



World Health
Organization



International
Labour
Organization

Mental health at work:

Policy brief



Prevent work-related mental health conditions through psychosocial risk management which includes using organizational interventions to reshape working conditions, cultures and relationships.



Protect and promote mental health at work, especially through training and interventions that improve mental health literacy, strengthen skills to recognize and act on mental health conditions at work, and empower workers to seek support.



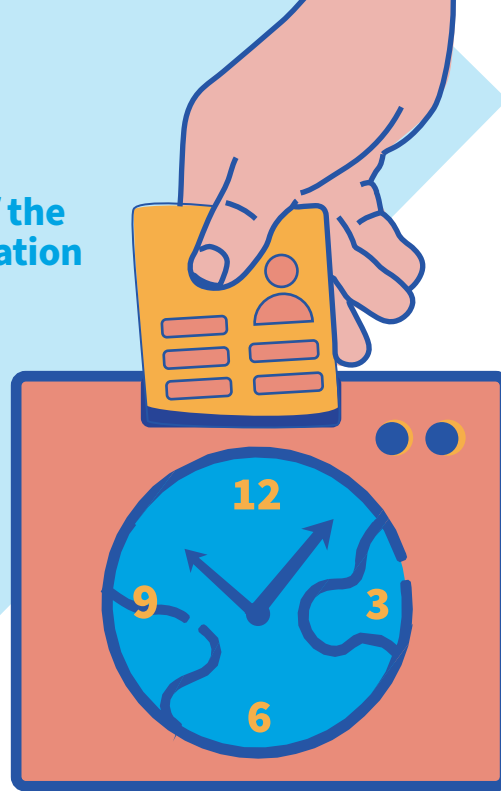
Support workers with mental health conditions to participate fully and equitably in work through reasonable accommodations, return-to-work programmes and supported employment initiatives.



Create an **enabling environment** with cross-cutting actions to improve mental health at work through leadership, investment, rights, integration, participation, evidence and compliance.

KEY
MESSAGES

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Introduction

As of 2022, almost 60% of the world's population is in work. All workers have the right to a safe and healthy environment at work. Work can be a protective factor for mental health but it can also contribute to potential harm. Across the world, workers, families, enterprises¹ and whole economies feel the impact of mental health conditions irrespective of whether they were caused by work.²

This policy brief aims to support stakeholders in the world of work to fulfil their respective roles in taking action to improve mental health at work.

Primarily written for national and workplace policy-makers - i.e., governments, employers, workers and their representatives - this policy brief presents strategies and approaches for implementing the recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) *guidelines on mental health at work* [1] taking into account the principles set in relevant conventions and recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO) (e.g. [2–4]). It describes the inextricable links between mental health and work, outlines the duties of employers and the rights and responsibilities of workers, and identifies strategies that stakeholders can take to:



¹ “Enterprises” refers to businesses or companies.

² The term “mental health conditions” covers mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities. It also covers other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning or risk of self-harm [6].

