This paper sets out the results of a research study which aims at (1) assessing the extent of the problem of occupational mental health as well as the organizational factors perceived by employees as risks to their mental health, and (2) assessing prevention and human resources management activities in order to inventory the tools being used to prevent and combat occupational stressors.

The data were collected from the following four organizations during the 2001-2002 period, using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focused interviews for the purposes of validation: a higher education institution, a firm in the metallurgy industry, a hospital and a tree nursery. A total of 3,142 people answered the questionnaire (35%), and 56 participants were interviewed.

In the four participating organizations, an average of 43.4% of employees show a high level of psychological distress, compared to 20% of the Quebec workforce in 1998. For each organization, a mental health risk level was calculated for each job category and each organizational risk factor measured. The risk levels were then sorted by decreasing order and divided into three equal sets in order to identify the high, moderate and low risk factors. The high risk factors affecting mental health are: quantitative overload, little recognition from coworkers and supervisors, poor relations with supervisor, a low level of participation in decisions, and insufficient communication of information.

The human resources management and work practices associated with these factors were documented through interviews conducted with managers, employees and the main occupational health and safety officers of the organizations. It was found that preventative activities in mental health are still in an embryonic state in each of the organizations. The four organizations examined organize secondary prevention activities (talks, training, etc.), though differences were found in their form, content and frequency. Primary prevention, which is intended to eliminate or control the source of risk factors, is emerging, and a willingness on the part of management teams and unions to take action is evident. Tertiary prevention is often managed by the occupational health department or through the employee assistance program (EAP).

This study concludes that the increase in the rate of absenteeism and psychological distress is of urgent concern to society, organizations and individuals. Improving prevention is a complex process and it should be undertaken with care and good will so that one day mental health will become just as important to management decision-making as are finance, technology or the market.