

Psychosocial Hazards

Psychosocial hazards at work are aspects of work and work situations which can lead to psychological or physical harm.

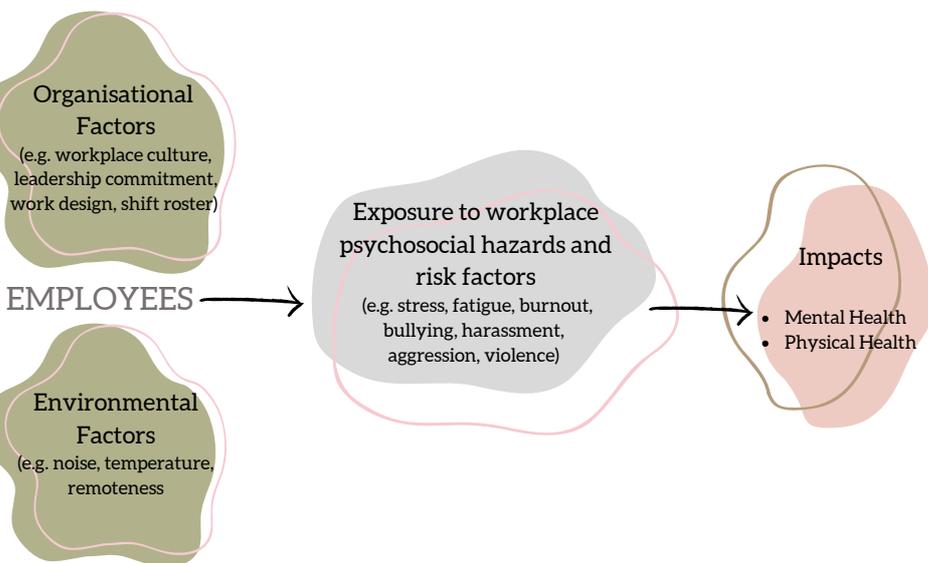
These stem from:

- the way the tasks or job are designed, organised, managed and supervised
- tasks or jobs where there are inherent psychosocial hazards and risks
- the equipment, working environment or requirements to undertake duties in physically hazardous environments
- social factors at work, workplace relationships and social interactions.

Workplace psychosocial hazards are related to the psychological and social conditions of the workplace rather than just the physical conditions. These include stress, fatigue, bullying, violence, aggression, harassment and burnout, which can be harmful to the health of workers and compromise their wellbeing

Both short- and long-term exposure to psychosocial hazards may cause harm to a person. For example, while exposure to severe, short-lived (acute) psychosocial hazards such as experiencing violence at work may result in harm to health (e.g. acute-stress disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder), it is important to also recognise that the cumulative effect of low-level exposure to psychosocial hazards can also lead to psychological or physical injury. People may experience multiple psychological and physical symptoms of harm as a result of exposure.

In addition to adverse health outcomes for workers, exposure to psychosocial hazards and risk factors in the workplace can also affect performance and increase the risk of accidents or incidents.



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Risk Factors

The table below lists some psychosocial hazards and risk factors that employers should assess as part of their risk management process.

To meet their duties to manage psychosocial hazards and risk factors in the workplace, employers must eliminate or minimise the risk as far as is reasonably practicable.

It is a requirement under the OSH Regulations to use a risk management approach to manage hazards and risks to worker safety and health, including psychological safety and health. Using a risk management approach enables employers to identify and address causal factors and systemic issues that may exist in the work environment.

Psychosocial Hazard / Risk Factor	Description	Examples
<p>Poor leadership practices and workplace culture</p>	<p>Leadership practices (e.g. style, resource allocation, supporting workers) that negatively influence workplace culture, which is the shared beliefs, norms and values of the workforce</p>	<p>Workplaces where there is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a leadership practice that tolerates or permits inappropriate or unreasonable workplace behaviours • leadership that does not respect diversity in the workplace such as ethnicity or sexuality • limited or no management accountability in managing psychosocial hazards and risks • a mismatch of leadership style to the nature of the work • a lack of trust and authentic consultation
<p>Poor or no policies and procedures</p>	<p>Policies and procedures that do not meet legislative and business requirements, and were developed with no or limited consultation with workers</p>	<p>Workplaces where there are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no policies or procedures for managing inappropriate and unreasonable behaviour • procedures that cannot be applied as written • policies and procedures that lack clarity and are difficult to understand • policies and procedures that are not adhered to • procedures that have little to no flexibility to accommodate the uniqueness of each situation • no mechanisms for impartially addressing worker reports of inappropriate and unreasonable behaviour by senior management • procedures that systemically discriminate against groups of workers in the workplace
<p>Work demands</p>	<p>Substantial and/or excessive physical, mental and emotional effort required to do the job</p>	<p>Tasks or jobs that involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fast work pace and time pressure • excessive or insufficient workload • repetitive or monotonous tasks • sustained concentration • high mental workload • frequent or high emotional labour • extended work hours or roster length • a large number of consecutive days worked • shift rotation • exposure to emotionally distressing situations (e.g. first responders)

