2)	
3 to 6 years old	4,459 (44.8)	5,277 (44.2)	< 0.0001
7 to 17 years old			0.373
At-risk drinking (AUDIT-C)[1]	5,678 (37.5)	4,087 (22.8)	< 0.0001
Current smoker	2,350 (25.6)	2,346 (23.0)	< 0.0001
Loneliness	14,424 (94.1)	16,988 (92.7)	< 0.0001
Never/seldom/sometimes	810 (5.9)	1,273 (7.3)	
Quite often/all the time			

1) At-risk drinking is assessed as AUDIT-C, men > = 6 points and women > = 5 points.

2) N indicates the number of yes answers.

	Men (n = 15,140)	Women (n = 18,112)	P value
Active member in societies, hobby groups, etc.	4,609 (28.9)	5,318 (28.1)	0.0962
Difficulty in covering household costs	3,583 (25.2)	4,567 (26.5)	0.011
How many persons give you practical help?	217 (1.6)	201 (1.2)	6.64
No one	8,303 (54.4)	9,697 (53.5)	0.0013
1–2 persons	6,412 (43.0)	7,957 (45.3)	
3–6 persons			
How many persons give you emotional support?	150 (1.1)	146 (0.8)	< 0.0001
No one	9,725 (63.8)	9,639 (53.4)	
1–2 persons	5,096 (35.1)	8,108 (45.8)	
3–6 persons			
Helping someone outside the household regularly, at least once a month	4,629 (41.3)	5,846 (44.3)	< 0.0001
Parent	3,204 (28.6)	4,691 (36.6)	< 0.0001
Child	3,394 (32.5)	4,921 (39.3)	< 0.0001
Other			< 0.0001
Work satisfaction	2,889 (18.6)	3,883 (20.9)	< 0.0001
Extremely satisfied	8,664 (56.0)	10,420 (56.6)	
Fairly satisfied	2,508 (16.8)	2,547 (14.2)	
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	1,233 (8.6)	1,431 (8.2)	
Fairly - extremely dissatisfied			
Mental strain of work	2,359 (16.7)	2,202 (12.9)	< 0.0001
Low	10,624 (69.2)	13,118 (72.0)	
Moderate	2,089 (14.0)	2,708 (15.1)	
High			
Physical strain of work	7,796 (47.8)	9,710 (52.1)	< 0.0001
Low	6,299 (44.0)	7,121 (40.9)	
Moderate	1,080 (8.2)	1,142 (7.0)	
High			

1) At-risk drinking is assessed as AUDIT-C, men > = 6 points and women > = 5 points.
2) N indicates the number of yes answers.

	Men (n = 15,140)	Women (n = 18,112)	P value
When I come home, I stop thinking about my work [2]	8,147 (55.4)	10,709 (59.6)	< 0.0001
I feel I am neglecting domestic issues because of my work[2]	5,502 (36.2)	7,126 (39.2)	< 0.0001
I sometimes ignore my family when I am wholly absorbed in my work[2]	4,290 (27.1)	4,512 (24.1)	< 0.0001
I often find it difficult to concentrate on my work because of domestic issues[2]	1,575 (10.9)	1,718 (10.1)	0.020
I have more energy to be with the children when I also go to work[2]	5,419 (34.9)	6,159 (34.5)	0.428
I feel inadequacy as a parent[2]	2,324 (15.1)	3,538 (20.0)	< 0.0001
1) At-risk drinking is assessed as AUDIT-C, men > = 6 points and women > = 5 points.			
2) N indicates the number of yes answers.			

Associations of study variables with psychological distress by gender

Cross-tabulation of different variables with psychological distress in men and women are presented in Table 2. Most of the independent variables were associated with psychological distress, but with some gender differences. Education was associated with psychological distress only in women, with less education being associated with more distress. Helping a parent or a child outside of a person's own household was associated with less distress, but statistically significantly only in men helping a parent and in women helping a child. Helping somebody other than one's own child or parent was associated with more distress, but statistically significantly only in women.