Work and mental health

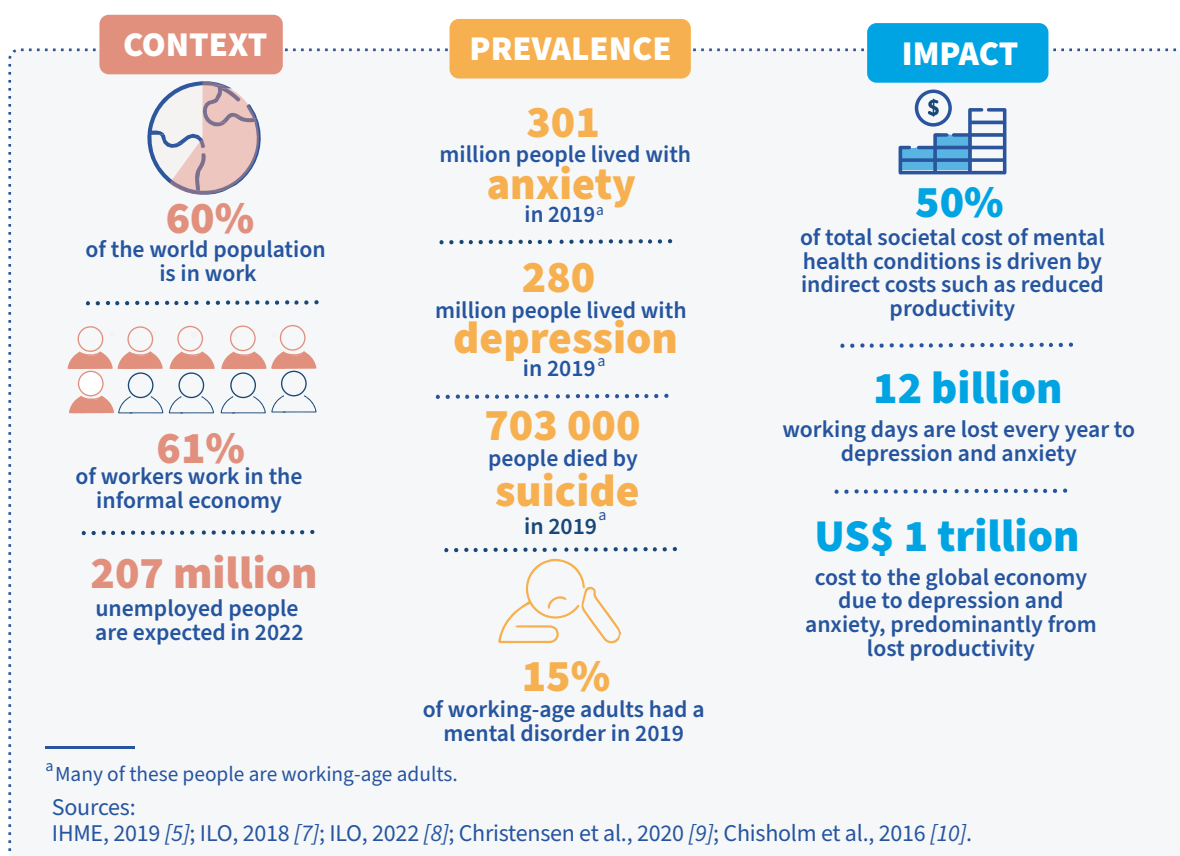
Work and mental health are closely intertwined. A safe and healthy working environment supports mental health, and good mental health enables people to work productively. An unsafe or unhealthy working environment can undermine mental health, and poor mental health can interfere with a person's ability to work if left unsupported.

Globally, 15% of working-age adults live with a mental disorder (see Fig. 1) [5]. Mental disorders and other mental health conditions are experienced in different ways by different people, with varying degrees of difficulty and distress [6]. Without effective structures and support in place, and despite a willingness to work, the impact of unsupported mental health conditions can affect self-confidence, enjoyment at work, capacity to work, absences and ability to gain employment. Carers and family members are similarly affected.

In governments, workplaces and communities around the world, mental health is too often misunderstood, under-resourced and deprioritized compared with physical health. People with mental health conditions are routinely stigmatized, discriminated against and excluded [6]. Widespread stigma creates a barrier. Some employers may be reluctant to hire people with mental health conditions and some workers may hesitate to disclose or seek help because they fear negative career consequences.

Work losses and missed opportunities affect individual and household earning capacities. Work losses also contribute to wider societal costs through increased unemployment, lost productivity, loss of skilled labour and reduced tax revenue.

Fig. 1 Mental health at work in numbers



Work: opportunity and risk for mental health

For all people, regardless of whether they have a mental health condition, workplaces can be places that enhance or undermine mental health.

On the one hand, decent work is known to influence mental health positively. It not only provides the means to an income but also offers a platform for structured routines, positive relationships and for gaining a sense of purpose and achievement. For people with severe mental health conditions, employment can promote recovery and is associated with improved self-esteem and better social functioning. For all workers, safe and healthy working environments are not only a fundamental right but are also more likely to improve work performance and productivity, improve staff retention and minimize tension and conflict.