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Low levels of control	<p>Lack of control over aspects of the work, including how and when a job is done (i.e. autonomy)</p> <p>Lack of control over the aspects of accommodation arrangements</p>	<p>Tasks or jobs where:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work is machine or computer paced • work is tightly prescribed or scripted • workers have little say in the way they do their work, when they can take breaks or change tasks • workers are not involved in decision making about work that affects them or their clients • workers are unable to refuse working with aggressive individuals <p>Jobs with limited options to allow for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal scheduling of activities of daily living (e.g. meal times, showering) • varying sleep schedules • different accommodation preferences (e.g. privacy)
Inadequate support	Lack of support in the form of constructive feedback, problem solving, practical assistance, provision of information and resources	<p>Tasks or jobs where workers have insufficient or inappropriate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support from leadership, supervisors or co-workers • information or training to support performance • equipment or resources to do the job
Lack of role clarity	<p>Unclear or constantly changing management expectations about the responsibilities of the job</p> <p>Incompatible expectations or demands placed on workers by different workplace stakeholders</p>	<p>Jobs where there is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uncertainty about or frequent changes to tasks and performance standards • important task-related information that is not available to the worker • conflicting job roles, responsibilities or expectations
Poor organisational change management	<p>Uncertainty about changes in the organisation, structure or job</p> <p>Unstructured approach to change</p>	<p>Workplaces where:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organisational change is poorly managed • there is inadequate communication and consultation with workers about the change
Low recognition and reward	Lack of positive feedback on job and task performance, and inadequate skills development and utilisation	<p>Jobs where there is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an imbalance between workers' efforts and associated recognition and reward • a lack of recognition of good performance • a lack of opportunity for skills development • an underuse of skills and experience
Poor organisational justice	Unfairness, inconsistency, bias or lack of transparency in the way procedures are implemented, decisions are made, or workers are treated	<p>Workplaces where there is a real or perceived:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inconsistency in the application of organisational policies and procedures • unfairness in the allocation of resources • bias in the approval of worker entitlements (e.g. annual leave)

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Insecure work	Employment types such as contract, seasonal work, casual, freelance and gig work	<p>Jobs where there is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • little or no job security • little or no entitlements or benefits (e.g. sick leave, pay rates) • low levels of control • need to work multiple jobs
Adverse environmental conditions	<p>Exposure to conditions that influence worker comfort and performance</p> <p>Adverse natural events</p>	<p>Working with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extremes of temperature • nuisance and excessive noise that disturbs concentration • poor air quality • Accommodation arrangements that unreasonably affect the amount of quality rest and sleep needed to manage fatigue, including exposure to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hot and humid conditions with no relief • nuisance and excessive noise that disturbs or disrupts sleep routines <p>A natural event (e.g. cyclone, flooding, bushfire) that can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restrict travel • constrain activities • interfere with communications • create uncertainty in the workforce and families
Remote work	<p>Work where access to resources and communications is difficult</p> <p>Work where travel times may be lengthy</p>	<p>Working and living in a remote location may mean:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited access to reliable communication technology • limited access to preferred support network • limited access to recreational activities • interruption and reduced capacity to fulfil usual roles and commitments in family, community and other social networks • challenges with reintegration to home and work environments after being away from them • few opportunities to escape work issues and work relationships <p>Commutes that involve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multiple modes of transport • crossing time zones • overnight accommodation • impact on unpaid personal recovery time
Isolated work	Work where there are no or few other people around, including working at home	<p>Work where there may be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited opportunities for problem sharing and feedback • a perception of increased responsibility for decision making • limited opportunities for socialisation • barriers to communication • blurring of boundaries between work and home life

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Fatigue	A state of mental or physical exhaustion, or both	Jobs where there are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high cognitive demands, such as sustained concentration • extended work hours • Design, quality and management practices for accommodation facilities that compromise the amount and quality of sleep and rest
Burnout	A psychological and physical response to chronic work-related stress	Emotionally demanding work with low support and control, and insufficient time for rest and recovery
Inappropriate and unreasonable behaviour	Exposure to behaviours that are unreasonable, offensive, intimidating or may cause distress	Witnessing or experiencing situations involving: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • violence or aggression, including sexual assault • bullying • harassment, including sexual and racial • harassment • conflict • discrimination
Traumatic events	Exposure to an event, or threat of an event, that is deeply distressing or disturbing for the individual	Witnessing or experiencing situations involving: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • death or threat to life • serious injury • near misses • self-injury
Vicarious trauma Secondary trauma	Results from repeated exposure over time to other people's traumatic experiences. It is a cumulative response and is sometimes referred to as compassion fatigue Can occur unexpectedly and suddenly as a result of emotional distress from indirect exposure to another person's traumatic experience. It is an acute response where symptoms often mimic post-traumatic response disorder.	Work where there is the potential for exposure to traumatic or distressing information and material. Jobs that involve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interaction with people who are experiencing trauma • interaction with people who have been abused • investigations into traumatic events

Identification

Undertaking a comprehensive risk assessment will help identify foreseeable psychosocial hazards and risk factors. It may require input from operational groups (e.g. work teams, safety and health representatives) and subject matter experts where reasonably practicable (e.g. organisational psychologists, organisational development consultants, human resources consultants).

Psychosocial hazards and risk factors in the workplace may be identified in a variety of ways, including:

- reviewing organisational structure (e.g. lines of reporting, supervisory responsibilities)
- consulting with the workforce (e.g. safety and health representatives, focus groups, surveys) to help identify circumstances that could impact worker mental health
- inspecting the design and use of the physical workplace (e.g. use of break-out areas, assistive equipment and condition of the work environment)
- assessing specific job requirements to ensure workload is reasonable
- observing how work tasks are completed
- reviewing reporting and investigation processes and worker trust in these processes
- examining hazard and incident reports to identify common themes
- analysing human resources data such as leave utilisation, exit interviews, staff turnover and complaints
- examining records of past incidents and injuries, including workers' compensation claims, at the workplace
- examining data, where easily available, or published literature for similar workplaces
- consulting relevant codes of practice and other guidance
- analysing available de-identified data from vocational rehabilitation or injury management personnel and employee assistance providers (EAPs).

Source : Government of Western Australia Psychosocial hazards in the workplace



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