Table 2
Associations of study variables with psychological distress by gender (MHI5 cut-off < = 52) (%)

	Men (N = 15,059)			Women (N = 18,050)		
	Psychological distress (N = 1,321)	No psychological distress (N = 13,738)		Psychological distress (N = 1,984)	No psychological distress (N = 16,066)	
%	% (N)	% (N)	P value	% (N)	% (N)	P value
Age group 20−34 (21.4) 35−49(36.7) 50−65 (41.9)	12.0 (388) 9.6 (507) 7.5 (426)	88.0 (2,977) 90.4 (5,103) 92.5 (5,658)	< 0.0001	15.6 (554) 10.9 (688) 9.9 (742)	84.4 (3,138) 89.1 (5,865) 90.1 (7,063)	< 0.0001
Education years <=12 (32.0) 13−16 (39.1) 17+ (28.9)	10.0 (541) 9.9 (464) 8.6 (316)	90.0 (5,355) 90.1 (4,753) 91.4 (3,630)	0.0756	13.1 (548) 11.5 (844) 10.7 (592)	86.9 (3,992) 88.5 (6,982) 89.3 (5,093)	0.0013
Marital status Married/cohabiting (76.7) Separated/divorced/widowed (9.9) Single (13.4)	8.1 (879) 14.2 (123) 14.5 (280)	91.9 (10,743) 85.8 (11,622) 85.5 (1,746)	< 0.0001	10.0 (1,238) 14.7 (308) 16.7 (365)	90.0 (11,814) 85.3 (1,879) 83.3 (1,895)	< 0.0001
Lives alone Yes (13.7) No (86.3)	14.7 (262) 8.7 (1059)	85.3 (1,690) 91.3 (12,048)	< 0.0001	15.4 (385) 11.0 (1,599)	84.6 (2,243) 89.0 (13,824)	< 0.0001
Has children under 18 years of age Yes (53.1) No (46.9)	8.6 (498) 11.6 (495)	91.4 (5,565) 88.4 (4,232)	< 0.0001	11.1 (674) 12.9 (777)	88.9 (5,699) 87.1 (5604)	0.0023
At-risk drinking[1] Yes (28.4) No (71.6)	12.0 (606) 8.1 (705)	88.0 (4,930) 91.9 (8,808)	< 0.0001	15.2 (574) 10.6 (1,410)	84.8 (3,414) 89.4 (12,653)	< 0.0001
Current smoker Yes (22.3) No (77.7)	13.6 (291) 8.6 (646)	86.4 (1,987) 91.4 (6,908)	< 0.0001	19.2 (411) 10.7 (900)	80.8 (1,869) 89.3 (7,503)	< 0.0001

1) At-risk drinking is assessed as AUDIT-C, men > = 6 points and women > = 5 points.

Calculated using the inverse probability weights (see Methods).

	Men (N = 15,059)			Women (N = 18,050)		
Loneliness	7.1 (933)	92.9 (13,285)	< 0.0001	8.8 (1,394)	91.2 (15,381)	< 0.0001
Never/seldom/sometimes (93.8)	49.3 (385)	50.7 (409)		48.1 (587)	51.9 (669)	
Often/all the time (6.2)						
Active member in societies, hobby groups, etc.?	6.9 (283)	93.1 (4,182)	< 0.0001	8.0 (397)	92.0 (4,775)	< 0.0001
Yes (29.5)	10.7 (1,020)	89.3 (9,367)		13.1 (1,553)	86.9 (11,021)	
No (70.5)						
How difficult or easy is it to cover household costs?	29.0 (251)	71.0 (655)	< 0.0001	29.2 (369)	70.8 (914)	< 0.0001
fairly difficult/very difficult (24.0)	8.2 (1,063)	91.8 (12,998)		10.1 (1,592)	89.9 (15,013)	
fairly easy /very easy (76.0)						
How many persons give you practical help?	39.8 (77)	60.2 (128)	< 0.0001	40.8 (75)	59.2 (119)	< 0.0001
No one (1.3)	11.8 (863)	88.2 (7,215)		13.9 (1,223)	86.1 (8,161)	
1−2 persons (54.9)	5.8 (331)	94.2 (5,890)		8.1 (593)	91.9 (7,187)	
3−6 persons (43.8)						
How many persons give you emotional support?	40.9 (54)	59.1 (85)	< 0.0001	45.2 (61)	54.8 (79)	< 0.0001
No one (0.9)	10.9 (931)	89.1 (8,531)		13.8 (1,206)	86.2 (8,120)	
1−2 persons (58.9)	6.2 (288)	93.8 (4,646)		8.3 (628)	91.7 (7,291)	
3−6 persons (40.2)						
Helping a parent outside the household regularly, at least once a month	9.1 (382)	90.9 (4,099)	0.0077	11.7 (634)	88.3 (5,067)	0.1040
Yes (42.9)	10.7 (649)	89.3 (5,789)		12.6 (859)	87.4 (6,273)	
No (57.1)						
Helping a child outside the household regularly, at least once a month	9.3 (264)	90.7 (2,837)	0.0774	11.1 (486)	88.9 (4,077)	0.0075
Yes (34.6)	10.5 (706)	89.5 (6,332)		12.8 (913)	87.2 (6,554)	
No (65.4)						

