



## Preventing mental crises

The number of people suffering from a mental illness is on the rise. It is the second most common cause of sick leave and is often associated with long periods of absenteeism. Yet at the same time, there is not enough therapy capacity. Company programmes can help alleviate bottlenecks in mental healthcare. Risk assessments must also identify mental stressors caused by work.

Our working world is becoming increasingly dynamic and fast-paced. The pandemic has added further stress factors. Burnout, chronic exhaustion, depression, adjustment disorders and anxiety disorders are illnesses that are all on the rise as a result. According to the NAKO Health Study – Germany’s largest cohort study – there is evidence of increased negative mental stress across all age groups. However, there is currently only enough capacity to provide one in four people with therapy. Employers can compensate for gaps in healthcare through company programmes and thus contribute to the health of their employees.

### Battling negative mental stress

Mental illness is never just work-related, but well-organised work and a good working atmosphere can help reduce the strain. It is important to identify the various stressors a team is exposed to and take action to counteract them. ‘Factors such as appreciation, scope for decision-making, employee-oriented leadership, collegiality and opportunities for further development have a demonstrably positive effect’, explained Professor Dirk Windemuth, Director of the



Mental and physical illnesses can occur if mental stress is permanently too high.

Institute for Work and Health of the German Social Accident Insurance (IAG). ‘Conversely, the constant pressure of deadlines, emotionally demanding work, a lack of work-life balance and being worried about your job have a negative effect’. Stressors and countermeasures must be identified as part of a risk assessment and continuously adapted. The German social accident insurance institutions provide advice and support for this.


### Highlighting company programmes

Managers in particular bear responsibility for the health of their team members. They are in close contact with them and can recognise unusual behaviour at an early stage. However, they must be able to refer to the programmes and services offered by the company. ‘Some people find it easier to open up to a person who has expertise and is bound by confidentiality’, said Windemuth. ‘Company social work is particularly well suited to fill gaps in healthcare and provide advice to managers at the same time. If this service is provided in-house, then there is a familiarity with employees and their circumstances, which can result

in targeted support in the company’. Other possible company services include psychosomatic consultation in-house or, in acute cases, initial psychological support in the company.

Mental stress is a part of daily life. However, if it is too intense and persists for a long period of time, it can lead to mental strain and physical or psychological illness. An open approach helps to recognise symptoms at an early stage. The Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is pursuing this goal with its Mental Health Offensive. The Joint German Occupational Safety and Health Strategy (GDA) also wants to encourage companies to make better use of risk assessments to identify mental stressors. Destigmatising mental illness and acknowledging it as a part of life helps everyone – employees, companies and our society.

### DGUV tools and guides:

➔ [www.publikationen.dguv.de](http://www.publikationen.dguv.de) >  Psyche (German only)

➔ [www.gda-psyche.de](http://www.gda-psyche.de) > Handlungshilfen > Gefährdungsbeurteilung psychischer Belastungen (German only)



Interview with Professor Stephan Brandenburg

# ‘The pandemic has led to the loss of daily structures, communication and social interaction’

Dear Reader,

This has been an eventful year for us. I’m recalling how the terrible flood disaster showed us how important it is to include climate change in our thoughts and deeds. But I’m also thinking of the impressive Paralympic Summer Games, where around 4,300 athletes with disabilities delivered outstanding performances and showed what can be achieved with perseverance and will.

And of course, the pandemic has once again dominated our activities and endeavours – the vaccination campaign to which we have contributed in many ways including #ImpfenSchützt (*vaccination protects*). The effects of the current fourth wave, which is stretching our health system and society as a whole to its limits. And for us as Germany’s accident insurance provider, the key question is always: How can we support our members with the practical implementation of necessary measures and make working and learning safe and healthy even in times of a pandemic? We have taken a clear stance on this: vaccination helps – every single dose counts.

I would also like to look back on the last four years. On 31 December, the German social accident insurance’s **kommittensch** prevention campaign comes to an end. It has been an important driver in establishing a culture of prevention in companies. The pandemic has lent considerable momentum to this issue, because thinking about safety and health at all levels is more important than ever. Even when the campaign ends, the culture of prevention will continue to grow.

The coming year will also be a challenging one. I look forward to playing our part.

