

Assessment and Control of Psychological Hazards in the Workplace

OHS information for employers and workers

Introduction

This bulletin focuses on the information for the identification and control of work-related psychological hazards. The terms psychological and psychosocial hazards are often used interchangeably. In this bulletin, we will use the term **psychological hazards**.

A psychological hazard is a situation, condition or thing that may affect the mental health of the worker and may result in physical effects by overwhelming individual coping mechanisms and impacting the worker's ability to work in a healthy and safe manner.

This bulletin is intended to outline a workplace strategy for control of psychological hazards that:

- can be shown to be effective;
- can be implemented, maintained and evaluated; and
- is based on current documented information.

This bulletin is intended to be effective in developing and improving OHS programs with respect to psychological hazards in the work place. It is required that, as part of the work site hazard assessment, employers identify these work-related hazards and work to prevent them.

Are Employers Required to Address Work-Related Psychological Hazards?

All workers have a right to a mentally and physically healthy and safe work environment. Psychological hazards are included when the legislation states that employers must ensure the health and safety of all workers at their work site.

What Legislation Applies?

RESPONSIBILITY

Employers must ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, the health and safety of all workers at their work site workers at their work site. (Section 2(1) OHS Act).

Employers must:

- Assess a work site and identify existing or potential hazards;
- Involve workers in the hazard assessment and control process;
- Prepare a written and dated hazard assessment;
- Take measures to eliminate or control identified hazards;
- Make sure workers and contractors are informed of the hazards and the methods used to eliminate or control the hazards;
- Review hazard assessments periodically and when changes occur to the task, equipment or work environment;
- Where a worker makes a report related to a mental health concern the employer shall review the situation and take corrective action in a timely manner.

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Workers must:

- Take reasonable care to protect the health and safety of themselves and other workers; and
- Cooperate with their employer to protect the health and safety of themselves and other workers. (Section 2(2) OHS Act).

HAZARDS – What Are Psychological Hazards?

Psychological hazards are elements of the work environment, management practices and/or organizational practices that pose a risk to one's health and well-being. In addition to psychological effects, exposure to these hazards may produce physical symptoms.

Common psychological hazards include acute exposure to, harassment, violence or traumatic events. However, long term exposure to less severe hazards can also cause serious harm to health.

To cope with chronic exposure to these hazards, some workers may develop different coping behaviours or habits. Some negative behaviours such as drug or alcohol abuse can, in turn, be a source of additional stress and further erode psychological health.

The factors that impact the worker may be categorized as follows:

Environmental Factors

Unhealthy physical environments:

- indoor air quality;
- lighting; and
- noise.

Work Organizational Factors

- interpersonal relationships;
- critical incidents;
- organizational change;
- workload and pace;
- job security, content and control;
- technological change; and
- shift work and hours of work.

Personal Factors

- pre-existing substance abuse issues;
- pre-existing depression, anxiety, and other mental illness;
- age-related changes; and
- work-life conflict.

Where to Start?

MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Senior management should clearly indicate that management is committed to identifying and controlling psychological hazards in the workplace. Management should be committed to providing a psychologically safe work environment rather than considering psychological hazards to be simply “part of the job.”

POLICY FOR WORKPLACE PSYCHOLOGICAL HAZARDS

Employers should develop one or more policies and procedures respecting workplace psychological hazards. It is important that the policy is clear, supportive and encourages the reporting and investigation of incidents.

The policy should include the following points:

- A definition of workplace psychological hazards;

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- The employer's commitment to recognize and address workplace psychological hazards;
 - A statement that any acts of harassment are unacceptable;
 - A requirement for a hazard assessment to be conducted that includes workplace related psychological hazards;
 - Training requirements for employees and managers on recognition and reporting of psychological hazards in the workplace;
 - The provision of support for workers suffering from exposure to workplace related psychological hazards; and
 - The provisions for complainant or victim confidentiality.
- Education and skills development;
 - Management of personal perceptions of stress;
 - Lifestyle management;
 - Managing the personal work environment; and
 - Communication strategies.
- Tertiary prevention focuses on treating the outcomes of those who now experience stress such as:
 - Employee assistance program accessibility, counselling;
 - Return to work program, modified duties and workplace accommodations as required; and
 - Peer support networks.