1) At-risk drinking is assessed as AUDIT-C, men > = 6 points and women > = 5 points.

Calculated using the inverse probability weights (see Methods).

	Men (N = 15,059)			Women (N = 18,050)		
Helping someone else outside the household regularly, at least once a month	10.6 (323)	89.4 (2,960)	0.299	13.6 (617)	86.4 (4,165)	0.0008
	9.9 (687)	90.1 (6,614)		11.5 (852)	88.5 (6,857)	
Yes (35.1)						
No (64.9)						
Work satisfaction	3.8 (93)	96.2 (2,720)	< 0.0001	5.0 (168)	95.0 (3,620)	< 0.0001
extremely satisfied (20.2)	6.2 (467)	93.8 (7,965)		8.7 (836)	91.3 (9,300)	
fairly satisfied (56.8)	15.3 (357)	84.7 (2,069)		19.3 (465)	80.7 (2,008)	
neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (15.1)	33.7 (387)	66.3 (811)		36.4 (490)	63.6 (895)	
fairly/extremely dissatisfied (7.9)						
Mental strain of work	4.4 (90)	95.6 (2,212)	< 0.0001	6.0 (112)	94.0 (2,024)	< 0.0001
Low (13.8)	7.9 (737)	92.1 (9,602)		9.7 (1,160)	90.3 (11,622)	
Moderate (71.7)	24.4 (460)	75.6 (1,561)		26.0 (663)	74.0 (1974)	
High (14.5)						
Physical strain of work	8.3 (582)	91.7 (7,040)	< 0.0001	10.4 (926)	89.6 (8,549)	< 0.0001
Low (52.8)	9.2 (524)	90.8 (5,573)		11.8 (775)	88.2 (6,136)	
Moderate (40.5)	19.1 (187)	80.9 (853)		21.0 (226)	79.0 (874)	
High (6.7)						
When I come home, I stop thinking about my work	6.9 (492)	93.1 (7,440)	< 0.0001	8.1 (787)	91.9 (9,621)	< 0.0001
	13.0 (814)	87.0 (6,116)		16.9 (1,168)	83.1 (6,185)	
Yes (56.3)						
No (43.7)						
I feel that I am neglecting domestic issues because of my work	15.5 (761)	84.5 (4,583)	< 0.0001	18.5 (1,221)	81.5 (5,729)	< 0.0001
	6.3 (543)	93.7 (8,957)		7.3 (729)	92.7 (10,053)	
Yes (37.8)						
No (62.2)						

1) At-risk drinking is assessed as AUDIT-C, men > = 6 points and women > = 5 points.
Calculated using the inverse probability weights (see Methods).

	Men (N = 15,059)			Women (N = 18,050)		
I sometimes ignore my family when I am wholly absorbed in my work	14.4 (549)	85.6 (3,625)	< 0.0001	18.9 (786)	81.1 (3,622)	< 0.0001
	7.8 (751)	92.2 (9,883)		9.3 (1,160)	90.7 (12,146)	
Yes (26.4)						
No (73.6)						
I often find it difficult to concentrate on my work because of domestic issues	28.7 (419)	71.3 (1,106)	< 0.0001	34.5 (556)	65.5 (1,118)	< 0.0001
	7.3 (881)	92.7 (12,425)		9.1 (1,395)	90.9 (14,651)	
Yes (9.9)						
No (90.1)						
I have more energy to be with the children when I also go to work	6.9 (350)	93.1 (4,928)	< 0.0001	9.8 (563)	90.2 (5,423)	< 0.0001
	11.1 (936)	88.9 (8,425)		12.7 (1,362)	87.3 (10,147)	
Yes (35.1)						
No (64.9)						
I feel inadequacy as a parent	20.6 (439)	79.4 (1,824)	< 0.0001	20.8 (686)	79.2 (2,756)	< 0.0001
Yes (17.8)	7.7 (850)	92.3 (11,546)		9.4 (1243)	90.6 (12,830)	
No (82.2)						
1) At-risk drinking is assessed as AUDIT-C, men > = 6 points and women > = 5 points.						
Calculated using the inverse probability weights (see Methods).						