**Dr Stefan Hussy**  
Director General of the DGUV

**The corona pandemic and its consequences have severely restricted the ability of people with disabilities to participate in work and society. In an interview with DGUV Kompakt, Professor Stephan Brandenburg, Director of the German Social Accident Insurance Institution for the Health and Welfare Services (BGW), describes fundamental issues in disability care. He discusses the opportunities created by digitalisation and how sport can contribute to successful inclusion.**

**Professor Brandenburg, the BGW insures various facilities for people with disabilities. In spring 2021, you conducted several surveys on the impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities and these facilities. What were your findings?**

The restrictions and their consequences hit supported employment, inclusive companies and vocational rehabilitation facilities with full force. This ranged from a ban on visitors to certain types of housing through to a decline in orders. The aid and counselling services provided by disability assistance programmes were also affected. Their facilities needed extensive support to maintain operations, care and work during pandemic times. Especially during lockdown, the pandemic had a serious impact on both the participation of people with disabilities and the situation for employees and specialised staff in this area. Residential areas were at times locked down; leisure activities and social contacts were severely restricted in certain cases. Facilities providing supported employment for people with disabilities had to be completely shut down for periods at a time. This led to the loss of daily structures, communication and social interaction. The pandemic also caused a reverse trend in the labour market. Whereas the

unemployment rate for severely disabled people had fallen in recent years, the corona pandemic threatens to undo past successes regarding inclusion.

**Fundamental issues often become apparent in times of crisis. Where do things stand in the field of disability assistance in Germany?**

The pandemic has been a major stress test, especially for occupational health; that is, how can people still work healthily and safely under pandemic conditions? In general, resources and structures were severely challenged. However, the interviews also revealed a courageous willingness to change. Thus, the corona pandemic was also used as an opportunity to innovate – to develop further, to review old processes and structures and to adapt them if necessary. The ability to solve problems experienced during the crisis led to more self-confidence among staff and employees.



**The corona pandemic threatens to undo past achievements in inclusion.**

**Digitalisation has had a big push. Is this also an opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities?**

In the world of work for persons with disabilities, digitalisation was certainly accelerated by the corona pandemic, but the spread of digital technologies and media heavily depends on a company’s activities and product range. Digital technologies play a greater role in inclusive companies than in supported employment facilities. Less than a quarter of respondents in inclusive companies or in companies without special support for people with disabilities said they felt overwhelmed by digitalisation. Among employees in sup-



Photo: stock.adobe.com/M.Dörr & M.Frommherz

The restrictions resulting from the pandemic hit people with disabilities with full force.

ported employment facilities, the figure was 38%. We can conclude that digital innovations in the work environment pose a challenge for people with cognitive impairments who work predominantly in supported employment.

#### Where is digitalisation an additional hindrance?

In general, digital technologies are seen as an opportunity. Regardless of their role in disability care or their impairment, all respondents are open to, interested in and curious about digitalisation. However, there is no disputing that digitalisation makes work processes more complex. This is also associated with risks, because it makes work more difficult in many sectors – including in the areas in which people in supported employment and inclusive companies work. The level of skills needed is increasing and some simple jobs are being cut back or relocated abroad. As a result, digitalisation can also lead to a reduction in employment opportunities – especially for people with cognitive and mental impairments.

#### The BGW is involved in a wide range of activities for people with disabilities. One of the latest is its collaboration with Special Olympics Germany. What are your goals for this?

As a social accident insurance institution, we have a vested interest in supporting inclusion in the world of work. One of our core tasks is to enable people to participate in work and society following an accident at work, a commuting accident or an occupational illness. In order to achieve true inclusion, social and communicative hurdles must be overcome. Getting people involved in sporting activities – the core goal of Special Olympics Germany – is an important way to achieve this. Sport not only means social participation, it also promotes health, self-confidence and a willingness to take responsibility. Everyone benefits from this.



Prof Stephan Brandenburg,  
Director of the BGW

## Simply talk to each other

How to make work healthy and safe concerns everyone in a company. Nevertheless, it is sometimes difficult to involve all employees. The **kommmitmensch dialogues** make it easier to start an exchange. They are part of the **kommmitmensch prevention campaign** run by the German social accident insurance institutions and the DGUV.

The dialogues use 30 cards that depict various situations from working life. They help to assess how safety and health are dealt with in the workplace. This encourages employees to reflect on their everyday working life and to categorise situations. In a step-by-step process, an overview is created of various aspects that they would like to change – be it communication, the working atmosphere or leadership. The team then develops specific suggestions for improving health and safety in the company. ‘The key to success in this process is that everyone participates’, said Gregor Doepke, Head of the DGUV’s Communications Department. ‘Only those who are listened to and taken seriously will support the results and share the responsibility. Participation is a basic prerequisite for a culture of prevention. It cannot be imposed from ‘above’.

