

To the Istituto Nazionale di Astrofisica



RE: Report on the 2024 activity of the INAF Counselling Desk for Work-Related Distress - synthetic version available for dissemination

The “Sportello di Ascolto del Disagio Lavorativo” (Counselling Desk for Work-related Distress), hereafter S.A.D.L., works through two main lines of action: a) psychological counselling for work-related problems; b) dissemination and information on the topics of interest to the service.

We report in the following specific actions carried out by the person responsible for the service during the periodo under exam (January 2024 - December 2024), as well as a few indications and opportunities for action, based upon case studies and reports received.

1. Sportello di Ascolto del Disagio Lavorativo (S.A.D.L.; Counselling Desk for Work-related Distress)

The **Counselling Desk for Work-related Distress**, established for the first time in INAF in January 2024, is a **service of psychological counselling** devoted to those who are experiencing psychological **distress in their working environment** which may be caused by, for example, situations of imbalance between demands and resource, conflict or ambiguity of role, difficult relationships, harassment and discriminations, personal problems affecting one’s work.

The activity carried out by S.A.D.L. can be defined as **psychological counseling**, constituted by the **analysis and definition of the troublesome situation and the definition of possible solutions and coping strategies**, while respecting the values and individual capacity for self-determination, and enhancing his/her resources, such as, for example, emotional, relational, and stress-managing skills.

The intervention consists in a maximum of eight meetings. If necessary, a follow-up meeting is arranged three to six months after the completion of the traditional procedure.

The service is addressed to all INAF personnel (technicians, administrative staff, technologists, researchers) and is managed and offered by an **external consultant (Responsible for the service), psychologist and psychotherapist**, specialized in occupational health, which ensures **anonymity and confidentiality** for those who contact the service. On the website of INAF, you can find a page which offers detailed information on this service ([.inaf.it/it/notizie-inaf/sedi/sede-centrale-nuova/comitato-unico-di-garanzia/sportello-dascolto](https://www.inaf.it/it/notizie-inaf/sedi/sede-centrale-nuova/comitato-unico-di-garanzia/sportello-dascolto)) with access through e-mail to the dedicated address: sportellodascolto@inaf.it. During the first appointment, the Responsible psychologist explains to the interested party those aspects related to privacy, data handling and informed consent.

In cases of discriminatory actions, harassment, or any action which may contravene the “Ethical Code to prevent sexual and moral harassment for the protection of the dignity of persons working inside the National Institute for Astrophysics”, the psychologist responsible for the service proposes a **complementary consultancy with the INAF Trusted Counsellor**.

The S.A.D.L. is a **virtuous initiative on the part of INAF**, since it is not required by a regulatory body, but is rather a fruit of the willingness to provide psychological support for all its employees. Although not imposed by law, this instrument contributes to answer the calls of the del Legislative Decree n. 81/2008 and n. 150/2009, according to which investing on individual psychological resources is crucial, in order to increase skills to cope with stress and prevent burnout, recover one’s own psychological balance in the face of tensions, ensure wellbeing and long-term competitiveness of the Institute.

2. Psychological Consultancy for individual cases

If we consider the activity of counseling, in the period under exam (i.e. 12 months; January 2024 – December 2024) the S.A.D.L. received **34 requests of consultation**. Following the fit assessment, all in all the S.A.D.L. managed 33 cases of working discomfort, for a total of 119 interviews.

The requests were equally subdivided by occupational profile between the category of **Technical-Administrative staff (N=17; 51.5%)** and the **Research Personnel and Technologists (N=16; 48.5%)**, including unstructured or temporary staff.

The personnel asking for S.A.D.L. has been mostly **female** (22 women; 67%). However, the gender distribution, considering the occupational profile, was predominantly female (82%) only for the Technical-Administrative Staff (PTA), whereas it is essentially similar between male and female in the category of Research Personnel and Technologists. The average age of the people contacting the service is 48 (ds=8.24). The employees calling the S.A.D.L. work in **14 different Structures/Observatories** spread throughout the country; however, it is found that a percentage of the accesses (20% of all cases) lead to a single Institute/Observatory, on which we are considering further analysis.

It is important to underline the fact that many people have contacted the S.A.D.L. immediately after the presentations of the service in the single INAF Institutes (see below the activity “CUG in Tour”), reflecting the fact that a communication and a direct contact may stimulate awareness of one’s own condition of discomfort, motivate people to take care of themselves and actively solve the troublesome situation, and therefore facilitate the use of the service.

While examining the motivations for the access to the service of S.A.D.L. we can identify specific clusters, which often cross roles and workplace settings, and characterize the situations of work discomfort. These clusters outline the following:

