

# Psychological health and safety in the workplace - Barriers

## OHS information for work site parties

This resource provides general information about barriers to psychological health and safety in the workplace, and how they can be overcome. This resource is not intended to be exhaustive or to interpret OHS legislation.

### KEY INFORMATION

- Stigma, lack of knowledge, and aversion to change are key barriers that can sometimes stand in the way of a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.
- Performing a thorough hazard assessment for all workplace hazards, including physical and psychosocial hazards, may assist in identifying and overcoming these barriers.
  - Other ways to overcome barriers include using worker supports, educating work site parties about mental health, and promoting sensitivity (in language and actions) about mental health and safety in the workplace.

### Barriers

The [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#) defines psychological health and safety in the workplace as “the absence of harm and/or the threat of harm to mental well-being that a worker might experience.”

All work site parties have a role to play in creating and maintaining a psychologically healthy and safe workplace, but there are many barriers that can get in the way.

Some key barriers were identified by a working group of subject matter experts from the contributing organizations listed at the end of this document. These barriers include stigmas, a lack of knowledge, and aversion to change.

### Stigma

**Stigma** refers to unfounded negative attitudes and beliefs about an individual or a group of people and their circumstances in life. These negative attitudes and beliefs can lead to discrimination, prejudice, inequity, and isolation. Stigma may discourage identification of physical and psychosocial hazards.

Health Canada identifies three main types of stigma:

- A self-stigma, such as saying “I can’t have a mental illness” or “It’s not that bad.”
- An interpersonal or public stigma, such as being treated badly for having a mental health issue.
- A systemic or structural stigma, such as discriminatory or exclusionary policies.

People who are subjected to stigma because of mental health issues may be too ashamed or afraid to seek treatment. This can create problems because the longer a mental health condition is left untreated, the more difficult it may be to treat.

### Lack of information

Mental health is an increasingly prominent topic throughout society. However, some workplaces still lack information that can be used to help prevent mental illness and injuries.

This information gap typically is of two types:

- A lack of information about psychological health and safety in the workplace, including its prevalence and the impact it has on workers and the organization.
- A lack of information on how to recognize, assess, eliminate, and control the hazards associated with workplace mental health (known as psychosocial hazards).

At work sites where this information is lacking, work site parties may be less likely to adopt effective ways to ensure a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. The lack of information may also allow the stigma associated with mental health condition to persist.

### Aversion to change

There are many benefits to establishing and maintaining a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. Some workplaces may need to make changes to organizational culture and individual behaviour to accomplish this. However, for a number of reasons, making these changes can be difficult. For example:

- People tend to be comfortable doing things the same way they always have, and can be reluctant to embrace change.
- Work site parties may have concerns that they will violate confidentiality, privacy, or human rights if they take steps to address psychological health.
- Workers may worry about having more rules and restrictions on behaviour in the workplace, or how their pay, productivity, or privacy may be affected.
- Employers may be concerned about additional costs.

## Overcoming barriers

One of the ways work site parties can overcome these barriers is by doing a thorough hazard assessment of physical and psychosocial hazards.

### PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS

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

- National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

The hazard assessment must identify any current and potential psychosocial hazards, and then come up with effective ways to eliminate them or control them if elimination is not reasonably practicable.

For more information, see [Assessment and control of psychosocial hazards in the workplace](#).

There are several other actions work site parties can take to overcome barriers and establish a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.

### Use worker supports

Workers may choose to access the following resources:

#### Health and safety committee or health and safety representative

Workers can contribute to the health and safety of their work site by becoming involved with their health and safety committee or talking to their health and safety representative, if either is available. The health and safety committee and representative can help make recommendations to address psychosocial hazards, as well as promote workplace psychological health and safety.

#### Supervisor or employer

At many organizations, managers are equipped with training on mental health resources in the workplace – they may be

able to listen to a worker’s job-specific concerns and connect them with human resources for additional support, as needed.

And remember: under OHS legislation, workers have a duty to report to their employer or supervisor concerns about unsafe or harmful work site acts or conditions.

#### Representative of organized labour group (union, association, etc.)

Some workers may be hesitant or afraid to raise any workplace issues with their supervisor or employer (let alone issues relating to mental health). They may not know that someone is there to represent them and support their concerns. If there is an organized labour group at a workplace, one of its representatives (a steward, labour relations officer, member services officer, etc.) might be a source of information workers can access.

#### Educate and communicate

If change in the workplace is needed, it may be difficult to have work site parties “buy in” to new ways of thinking and working. Providing information is a key to overcoming unwillingness to change. Educating work site parties about the benefits of a psychologically safe and healthy workplace, giving people a better understanding of how mental health affects the workplace, and highlighting resources for people to learn more about mental health are all important steps in overcoming hesitancy and resistance to change.

#### Make a change, be the change

The Canadian Mental Health Association urges people to use a “STOP” mnemonic device to evaluate whether someone’s words or actions:

- **S**tereotype people with mental health conditions.
- **T**rivialize or belittle people with mental health conditions and/or the condition itself.
- **O**ffend people with mental health conditions by insulting them.
- **P**atronize people with mental health conditions by treating them as if they were not as good as other people.

Everyone in the workplace is encouraged to start with themselves when asking what can be done to increase psychological health and safety. Choose words carefully and with sensitivity when talking about mental health and safety in the workplace.

## About the OHS Prevention Initiative

The [OHS Prevention Initiative](#) is a partnership between the Alberta government, employers, workers, health and safety associations, labour organizations, service providers (consultants, trainers and auditors) and the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB). Its aim is to raise awareness and provide information on preventing workplace illness and injury.

## Contributors to this resource

Alberta Workers' Health Centre  
 United Nurses of Alberta  
 Workers' