

How workplace stigma leads to sick leave and unemployment

Evelien P. M. Brouwers

Video Abstract

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Abstract

A paper recently published in BMC Psychology reports that mental health stigma in the workplace leads to unemployment much more often than we tend to realize. Ample evidence shows that workplace stigma negatively affects the careers and wellbeing of people with mental health issues and illness—a group 3 to 7 times more likely to be unemployed than others. This makes workplace stigma an important public health problem that deserves more attention. The scientific literature reveals at least four stigma-related problems that negatively affect workers' sustainable employment. First, negative stereotypes are prevalent, and workplace stakeholders often hold negative attitudes towards people with mental illness. Prejudice makes employers less likely to hire workers with mental illness, and more inclined to let them go. A second problem with workplace stigma is the disclosure dilemma: Both disclosure and non-disclosure can lead to unemployment. On the one hand, disclosure may lead to stigma and discrimination and result in unemployment. For example, a temporary employment contract may not be renewed. Or job applicants may not be hired after disclosure. On the other hand, disclosure can prevent sick leave and job loss. It may lead to work adjustments and support from managers and colleagues, which are helpful for maintaining employment. Also, most workers with mental illness prefer to be open, because keeping their illness a secret at work can be very stressful. A third problem is that negative social stereotypes can lead to discouragement, lower self-esteem, and self-stigma in people with mental illness. That can disrupt important behavior, such as proactively trying to maintain or seek new employment. This is known as the 'why Try?' effect. A fourth reason why workplace stigma is problematic is that it can present a barrier to seeking healthcare. For instance, many studies have shown that soldiers, journalists, and police officers often do not seek healthcare because they're concerned about the potentially negative views of colleagues and managers. But missing out on professional treatment can exacerbate health problems and thus lead to prolonged sick leave, loss of employment, and substantial associated costs. Workplace stigma negatively affects not only workers with mental illness, but also those with other health conditions, such as cancer, diabetes, and HIV. High-quality research is urgently needed, and overcoming workplace stigma should be made a priority. Ensuring a stigma-free work environment would undoubtedly benefit individuals, employers, and society at large.