

# A two-way street: Mental health can't be ignored during work injury recovery

July 18 2024, by Steve Granger and Nick Turner

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Discussions about mental health in the workplace have surged lately, driven by growing awareness of its impact on [employee and organizational success](#). As occupational health researchers, these discussions have helped us shed light on the precursors and consequences of mental health challenges.

One such critical but often overlooked aspect is the relationship between

mental health challenges and work injuries—a [relationship that goes in both directions](#): struggling with mental health can increase the risk of work injuries, and work injuries can give rise to, or worsen, mental health challenges.

We aimed to shed light on this crucial bidirectional relationship because it undermines the sustainability of an organization's most crucial asset: its people.

## **Mental health and work injuries**

Mental health challenges and work injuries result in significant costs for organizations and society, and tremendous suffering among individuals and [their families, workplaces and wider support systems](#).

While the costs for work injuries and mental health challenges vary widely, evidence indicates that experiencing both together can multiply [medical expenses](#) and [time loss](#) from two to 10 times.

Despite their impact, the critical relationship between work injuries and mental health challenges has only been examined sporadically across diverse disciplines, which rarely communicate with each other—until now.

[Our comprehensive meta-analysis](#), involving a worldwide sample of more than 1.4 million participants across 147 studies conducted since 1988, highlights the need for integrated approaches to address physical and psychological well-being in the workplace.

Meta-analytical studies like ours are valuable because they involve systematically gathering and summarizing all existing quantitative research. This approach helps us consolidate and distill the findings from multiple studies, providing a clearer picture of what we currently

understand.

Our findings reveal that the relationship between work injuries and mental health depends on whether someone experiences mental health challenges or workplace injuries first. A stronger, more robust relationship emerges when work injuries precede mental health challenges, while a smaller, but still significant, association exists when mental health challenges precede work injuries.

## **The hidden toll of work injuries**

When a work injury occurs, the immediate focus is on physical recovery. However, the psychological impact of injuries shouldn't be neglected.

The sudden disruption caused by a work injury can lead to increased stress, anxiety and depression. This [psychological distress](#) can stem from various factors, including [pain, stigma and uncertainty about one's ability to continue earning a living](#).

Our analysis indicates that [negative thoughts](#), such as rumination, commonly arise after work injuries. They play a significant role in the development of mental health challenges. These negative thoughts can lead to a downward spiral, mentally trapping an injured individual in their situation and further hindering their recovery process.

Interestingly, the relationship is not one-way. Our research also shows that mental health challenges are associated with an increased likelihood of sustaining a work [injury](#).

Individuals struggling with mental health often experience reduced cognitive functioning, increased distractibility and impaired decision-making abilities, making regular job duties increasingly overwhelming and difficult to manage. These factors can lead to a higher risk of

injuries at work.

For example, an employee dealing with [severe depression](#) might have difficulty concentrating on tasks, increasing the risk of overlooking emerging hazards or misjudging dangerous situations.

The stigma associated with their mental health condition might also [prevent the employee from seeking the help or accommodations](#) they need, further increasing their vulnerability to work injuries.

## **Breaking the vicious cycle**

The interconnected nature of work injuries and mental health challenges highlights the need for comprehensive rehabilitation approaches.

Integrating [psychological care](#) into the rehabilitation process is crucial for promoting overall well-being and preventing the recurrence of injuries.

Employers and policymakers should consider implementing programs that address both the physical and mental health needs of employees. This includes providing [access to and awareness of mental health services](#), promoting a safe and supportive work environment and implementing strategies to reduce workplace stress.

By taking a [human sustainability approach](#) that emphasizes physical, psychological and social health through prevention rather than reaction, it's possible to break the cycle of work injuries and mental health challenges. This could ultimately lead to healthier and more productive workplaces.

## **Improving human sustainability**

Our study paves the way for future research and interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of work injuries on mental health and vice versa. Recognizing this bidirectional relationship is the first step towards creating more effective interventions and support systems.

Understanding the underlying mechanisms, such as negative thoughts and perceived job demands, can help when designing targeted interventions that address the root causes of these issues.

Additionally, understanding factors that influence the connection between work injuries and mental health—like how severe or often injuries occur, the types of [mental health challenges](#) that may arise and specific vulnerable groups—can provide valuable insights for developing tailored strategies.

By integrating physical and psychological care, we can ensure both aspects receive the attention they rightfully deserve in promoting human sustainability and enhancing the quality of life for workers across all industries.

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