The dialogues are also available in English and there are different versions for schools, day-care centres, universities, and vocational training facilities. Special dialogue cards deal with topics such as road safety, mental stress, pandemics, and violence. They can be used digitally regardless of location or in separate teams. ‘The dialogue boxes have been a major success’, said Doepke. ‘This is reflected by the positive feedback and the number of people ordering them. We will continue to provide them even after the campaign finishes because the culture of prevention will play a central role in the future prevention work of Germany’s social accident insurance system’.

Dialogue cards can be ordered at:  
 → [www.dguv.publikationen.de](http://www.dguv.publikationen.de) >  
 🔍 **kommmitmensch Dialoge**  
 (scroll down for English versions)

The BGW is the social accident insurance institution for non-governmental bodies in the health and welfare services sector. It is responsible for almost 9 million insured people; in 2020 this included **456,901** disabled people in supported employment facilities, inclusive companies and employment programmes.

From February to April 2021, the BGW surveyed people from all areas of disability care on the effects of the pandemic. The results were published in three reports.

→ [www.bgw-online.de](http://www.bgw-online.de) > 🔍 **Trendbericht 2021**  
 2021 (German only)



# Challenge of working from home

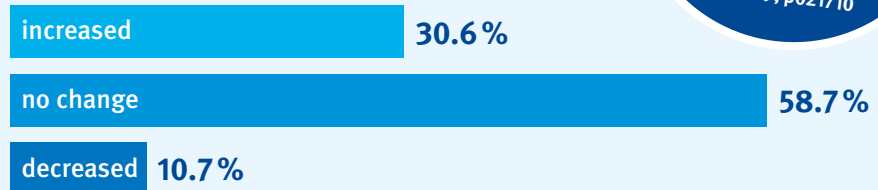
Is working from home easier or harder? In a cross-sector survey by the DGUV, around 30% of respondents stated that their workload had increased. For more than half, the scope and difficulty of work remained unchanged. Only about 11% felt that their workload had decreased.

Half of the respondents said that the lack of contact with colleagues was a particularly stressful aspect. About a third found the blurring of work and private life, as well as the lack of exercise, to be particularly stressful factors.

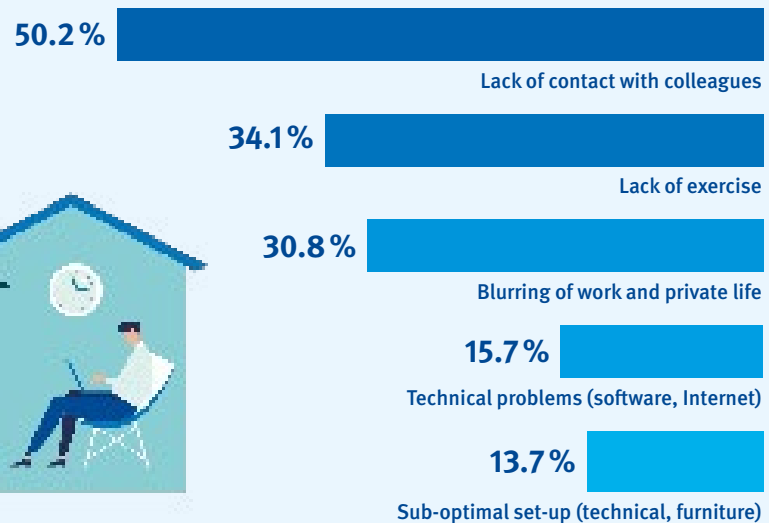
→ Full results of the survey:  
[www.dguv.de](http://www.dguv.de) > Webcode: dp1319181  
 (German only)



Has your workload (volume or difficulty) decreased or increased since you started working from home?



TOP 5 issues perceived as particularly stressful:



N = 1,000. Survey period: 6-11 Oct 2021



# Safety on German film sets and stages

The fatal shooting on an American film set raises the question of whether similar events could also happen in Germany. As part of the #nachgefragt series of interviews in the **kommittmensch** prevention campaign, Holger Schumacher, a safety consultant for stunts and other dangerous shooting on film sets, explains what the safety situation in the German entertainment industry is like. He rates the danger of a fatal firearm accident as 'extremely unlikely'. In Germany, firearms are primarily used as a deterrent and are never aimed directly at people. Real weapons can only be used after they have

been converted according to special rules. Schumacher views risk assessments and good communication as the most important factors for safety in the entertainment industry. The greatest hazards are usually the result of time pressure and stress. To increase safety even more, he would like to see stunt coordinators or an independent safety officer with expertise in dangerous scenes on every shoot.

→ Interview: [www.kommittmensch.de](http://www.kommittmensch.de) > Aktuelles > #nachgefragt (German only)



Holger Schumacher at work on a film shoot.

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