- a) situations of **critical or conflictual relationships**, mostly between collaborator and responsible person (e.g.: perception of lack of recognition, on the part of one's manager, of the effort made, insufficient autonomy and delegation, inadequate support; to a lesser extent, hostile behavior, perceived as harassment, on the part of the leader; leader's difficulties in managing his/her own collaborators). The reporting of such criticalities on the part of a number of employees of the same Institute may suggest an issue requiring a targeted organizational and group intervention;
- b) **imbalance between demands and resources**: difficulties in coping with work tasks because of **resources perceived as inadequate**, as for example lack of clarity of role and organizational processes, communication, structural and work tool deficiencies, ambiguity or unbalanced distribution of loads, insufficient support from colleagues and/or responsible persons, unsuitable staff. At a specific level, the research personnel may perceive difficulties and poor support in activities requiring carrying out administrative and managerial tasks; moreover, some Institutes may work through different organizational procedures, thus affecting the process of di standardization among the various INAF Institutes;
- c) **job dissatisfaction** and **declining motivation** associated with perceived low involvement, promotion and/or reward, assignment of activities inadequate to the level of training and/or competence reported, poor prospects of growth in skills and/or role;
- d) to a lesser extent: cases of **psychological harassment**, often connected to episodes of hostile communication, in limited cases, episodes of (direct or indirect) **discrimination** and verbal aggression by colleagues or responsible managers; **home-work imbalance**, difficulties in reconciling family care and workload; **problems experienced in private life** which make it difficult to attend workplace demands. The cases presenting elements of discrimination, hostile behaviors, harassment, also involved the Trusted Counsellor, thus allowing a fruitful comparison and a specialized consultancy.

During the interviews, the mental and occupational health condition, associated to the situations of work discomfort, were explored. **Psycho-physical, cognitive, behavioural, and occupational symptoms** were reported. In several cases these symptoms were temporary and of medium intensity and had a moderate impact on the quality of life; in some cases, however, the worsening of the imbalance between loads and resources and/or the duration or intensity of the adverse situation over time have led to more severe symptoms.

For about one third of the cases, a recurring to external health professionals (e.g. general practitioner, psychologist, psychotherapist, psychiatrist) was suggested.

3. Information and awareness activity about work well-being and discriminations

A **fruitful collaboration with CUG and Trusted Counsellor** has been launched from the early stages, with monthly meetings and participation to the information and awareness activities carried out in the various local Institutes.

In occasion of the event *CUG in Tour*, it was possible to organize information meetings in the INAF Institutes throughout the country to present the role of the CUG, of the Trusted Counsellor and of the psychologist Responsible for the Counselling desk. During these presentations I illustrated the method of intervention of the S.A.D.L., the possible causes for work discomfort, and how to get access to the service, as well as introducing on a large scale the contacts/referents appointed by INAF for the topics of work well-being, discriminations and harassment, inclusion, explaining ways and areas of intervention. It is worthwhile to mention also the recent start of the Staff Service attached to the General Direction “Organizational Well-being and Training needs” with which together with CUG and Trusted Counsellor, I started a synergic collaboration.

While respecting and ensuring privacy and the anonymity of the individuals who contacted the S.A.D.L., as Person Responsible for the service, I informed the CUG, in dedicated meetings, about the reports I received, so as to focus on specific themes and assess the need for intervention.

4. Indications and opportunities for action

The creation of a psychologically healthy working environment implies minimizing risks and recognizing psychological well-being as an objective of equal value to other organizational aims. The **actions to address psychological health risks at work** can be organized according to **individual, group and organizational level**, aiming at: a) preventing work circumstances affecting well-being; b) promoting well-being through actions increasing resources, recognizing markers of being compromised, empowerment in seeking support; c) supporting anyone with psychological discomfort.

On the basis of the above-mentioned indications and reports I received, I see the opportunity to consider the following organizational and training interventions:

- **increasing leadership and team management skills**, so as to favour psychological safety, uplifting resources, the culture of recognition and positive feedback, involving the group in decision-making processes, respect for fairness and transparency;

- **support the development of the soft skills** of employees, with a particular reference to **conflict management** and work-related stress management;
- optimize **role clarity** and the **definition of responsibilities and organisational processes** (e.g. clear and shared definition of objectives, tools and responsibilities of single activities); **improve communication flows between and within groups**. It may be useful to start an intervention of **standardization of management and administrative processes**, in order to **avoid discretionary and dissonant interpretations** on the part of all those who manage groups and resources, over and above differentiated readings of the single Institutes, which may create inequalities and compromise the overall cohesion and effectiveness of the organization and research activities.
- start an activity of **continuing education on the topics of psychological health; monitor organizational well-being and psychosocial risk factors; investigate and intervene in areas in which working well-being is compromised**. It might be cost-effective to start specific *listening circles* aiming at the promotion of organizational well-being. Over and above the S.A.D.L. Responsible, also CUG, Trusted Counsellor and the various referents for Organizational Well-Being and Training Needs would take part in these meetings. One should also consider the possibility of starting these initiatives in a few pilot Institutes, which are considered as priorities;
- facilitate shared **INAF values**, raise awareness on the topics of **work ethics, highlight all the positive and virtuous personnel initiatives, pointing out best practices**;
- continue **raising awareness about recognition and management of discriminatory behavior and harassment in the workplace**; support an inclusive culture, against any form of violence, increase psychological safety, so as to elicit as much as possible complaint on the part of victims;
- **support organizational policies for flexibility and work-life balance**.

Moreover, in order to create and maintain a culture of well-being, it is important to start a joint, integrated actions of all actors involved in the process of protection of safety and health, and that S.A.D.L. may move in synergy and continuous dialogue not only with CUG and Trusted Counsellor, but also the Occupational physicians, the Unions representatives, the staff responsible for the Prevention and Protection Service.

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The Responsible Person
for the Counselling Desk for Work-related Distress
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