Assessment and control of psychosocial hazards in the workplace

OHS information for work site parties

This resource provides general information to help work site parties identify, eliminate, and control psychosocial hazards in the workplace. This resource is not intended to be exhaustive or to interpret OHS legislation.

KEY INFORMATION
- Psychosocial hazards include elements of a work environment, management practices, or organizational practices that threaten mental health and well-being.
- Under OHS law, employers must identify and eliminate (or, if elimination is not reasonably practicable, control) workplace hazards, which may include physical and psychosocial hazards.
    - The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace provides guidance for preventing psychological harm in the workplace.

What are psychosocial hazards?

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace defines psychosocial hazards as "elements of the work environment, management practices, or organizational practices that pose a risk to mental health and well-being." Examples of possible psychosocial hazards include exposure to harassment, violence, or traumatic events at work.

Other factors can potentially affect psychological health and safety to the point where they become psychosocial hazards. The National Standard identifies several of these factors:

Work organizational factors
- Shift work and hours of work.
- Job security.
- Workload and pace.
- Interpersonal relationships.
- Organizational change.
- Technological change.

Environmental factors
- Indoor air quality.
- Lighting.
- Noise.

Personal factors
- Work-life conflict.
- Poor physical health.
- Changing stages of family life.
- Pre-existing depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other mental health conditions.

Risks of exposure to psychosocial hazards

The National Standard indicates that exposure to psychosocial hazards can negatively impact workers' physical and mental health in many ways. For example, people sometimes develop negative coping behaviours such as alcohol or drug abuse, which can create further physical or psychological distress or lead to addictions.

Reduced worker psychological health can also impact work site parties directly and indirectly through:

- Absenteeism rates.
- Benefits costs.
- Turnover rates.
- Incident and injury rates.
- Disability management claims/rates (including workers' compensation, short-term disability, and long-term disability).
- Reduced job performance.

Hazard assessment

Under OHS law, employers are required to assess a work site and identify existing and potential hazards. Employers should identify any existing or potential hazards for each task at a work site, in accordance with Part 2 of the OHS Code. An employer must prepare a report of the results of the hazard assessment and the methods used to control or eliminate the hazards. The hazard assessment must include all existing or potential hazards. This may include physical hazards and psychosocial hazards.

Identifying psychosocial hazards

Because every work site is different, there is no single prescribed process for identifying psychosocial hazards in a hazard assessment. However, the National Standard identifies factors that impact psychological safety at work:

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- Psychological support.
- Organizational culture.
- Clear leadership and expectations.
- Civility and respect.
- Psychological job demands.
- Growth and development.
- Recognition and reward.
- Involvement and influence.
- Workload management.
- Engagement.
- Work/life balance.
- Psychological protection.
- Protection of physical safety.

When identifying psychosocial hazards, employers may want to consider these factors and think about how they might affect their own workplaces.

Employers can also use the National Standard as a framework to guide them in developing an effective mental health component of their health and safety program.

> Watch the Psychological health and safety for the workplace video series to learn more about the factors identified in the National Standard.

Eliminating or controlling psychosocial hazards

Once a hazard assessment has identified the psychosocial hazards that could affect workers' health and safety, the next step is to take measures to eliminate each hazard or, if elimination is not reasonably practicable, to control the hazard.

Elimination
Some psychosocial hazards can be eliminated completely, particularly if they are of a physical or tangible nature. For example, if harsh fluorescent lighting in a work space is causing a group of workers psychological distress, changing the lighting could potentially eliminate the hazard.

Control
In situations where it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate a psychosocial hazard, they need to be controlled. Controlling hazards identified in a hazard assessment involves an OHS concept called the "hierarchy of controls".

In this hierarchy, engineering controls (physical changes to a work site) are preferred and are implemented first; if these are not sufficient, administrative controls (policies, procedures, or training) are implemented. If neither of these types of controls are sufficient to control the hazard, personal protective equipment (PPE) needs to be used.

If a hazard cannot be eliminated or controlled using a single control method, a combination of engineering controls, administrative controls, and PPE can be used.