Separate multivariable logistic regression analyses for men and women

Work-family conflicts were similarly either protective or risk factors in both genders (Table 3). Only one domain, 'I sometimes ignore my family when I am wholly absorbed in my work', was associated with psychological distress in women, but not in men. The most distressing domain in both genders was family-to-work conflict, 'I often find it difficult to concentrate on my work because of domestic issues', while the second most distressing was 'I feel inadequacy as a parent'.

Being fairly or extremely dissatisfied with work had the strongest association with on psychological distress measure in both genders. The high mental strain of one's work had a statistically significant association with psychological distress only in men, whereas the physical strain of one's work was not associated with distress in either gender.

Of the other variables considered, loneliness was strongly associated with psychological distress among both genders. Smoking and difficulties in covering household costs were also similarly associated with psychological distress in both genders. With respect to other not work-related factors, having minor children and actively participating in hobby groups and societies were associated with lower odds, while feeling inadequacy as a parent was associated with higher odds for psychological distress.

Having someone to give practical help (among men) or emotional support (among women) when needed were both associated with lower odds of psychological distress, especially when several supporters were available. Helping others outside the home was not associated with psychological distress.

Combined logistic regression analysis to test for gender interactions

In the logistic regression models conducted separately for men and women, gender difference in the strength of the associations with psychological distress appeared possible in the following variables: having children under 18 years old, at-risk drinking, active participation, receiving practical help from others, receiving emotional support from others, mental strain of work and ignoring family when wholly absorbed in one's work. We included these variables in the logistic regression model pooled together across gender to test if they exhibited statistically significant gender interaction.

We found significant interaction by gender in two variables. The interaction term 'gender and mental strain' proved significant (F value 3.86, p = 0.0212), indicating that mental strain was associated with psychological distress in men (see Table 3). The interaction term 'gender and ignoring family due to being absorbed in one's work' also proved significant (F value 4.16, p = 0.0414), indicating that ignoring family due to being absorbed in one's work was associated with psychological distress in women.

Discussion

In this cross-sectional, nationally representative study sample of the working population, we found that several factors related to work and balancing work and family life are associated with psychological distress. Furthermore, these associations were mostly similar among women and men. Earlier studies have yielded mixed evidence regarding gender differences based on work-family conflicts [79].

Family-to-work conflict has previously been found to be less common than work-to-family conflict [80], but in our study family-to-work conflict was more strongly associated with psychological distress than work-to-family conflict. The only gender difference was found in sometimes ignoring family when wholly absorbed in one's work, which was associated with psychological distress only in women. This suggests that an engaging job may cause psychological distress via work-to-family conflict among women [81]. Difficulty in concentrating on work because of domestic issues showed the strongest association with psychological distress, but it could also imply that the participants were experiencing distressing family-related challenges at the time.

We also found evidence of work-to-family enrichment: those who responded that they have more energy to be with their children when they also go to work had less psychological distress [15]. Also, participants who reported that they stop thinking about their work when they come home had less distress, suggesting that a successful combination of work and family life protects a person from psychological distress. Inadequacy as a parent was associated with psychological distress independently of gender. Prior studies have reported that about half of employed parents feel they do not spend enough time with their children, and such a time deficit is associated with psychological distress [82].

Interestingly, mental strain of one's work was a risk for psychological distress in men but not in women. The link between the mental demands of one's work and psychological distress or mental disorder has been observed both in cross-sectional and in longitudinal studies [83, 85]. Emotional exhaustion is more common in emotionally demanding jobs, such as in police work or among physicians and other professionals working in healthcare, and effective preventive interventions are available [86]. Most previous studies have not found any gender difference in how the psychosocial or emotional demands of one's work affect mental health, but one previous study found that they may have a mediating effect between low income and psychological distress in men [87].

