

**Work-related stress, and the risks ('psychosocial' risks) such as bullying, occupational violence and fatigue that cause it, can have a profound impact on employers, employees, their colleagues and families.**

This factsheet provides information on what psychosocial safety means, why it is important and the steps an organisation (and its management) might take to ensure psychosocial safety in the workplace.

## What is workplace psychosocial safety?

In an employment context, psychosocial safety relates to the identification, elimination and management of the work-related psychosocial risks that cause workplace stress and impact the psychological health of workers. Psychosocial risks include bullying, harassment, occupational violence, unreasonable job demands, job control/autonomy and job insecurity.

## Why is psychosocial safety in the workplace important?

Workplace stress can have a profound impact on both individuals and employers.

Workplace stress can effect an individual's physical and psychological health as well as result in unhealthy behaviours. Some physical, psychological and behavioural health impacts of workplace stress include:

- ⌚ cardiovascular disease;
- ⌚ diabetes;
- ⌚ hypertension;
- ⌚ metabolic syndrome;
- ⌚ depression;
- ⌚ anxiety;
- ⌚ burnout;
- ⌚ smoking;
- ⌚ high alcohol consumption and dependence;
- ⌚ poor diet; and
- ⌚ obesity.

Workplace stress also impacts employers by causing high staff attrition rates, high levels of absenteeism, decreased performance levels and increased rates of injury and workers' compensation claims.

## What can organisations do to improve psychosocial safety?

Workplace health and safety (**WHS**) legislation requires employers and managers to (among other things) ensure employees' psychosocial safety (as well as physical safety) at work. This should involve identifying, eliminating or minimising psychosocial risks in the workplace.

There are substantial benefits to both individuals and employers that arise from eliminating and preventing workplace stress including higher rates of productivity, reduced workers' compensation claims and increased employee morale and job satisfaction. A commitment from senior management to address psychosocial safety risks is critical to the process.

The following five steps are an example of steps an organisation might consider when establishing a risk management process to prevent and respond to psychosocial risks.

### 1. Identify and assess psychosocial risks

Employers should conduct regular checks to identify psychosocial risk factors. This might involve conducting a confidential survey of employees on the issue of psychosocial safety and reviewing feedback from exit interviews as well as reports of patterns of absenteeism, sick leave, injury and staff turnover.

Risk factors may include:

- ⌚ **Organisational change** including restructuring, downsizing, changes in supervisors and management, significant technological changes or the outsourcing of employment opportunities.
- ⌚ **Negative leadership styles** such as authoritarian management styles (for example, managers who are inflexible, unreasonably strict and who do not consult with employees regarding management decisions) and over-relaxed management styles (for example, managers who provide inadequate or no supervision and limited guidance to employees).
- ⌚ **Lack of appropriate work systems** including poorly trained staff, lack of support systems and staff shortages, excessive or unrealistic work demands and high levels of uncertainty around roles and responsibilities.
- ⌚ **Poor workplace relationships** including negative relationships between managers and employees, poorly managed and unresolved workplace conflicts and the exclusion or isolation of employees.

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- ⌚ **Workforce characteristics** that mean that certain employees may be more vulnerable to bullying, such as people with mental health problems, new or inexperienced employees, trainees or apprentices, injured employees, employees returning to work and employees who are in a cultural, ethnic, religious, political, or gender minority.

This list is not exhaustive and employers may need to consider other factors unique to their workplace.

