

OVERWHELMED

Working long hours causes depression in women, but not men, study suggests

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A new study of more than 20,000 adults led by University College London has found that women, but not men, face higher risks of suffering depression when working more than 55 hours a week.

According to the study, women working extra-long hours displayed 7.3 percent more depressive symptoms than women who worked standard 35-40 hour weeks, while men's depression rates remained essentially unaffected by long work weeks. The lead author of the study, UCL Institute of Epidemiology and Health Care PhD candidate Gill Weston, suggested that the discrepancy might be explained in part by societal expectations about gender roles.

"Although we cannot establish the exact causes, we do know many women face the additional burden of doing a larger share of domestic labor than men, leading to extensive total work hours, added time pressures and overwhelming responsibilities," said Weston. "Additionally, women who work most weekends tend to be concentrated in low-paid service sector jobs, which have been linked to higher levels of depression."

The study also found differences in the ways having children affected the amount of time worked by men and women. Men involved in the study, researchers said, typically worked significantly longer paid hours than women — especially after having children. Two-thirds of men in the study worked weekends, compared to one-half of women. And while most mothers saw their working hours decrease after having children, most men began working longer hours after becoming fathers.

Weston has cautioned against over-analyzing the data, noting that "women in general are more likely to be depressed than men." But certain trends found in the research, she noted, could prove useful for employers seeking to reduce the mental strain on their employees.

"Independent of their working patterns, we also found that workers with the most depressive symptoms were older, on lower incomes, smokers, in physically demanding jobs, and who were dissatisfied at work," she said. "We hope our findings will encourage employers and policy makers to think about how to reduce the burdens and increase support for women who work long or irregular hours — without restricting their ability to work when they wish to."

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