On the other hand, unemployment or unstable or precarious employment, discrimination in the workplace or poor working environments³ can all be sources of stress and pose a risk to mental health. Unemployment, job and financial insecurity, and recent job loss are known risk factors for suicide attempts [6]. Inequality and unequal treatment can manifest through inequity in earnings, opportunities or respect at work. Some people can face discrimination at work because of their race, sex, gender identity or expression, disability, sexual orientation, social origin (such as class or caste), migrant status, religion or age (or any other social characteristic), putting them at increased risk of work-related stress or compounding the impact of existing mental health conditions. The right to work is one of the most commonly violated rights for people with severe mental health conditions – who are also more likely to be underpaid than the general population [6].

Unsafe working environments create risk factors for mental health. These are known as "psychosocial risks" and may be related to job content or work schedule, specific characteristics of the workplace, or opportunities for career development, among other things [11]. For example, how the job is designed, including high job demands, low job control (i.e. low authority to make decisions about work) and unclear roles can all exacerbate work-related stress and heighten the risk of exhaustion, burnout, anxiety and depression. Psychosocial risks at work are associated with negative mental health outcomes, including suicidal behaviours.

Violence and harassment at work, including bullying, also violate human rights and undermine mental and physical health. So too does limited access to essential

environmental services at work, including safe drinking-water, clean air and good waste management. Inadequate and insecure pay and job insecurity, particularly for workers in the informal economy, can be profoundly detrimental to mental health as they increase uncertainty across multiple areas of life.

Psychosocial risks can also cause or exacerbate physical health conditions. For instance, in 2016, an estimated 745 000 people globally died from stroke and ischaemic heart disease as a result of having worked 55 hours or more per week [12]. Although psychosocial risk factors may be found in all sectors, working situations common to some occupations tend to increase the risk of exposure and a higher likelihood of mental health conditions is observed – e.g. where work carries a high emotional burden or exposure to potentially traumatic events is more likely, such as health and emergency work. Workers in low-paid, unrewarding or insecure jobs, or working in isolation are also likely to be disproportionately exposed to psychosocial risks, compromising their mental health. Workers who may face greater exposure to psychosocial risks due to a confluence of their work situation or their demographic status include migrants, domestic workers, casual labourers and those working in the gig⁴ or care economies.

More than half the global workforce works in the informal economy⁵ where there is no regulatory protection for health and safety [7]. These workers may face heightened threats to their mental and physical health through lack of structural support. Informal workers often operate in unsafe working environments, work long hours, have little or no access to social or financial protections, and face discrimination – all of which may further undermine mental health and limit access to mental health care.

Recent transformations in the world of work – including technological development, climate change, globalization and demographic shifts – are changing where and how people work. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace of change, especially in remote work, e-commerce and automation. It has also disrupted labour markets, increased financial instability and prompted widespread restructuring of enterprises. For many workers, these changes have created new psychosocial risks or exacerbated existing ones [13]. For many, these changes resulted in loss of earnings. Likewise, crises such as conflict continue to profoundly disrupt where, how and whether people are able to work.

³ The term "working environment" includes working conditions, as well as the environment in which an enterprise operates, its organizational culture, and how this affects the way it manages occupational safety and health.

⁴ A gig economy is a free market system in which temporary positions are common and organizations hire independent workers for short-term commitments.

⁵ "Informal economy": refers to all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements; and does not cover illicit activities, in particular the provision of services or the production, sale, possession or use of goods forbidden by law, including the illicit production and trafficking of drugs, the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms, trafficking in persons, and money laundering, as defined in the relevant international treaties (See: Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204)).

The need for action

Effective policies and action to improve mental health at work are critical to uphold the human right to good health, including mental health, and to advance progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 3 on health and SDG 8 on decent work for all.