## 2. Control the risk factors

The best way to eliminate psychosocial risks is to eliminate the factors that cause them. If that is not reasonably practicable, employers should implement measures to reduce the risks. Measures may need to be implemented organisation wide, as well as in a specific work area. Measures should be implemented in consultation with WHS representatives and employees. Controls will depend on the nature of the risk and may include:

- ⌚ with respect to addressing **organisational change** - ensuring any change is planned, adequately communicated to affected employees and that there is a process for employees to provide feedback.
- ⌚ with respect to addressing **negative leadership styles** - providing appropriate leadership and other relevant training to managers and supervisors, ensuring appropriate levels of management support and supervision and providing regular feedback on management performance.
- ⌚ with respect to addressing a **lack of appropriate work systems** - developing and implementing policies and standard operating procedures, reviewing and monitoring staffing and resourcing levels, developing a complaints system and conflict management process to assist with interpersonal conflict and providing specific training for managers who are managing employees at high risk.
- ⌚ with respect to **unreasonable workloads and demands** - clearly define workers' responsibilities and expectations, increase time or other resource allocations, provide adequate breaks and additional support to employees.

- ⌚ with respect to addressing **poor workplace relationships** - developing and implementing a conflict management process, providing training such as in respect of diversity and equal opportunity and ensuring that management and supervisors respond to inappropriate behaviour.
- ⌚ with respect to addressing risks associated with **vulnerable workers** - providing adequate support and training to such workers, implementing a buddy system and training management and supervisors in how to manage and support vulnerable workers.

## 3. Develop and implement policies

The development and implementation of policies and procedures that address work-related stress and the factors that contribute to it is important. These policies and procedures should complement existing policies on bullying, sexual harassment and WHS. Policies might provide information to employees and managers about:

- ⌚ strategies to prevent and manage work-related stress;
- ⌚ services available to employees who are experiencing work related stress, such as access to counselling and support services;
- ⌚ reasonable accommodation of mental health issues in the workplace;
- ⌚ standards of appropriate behaviour and the consequences of any inappropriate workplace behaviour, such as bullying or sexual harassment, that might cause work-related stress;
- ⌚ the process for reporting any psychosocial risks.

The relevant work safety regulator in each State or Territory may be able to provide guidance on the development and implementation of policies and procedures relating to psychological health.

## 4. Training

All staff should be provided with training in recognising and responding to psychosocial safety risks. Managers may need additional training in managing and responding to potential risk factors.

If practical, information about the psychosocial policy and procedures should be included in employee inductions.

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## 5. Monitor

Once policies and procedures are in place, these should be monitored and reviewed to ensure that they are up to date and effective. A review may happen at any time, but is recommended:

- where a case of work related psychological injury has been substantiated;
- if there is an increase in reports of inappropriate behaviours like bullying; and
- when new or different information about psychosocial safety becomes available or when there are any changes to WHS regulations or workplace relations laws in relation to psychosocial safety.

The results of any policy review should be reported to the organisation's WHS committee, senior leadership team, the board of management and other relevant stakeholders. Any subsequent changes to policies and procedures should be communicated to affected employees as quickly as is reasonable.

## More information and resources

VicHealth 2012, Reducing stress in the workplace (An evidence review: summary report), Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne Australia [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au)

GuardingMinds@Work, A Workplace Guide to Psychological Safety & Health, Consortium for Organizational Mental Healthcare <http://www.guardingmindsatwork.ca/>

Australian Psychological Society  
[http://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/psych\\_injury/#s2](http://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/psych_injury/#s2)

### State/Territory WorkSafe contacts

ACT	<a href="http://worksafe.act.gov.au">worksafe.act.gov.au</a>
NSW	<a href="http://workcover.nsw.gov.au">workcover.nsw.gov.au</a>
NT	<a href="http://worksafe.nt.gov.au">worksafe.nt.gov.au</a>
QLD	<a href="http://worksafe.qld.gov.au">worksafe.qld.gov.au</a>
SA	<a href="http://stopbullyingsa.com.au">stopbullyingsa.com.au</a>
TAS	<a href="http://worksafe.tas.gov.au">worksafe.tas.gov.au</a>
VIC	<a href="http://worksafe.vic.gov.au">worksafe.vic.gov.au</a>
WA	<a href="http://safetyline.wa.gov.au">safetyline.wa.gov.au</a>