HAZARD ASSESSMENT AND CONTROL

The hazard assessment process includes the identification of potential hazards for jobs and tasks at each work site. Each hazard is then assessed for the level of risk that it presents. Frontline workers play a pivotal role in the identification of hazards, evaluating risk and determining appropriate precautions. Individual responses to psychological hazards should be factored into this evaluation.

Successful strategies to control work-related mental health hazards involve three levels of prevention:

- Primary prevention focuses on the reduction or removal of workplace hazards at the organizational level such as:
 - Demands of the job;
 - Work environment and conditions; and
 - Effort-reward imbalance.
- Secondary prevention focuses on providing workers with the tools to deal appropriately with stress such as:

Volume 5 of the Healthcare Industry series, *Best Practices Guides for the Assessment and Control of Psychological Hazards* is a resource for additional information, including a table of control options for varying workplace related psychological hazards presented in sections 5 & 6. The publication can be found online at:

<https://work.alberta.ca/documents/bp013-bestpractices-volume5.pdf>.

HAZARD ASSESSMENT RELATED TO WORKER STRESS

The following is a checklist of workplace conditions that have been associated with increased worker stress.

- Poor communications at any or all levels.
- Inadequate participation or consultation of workers.
- Lack of opportunity for advancement.
- Job insecurity.

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- Role ambiguity or role conflict.
- Under-utilization of skill or knowledge.
- Lack of control over work content or workload.
- Lack of clarity in defining work.
- Too much or too little work.
- Fast paced work or time pressures.
- Inflexible schedules.
- Shift work.
- Working in social isolation.
- Interpersonal conflict among co-workers.
- Lack of social support.
- Poor relations between management and workers.
- Compassion fatigue.
- Inadequate work-life balance.
- Inadequate resources, including staffing and equipment.
- Technology changes or advancements.

TRAINING

Training provided to workers and management should address the following:

- Hazard assessments for workplace related psychological hazards;
- General knowledge about the types of psychological hazards and health effects associated with exposure to these hazards;
- A review of the employer's policies and procedures developed to address workplace psychological hazards; and
- Incident reporting expectations and procedures.

INCIDENT INVESTIGATING AND REPORTING PROCEDURES

All incidents or near misses that result or could result in psychological injury should be reported and investigated.

Due to the personal nature of these types of incidents, they may go unreported for fear of reprisal or blame. Unless incidents are investigated, they could be repeated.

Reporting processes (e.g. to human resources personnel) should be established in a way that respects the individual's right to privacy and does not put the person reporting the incident in jeopardy.

HOW TO REPORT TO OHS

You can make a health and safety complaint by either:

- submitting a complaint online at <https://work.alberta.ca/occupational-health-safety/file-a-complaint.html>
- calling the OHS Contact Centre;
 - 1-866-415-8690 (toll-free in Alberta)
 - 780-415-8690 (in Edmonton).
- You may remain anonymous if you choose

If you wish your complaint to remain confidential, OHS officers will maintain confidentiality to the best of their abilities but cannot guarantee it.

After you make the complaint:

- calls to the OHS Contact Centre are answered immediately;
- OHS acknowledges receipt of online complaints within 3 business days; and
- follow-up actions by OHS depend on the nature of the complaint and the number of complaints being processed.

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Contact Us

OHS Contact Centre

Edmonton & Surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Throughout Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Deaf or hearing impaired:

- 780-427-9999 (Edmonton)
- 1-800-232-7215 (Alberta)

Website

work.alberta.ca/ohs-contact-us

Get Copies of OHS Act, Regulation and Code

Alberta Queen's Printer

www.qp.gov.ab.ca

Occupational Health and Safety

work.alberta.ca/ohs-legislation

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