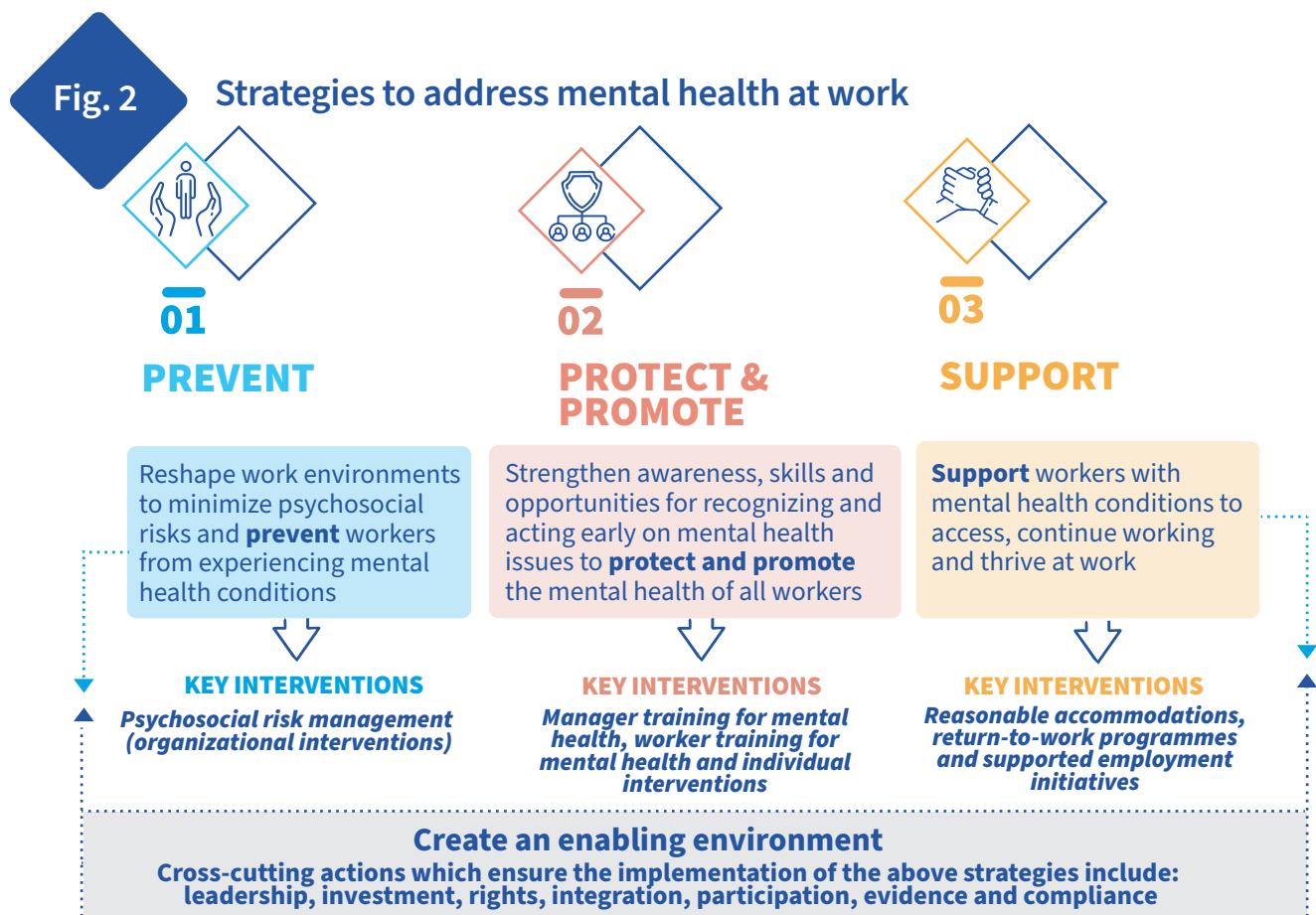
For individuals and households, better mental health at work can reduce exclusion, improve overall health and well-being and increase economic security. Enterprises also stand to benefit through greater participation in the labour market and higher productivity, both of which improve a company's bottom line. For governments too, addressing mental health at work can lead to savings in health care expenditure and welfare support.

