

Assessment and Control of Psychological Hazards in the Workplace

OHS information for employers and workers

KEY POINTS

- The workplace can be a source of psychological hazards
- Psychological hazards can impact physical and mental health
- Psychological hazards must be included in the hazard assessment process
- Worker training should include psychological hazards
- Reporting and investigation of all incidents involving potential psychological injury should be encouraged
- Focus on prevention by fostering a respectful workplace

THE HAZARD: What are psychological hazards?

Psychological hazards are elements of the work environment, management practices or organizational practices that pose a risk to mental health and well-being.

Common psychological hazards include exposure to harassment, violence or traumatic events. However, long term exposure to less severe psychological hazards, such as increasing job demands or role ambiguity, can also impact psychological health.

A worker's psychological health can also be affected by the following 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
- changing stages of family life
- pre-existing depression, anxiety, substance abuse and other mental illness

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The Canadian Standards Association (CSA), National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace provides organizations with a framework and guidance to develop an effective psychological health and safety program. The standard identifies 13 workplace factors that impact psychological health. Employers should consider how each of the following factors supports psychological health and safety:

- 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

THE EFFECTS: What are the effects of psychological hazards in my workplace?

Exposure to psychological hazards can negatively impact a worker's physical and mental health. People sometimes develop negative coping behaviours to deal with psychological hazards, such as alcohol or drug abuse, which can create further psychological distress or possibly lead to addictions.

The conditions and behaviours that result from poor psychological health can impact the employer, directly and indirectly through:

- absenteeism rates
- benefits costs
- turnover rates
- accidents and injuries rates
- workers' compensation claims
- disability rates

THE CONTROLS: How can employers and workers control psychological hazards?

1. Hazard Assessment

The [hazard assessment](#) process involves identifying existing and potential hazards for every job and every task at a work site. After hazards are identified, each is assessed for the level of risk it presents and appropriate control measures need to be put in place. Below are some controls that will help you assess how well you are controlling psychological hazards at your work site.

2. Develop a policy on psychological hazards

Employers should indicate their commitment to identifying and controlling workplace psychological hazards. This can be done by developing policies and procedures to prevent or control psychological hazards.

A good [psychological hazard policy](#) is clear, supportive, and encourages reporting and investigation of incidents. The policy should include:

- employer's commitment to recognize and address workplace psychological hazards
- a statement that any acts of harassment are unacceptable
- a definition for workplace psychological hazards
- a requirement for a psychological hazard assessment
- training for workers and managers on recognition and reporting of psychological hazards
- support for workers experiencing workplace related psychological hazards
- confidentiality for those experiencing or reporting incidents

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3. Worker Training

Worker training is a critical component of any safety program. Training should include:

- hazard assessments for workplace related psychological hazards
- general knowledge about the types of psychological hazards and health effects associated with exposure
- review of the employer's policies and procedures developed to address workplace psychological hazards
- incident reporting expectations and procedures

4. Encourage reporting and incident investigation

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 are likely to be repeated. Reporting processes 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.

5. Focus on prevention

Successful strategies to control work-related psychological hazards involve three levels of prevention. Examples at each level are provided below for consideration when planning possible interventions.

Level 1 prevention aims to prevent psychological injuries or harm by:

- assigning reasonable work quantities
- creating psychologically safe work environment and conditions
- assigning work that aligns with the workers' skills

Level 2 prevention looks to reduce or modify impact through:

- education and skills development like developing communication strategies
- management of personal perceptions of stress
- provision and promotion of wellness programs
- managing the personal work environment to remove stressors, such as ambient noise, air quality concerns, and ergonomic issues

Level 3 prevention looks to lessen the impact of those experiencing psychological injuries or harm by providing:

- accessibility to employee assistance programs and counselling
- workplace accommodations, return to work planning, modified duties
- peer support networks

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Contact Us

OHS Contact Centre

(Complaints, questions, reporting serious incidents)

Anywhere in Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Edmonton & surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Deaf or hearing impaired

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

File a complaint online

ohsComplaintsPortal.labour.alberta.ca

Online incident reporting

(Potentially serious, mine or mine site incidents)

oir.labour.alberta.ca

Website

alberta.ca/OHS

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[Psychological Hazards in the Workplace Procedures - Worksheet](#)
(BP024-1)

[Psychological Hazards in the Workplace - Sample policy statement for employers](#)
(BP024-2)

[Hazard Assessment and Control: a handbook for Alberta employers and workers](#) (BP018)

[Volume 5 of the Healthcare Industry series, Best Practices Guides for the Assessment and Control of Psychological Hazards](#) (BP013)

CSA National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. CAN/CSA-Z1003-13/BNQ 9700-803/2013
<http://shop.csa.ca/page/home>

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