Engineering controls
Because physical elements of a workplace can affect workers' mental health, engineering controls may be effective in some cases.

For example, if constant noise from loud ventilation fans is an existing or potential hazard to workers, potential engineering controls could include reducing the noise by installing soundproofing, running the fans at lower speeds, or changing the fans to a type that is not as loud.

Note that engineering controls which mitigate a psychosocial hazard might have the added benefit of mitigating a physical hazard (to workers' hearing in the above example).

Administrative controls
Administrative controls for psychosocial hazards can include policies, procedures, and training.

For example, the National Standard calls for organizations to commit to developing a psychological health and safety management system — a collection of policies and procedures to be integrated with (or compatible with) the organization's governance practices and other systems. Such a system might contain policies and procedures that address psychosocial hazards identified in a hazard assessment.

Worker training relating to psychosocial hazards is another important administrative control. Potential training topics might include:

- How to recognize workplace psychosocial hazards.
- General knowledge about the types of workplace psychosocial hazards and their associated health effects.
- A review of the employer's psychosocial hazard policies and procedures.
- How to respond to workplace psychosocial hazards and incidents.

To determine what other administrative controls would work best in their particular workplace, employers can again consider the factors mentioned in the National Standard. What kinds of policies or procedures might mitigate potential hazards created by, for example, the demands of the job or the organizational culture? For instance, if a job is particularly stressful, employers might consider spreading the duties of the job to more people.

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"PPE" controls

For physical hazards, if engineering and administrative controls cannot adequately address them, PPE controls must be introduced.

Of course, most psychosocial hazards can't be controlled using PPE such as respirators, steel-toed boots, or protective gloves, but there are some things that can protect psychological health and safety. For example, as mentioned in the National Standard, a personal alarm system or privacy barriers can be considered as PPE for psychological health and safety.

There are also personal or organizational strategies that can function as "psychosocial PPE". For example, individuals can find ways to manage their stress levels and increase their mental fitness, such as yoga, meditation, or talking with trusted friends. Employers can provide and promote wellness programs, coping skills seminars, and sessions to develop skills such as communication skills. And all work site parties can do their part to promote education and awareness of mental health issues and barriers in the workplace.

Other legislative requirements

In addition to the hazard assessment, elimination, and control requirements under OHS legislation, there are other legislative requirements that are relevant to addressing psychosocial hazards in the workplace.

For example, Part 27 of the OHS Code specifies requirements for addressing violence and harassment in the workplace, including development of prevention plans, policies, and procedures. For further details, see Harassment and violence in the workplace.

For more information about the legislated responsibilities of employers, supervisors, and workers, please refer directly to Alberta's OHS legislation. Additional informational resources include the Guide to OHS: Employers, Guide to OHS: Supervisors, and Guide to OHS: Workers.

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Contact us

OHS Contact Centre

Anywhere in Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Edmonton and surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Deaf or hard of hearing (TTY)

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

Notify OHS of health and safety concerns

alberta.ca/file-complaint-online.aspx

Call the OHS Contact Centre if you have concerns that involve immediate danger to a person on a work site.

Report a workplace incident to OHS

alberta.ca/ohs-complaints-incidents.aspx

Website

alberta.ca/ohs

Get copies of the OHS Act, Regulation and Code

Alberta Queen's Printer

qp.gov.ab.ca

OHS

alberta.ca/ohs-act-regulation-code.aspx

For more information

Guide to OHS: Employers (LI009)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li009

Guide to OHS: Supervisors (LI010)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li010

Guide to OHS: Workers (LI008)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li008

Harassment and violence in the workplace (LI045)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li045

Harassment and violence in the workplace: sample policies (LI045TMP)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li045tmp

Hazard assessment and control: a handbook for Alberta employers and workers (BP018)
ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp018

Mental health continuum model (Mental health commission of Canada)
theworkingmind.ca/sites/default/files/resources/r2mr_poster_en.pdf

National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace
mentalhealthcommission.ca/national-standard