The costs to society of inaction are significant. Making mental (or physical) health care available comes at a cost. However, the indirect costs of reduced productivity (which can include premature death, disability and reduced productivity while at work) often far outstrip the direct costs of care [6].

Improving mental health at work requires action to prevent work-related mental health conditions, to protect and promote mental health at work, and to support all workers to participate in work fully and equitably (see Fig. 2). Each area of action has limited value on its own and works best when implemented alongside the others as part of a broad and comprehensive approach.

Stakeholders in the world of work can help to create an enabling environment for change by securing commitment and funds, tackling stigma and discrimination, coordinating multisectoral and participatory approaches and strengthening the evidence for effective interventions.

The sections that follow take a closer look at both the specific strategies and the cross-cutting actions that different stakeholders can use to address mental health at work.



International and national frameworks

At international levels, a diverse set of instruments create obligations or commitments for countries on mental health at work (see Fig. 3), including upholding workers' rights to a safe and healthy working environment, fair treatment in the workplace, and equitable opportunities for employment and vocational rehabilitation.

The ILO fundamental Conventions on OSH – the Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155) and the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No. 187)⁶ – aim to protect both physical and mental health of workers and to prevent occupational accidents and diseases. Together, Conventions Nos 155 and 187 provide for the establishment of a systems approach to the management of OSH, defining the key responsibilities, duties and rights in this field, and highlighting the complementary roles of governments, employers and workers in creating safe and healthy working environments.

At national levels, governments can similarly establish and enforce laws, policies and guidance regarding mental health at work. This includes regulations on OSH as well as laws that compel equality and non-discriminatory and related policies on violence, harassment, minimum wage, parental leave and so on. In addition, governments should take action to

promote, monitor and enforce compliance with such regulations – e.g. by strengthening the labour inspectorates' capacities to deal with issues at work.

Most countries require enterprises to safeguard workers' mental health within national frameworks of OSH rights and responsibilities. However, the extent to which these are implemented by lawmakers, enforced by regulators or put into practice by employers (e.g. through internal company regulations) remains unclear. In WHO's latest assessment of countries, only 35% reported having a national programme for work-related mental health promotion and prevention [14].

All stakeholders in the world of work can and should do more to address poor mental health at work.

The sections that follow describe evidence-based interventions that can help drive improvement. Throughout this policy brief, actions **for governments** refer to national or subnational actions that can be collaboratively developed by health and labour ministries in meaningful consultation with employers' and workers' organizations. Actions **for employers** refer to actions at work that are taken in meaningful consultation with workers and/or their representatives.

⁶ ILO Conventions No. 155 and No. 187 were both declared fundamental conventions in June 2022. This means that all ILO Members, even if they have not ratified the conventions, have an obligation to respect, promote and realize, in good faith and in accordance with the ILO Constitution, the principles concerning the fundamental rights which are the subject of those Conventions.

