

Support by supervisors – trebly important, simply underestimated

The Stress Report Germany 2012 showed that there is a backlog demand in Germany regarding help and support by direct supervisors. Only 59% of employees in the BIBB/BAuA Employment Survey 2012 report that they can frequently count on support by their supervisors. In comparison, 80% can frequently build on support by colleagues. Germany is at the bottom of the list among European data: in no other EU-27-Member State is the proportion of those who never or seldom receive support by supervisors as high as in Germany (see Stress Report 2012). This Factsheet focuses on the support by the direct supervisor and its significance in the context of work-related stress and employees' health complaints.

Support from supervisors – trebly important!

Social support at the workplace is an important resource, i.e. it can help to make it easier to cope with daily work. In the following, support means useful information (e.g. suggestions, passing on knowledge) or practical assistance (e.g. tools, templates) that facilitates employee's own work. But it also includes the opportunity to approach colleagues or supervisors in confidence to broach personal problems. Support by supervisors is particularly important, because supervisors have many opportunities through their management function to make suitable help and support available. As Fig. 1 shows, support by supervisors has three important functions: first, it reduces employees' workload. Providing help or suggestions can, for example, show solution paths with which difficulties in carrying out tasks, unclear priorities or conflicts with colleagues or customers can be cleared up more easily.

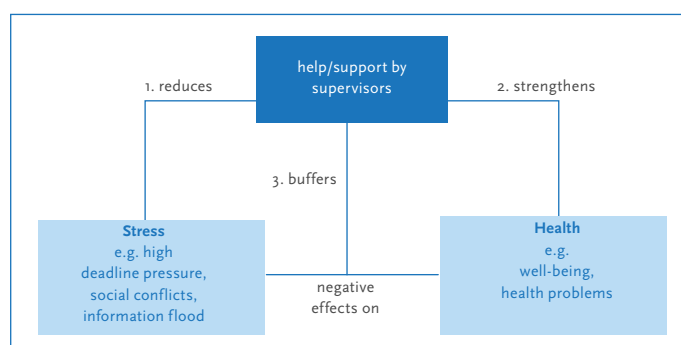


Fig. 1: Support by supervisors has three functions: it reduces stress, strengthens health and buffers negative effects of stress on health (in accordance with Stadler & Spieß, 2002)

Second, support can also counter health complaints and reduce the occurrence or the extent of stress. The feeling of being able to rely on the help of others when it is needed makes people virtually immune to stress.

A third function of support is to “buffer“ the negative effect of workload, e.g. deadline pressure, because it enables employees to cope with these loads more easily. This results in less stress and fewer health complaints than without the supportive security network. This function is above all important when workload cannot be avoided. In these situations it is particularly good to be able to rely on help and support on the part of supervisors.

Supported and less stressed

In BIBB/BAuA Employment Survey 2012 over 17,000 persons in dependent employment were interviewed among other things on different workloads. In the following, two examples of mental stress, high pressure to meet deadlines and to perform as well as disturbances/interruptions at work, and two physical working conditions, working while standing as well as lifting and carrying heavy loads, were considered. Fig. 2 shows only those employees who are frequently exposed to these four stresses and strains. Employees who are often supported by their supervisors reported frequent appearance of stress to a lesser extent than those who never experience support. About half of those (47%) who are often supported report frequent heavy pressure to meet deadlines, while the figure for those who never experience support is 59%.

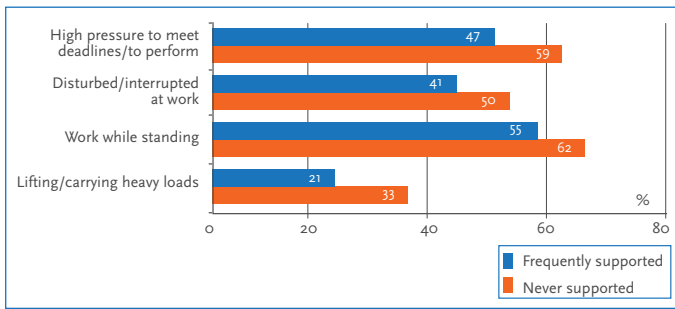


Fig. 2: Comparison of employees who often or never receive support by supervisors. The proportion of employees who often report stresses and strains is given.

In addition, in the chapter on management and health the Stress Report Germany 2012 shows that employees who are often supported report significantly less health problems than those who receive support by their supervisors sometimes, seldom or never.

Support as a stress buffer

The third function of support is illustrated in Fig. 3. When employees are exposed to heavy workloads, it can be seen how frequent or non-existent support affects psychosomatic complaints. Symptoms such as exhaustion, tiredness, irritability or sleep disturbances are regarded as psychosomatic complaints.

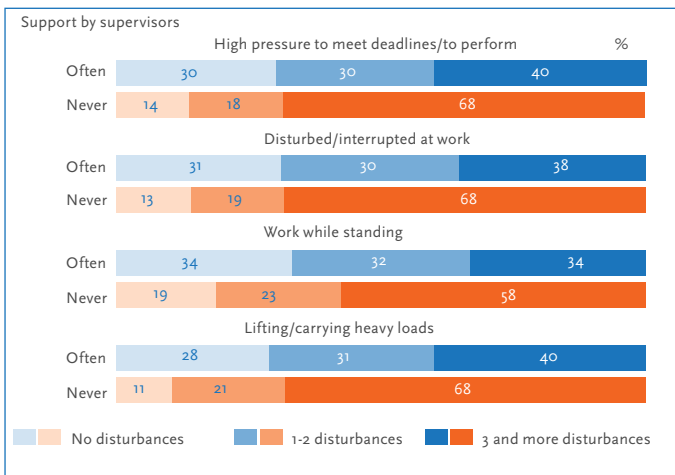


Fig. 3: Comparison of employees who receive support by supervisors often or never. The proportion of employees who report no, one or two, and three or more psychosomatic complaints on frequent stresses and strains is given.

Employees are more likely to report psychosomatic complaints on frequent workloads if they never receive support by their supervisor(s). In the group without support, two out of three employees report three and more disturbances if they are exposed frequently to pressure to meet deadlines and to perform or to disturbances at work, or have to lift and carry heavy loads (68% in each case). Similarly, at frequent work while standing the proportion is 58%. If support can be accessed frequently, the proportion of employees with three or more disturbances is at a much lower level (34-40%). About one in three of those who are often supported have no problems (28-34%). The proportion without any disturbances of those who are never supported is much lower (11-19%).

Conclusion – simply underestimated!

The results show that support by supervisors can have three positive effects on employees' work and health situations. In spite of this, approx. 40% of employees cannot rely on this help and support regularly. It is recommendable for companies to promote support by supervisors not only on account of this data.

Possible starting points lie in the framework conditions in the company, the managers and the employees. As a condition, a corporate culture should be created in which mutual support is promoted and is not seen as an inconvenient additional task. Awareness and trainings for supervisors as "efficient supporters" can contribute to a supportive corporate culture in the same way as making suitable resources for support services available to managers. But employees themselves can also be active. It is not always easy to ask for support. Employees should therefore be explicitly encouraged to do this (e.g. motivate to communicate problems or mistakes openly and to provide and look for feedback). Supervisors also find supporting easier if employees make active efforts to solve a problem, ask for precise offers of help, and do not take this for granted.

You can read more on this subject in the Stress Report Germany 2012 (www.baua.de/dok/3430796) and in the article "Mitarbeiterorientiertes Führen und soziale Unterstützung am Arbeitsplatz" by Stadler and Spieß (www.baua.de/dok/699238). There, you will also find checklists for assessing your management and support situation, as well as detailed recommendations for action.

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