Consistent with prior studies [27, 88], our findings showed that job dissatisfaction was strongly associated with psychological distress. We did not find any gender difference in terms of job dissatisfaction, which is consistent with earlier

studies [29, 89]. In a meta-analysis on the health effects of job dissatisfaction, the strongest correlation between job dissatisfaction and mental health problems was with burnout [27]. Burnout is a chronic stress syndrome characterised by exhaustion, cynicism and a lack of professional efficacy [90], and it may be an important mediator in the observed association between job dissatisfaction and psychological distress.

Loneliness was, similar to job dissatisfaction, the most significant factor increasing the odds of psychological distress, and at the same magnitude, in both genders. Women reported feelings of loneliness more often than men, as has been found earlier [41], but the association with psychological distress was equal in both genders. Previous studies have shown that loneliness is a significant risk factor for depression [91] and other common mental disorders [43] as well as for suicidal ideation and suicide attempts [92]. Furthermore, loneliness is associated with an increased risk of many health problems [92], and it has been increasingly seen as an important public health problem [93]. Our finding supports this view and encourages experts to implement specific interventions to reduce loneliness [94].

Various aspects related to social networks and social support were associated with having less psychological distress. Having minor children, being active in hobby groups, and receiving social support when needed were all associated with less psychological distress. Previous studies have found that social participation in activities is especially beneficial for women [34, 38], whereas men and women benefit differently from emotional support [33–35]. However, while the analyses conducted separately among men and women suggested that there might be gender differences in these aspects of social networks and support, we did not observe any significant interaction in the analysis. It is also noteworthy that helping others outside the home was not associated with psychological distress.

Previous studies [66, 68, 70] have likewise found that financial difficulties constitute a notable risk factor for psychological distress. Consistent with a large body of previous research, smoking [59, 95, 96] and at-risk drinking [97, 98] were associated with more psychological distress; however, their effect was less prominent than that of social and work-related factors in our study.

After considering a wide range of work-related, family-related and social factors, well-known risk factors like marital status and living alone did not have an association with psychological distress. This is consistent with a previous study that found that loneliness is a mediator between living alone and distress [98].

Strengths and limitations

The major strength of the present study is the large study sample representative of the adult working-age population in Finland. It was possible for participants to respond in several languages spoken by sizeable minorities within Finland, which further improved the representativeness.

The major limitation is that our study is cross-sectional. Therefore, we could not assess the direction of the associations. Furthermore, we did not have information on some essential contributing factors, such as recent life events, workplace-related factors [13] or symptoms of burnout. We did not have information about job demands, job control or other features related to work. Low response rate is a common phenomenon in survey studies today, and so it was in our study as well, especially for the youngest age group. However, we used inverse probability weighting to account for missing data, which has been shown to remove a relatively large proportion of the bias related to the low response rate in the current study sample [74].

Conclusions

Satisfying work, family life and being able to successfully combine both are important sources of psychological well-being in the working population, both among men and women. Moreover, our findings support the notion of loneliness as a major public health problem.

Declarations

Abbreviations

ATH
Finnish Regional Health and Well-being Study
MHI-5
Mental Health Inventory-5
OR
odds ratio
AUDIT-C
The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test
CI
confidence interval

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The ATH Study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available. The data, from which all personal data have been eliminated, may be disclosed for research purposes by FinData in return for a research proposal and an approved user authorisation application.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Not applicable.

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. The statistical analysis plan was designed by SV and JS, and material preparation and statistical analysis was done by SV. The first draft of the manuscript was written by SV, and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures
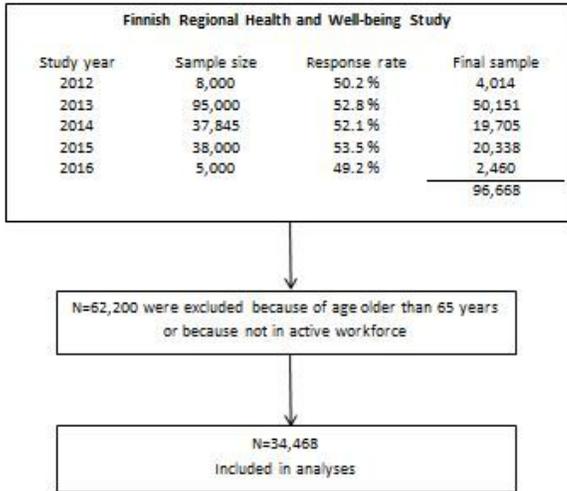
Figure 1

Flow chart of the sample sizes and response rates to the Finnish Regional Health and Well-being Study and participants in the present study.