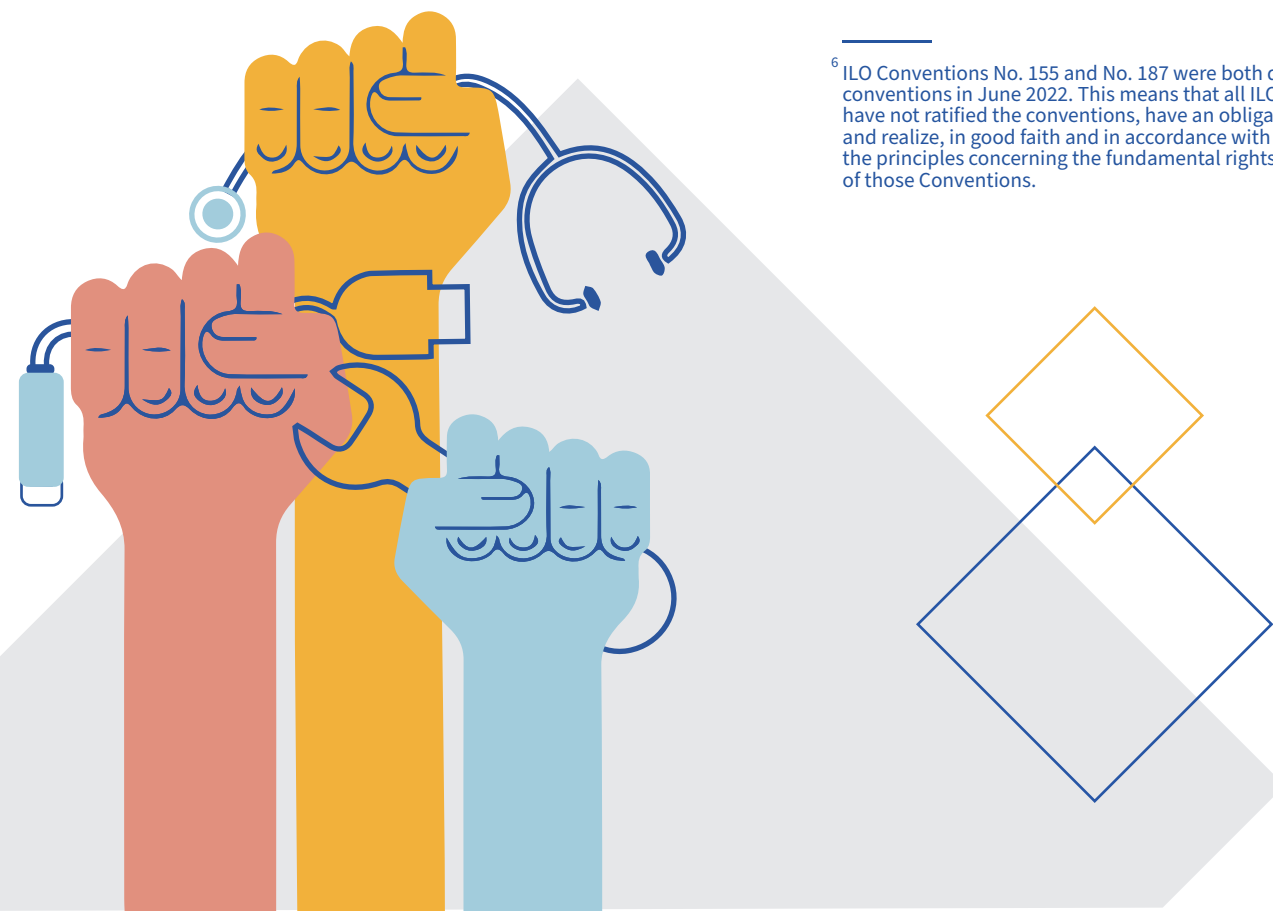
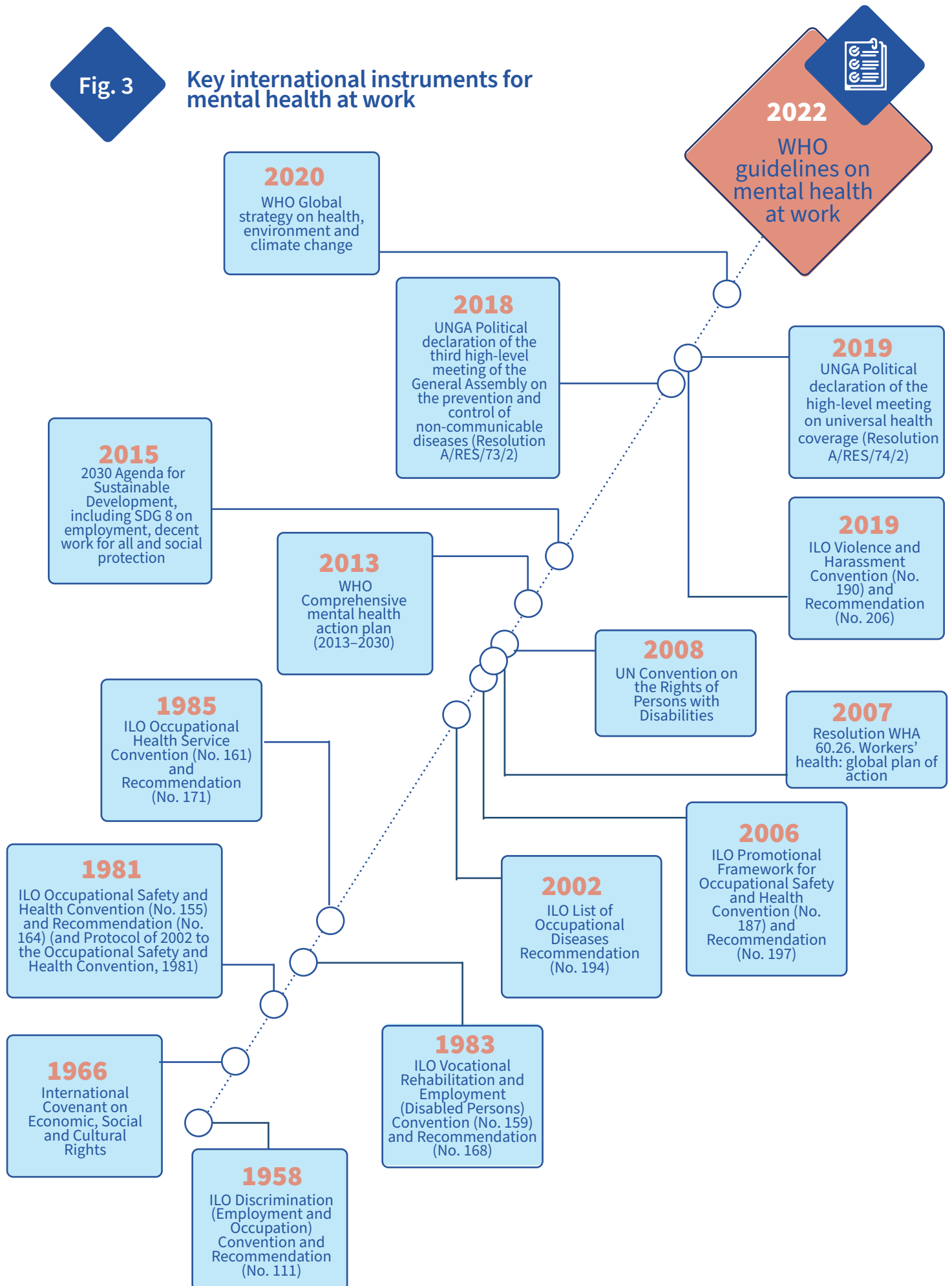


Fig. 3

Key international instruments for mental health at work





Prevent work-related mental health conditions

Strategies to prevent mental health conditions at work centre on psychosocial risk management, in line with ILO guidelines [2, 4].⁷



For governments, this means working with employers' and workers' organizations to develop new, or review and revise existing, employment and OSH laws, policies and guidance to include provisions on mental health in parity with those on physical health. This implies ensuring that the definition of occupational health always covers both physical and mental health, as well as including mental disorders in the national lists of occupational diseases, in line with the ILO List of Occupational Diseases (revised 2010). Other provisions may, for instance:

- ◇ ensure that work can be adapted to workers' physical and mental capabilities, or ensure transfer to alternative suitable employment without any loss of pay or seniority;
- ◇ emphasize the need for preventive measures (rather than reactive measures such as compensation);
- ◇ provide guidance on assessing and managing psychosocial risks, including violence, harassment and discrimination;

- ◇ protect wherever possible the employment and income of workers affected by mental health conditions; and
- ◇ ensure that workers and their representatives participate in identifying psychosocial hazards and are consulted in any action taken to mitigate the associated risks – as for any other hazards and risks at work.

Governments also have a role in building capacities for psychosocial risk management among occupational health services. They should strengthen the role of these services in preventing, monitoring and proposing remedial action for harm caused by psychosocial risks, especially to support lower-resourced employers such as small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).



For employers, mitigating psychosocial risks can similarly be achieved by embedding mental health

informed and trained about the measures adopted to prevent the associated risks. Circumstances which

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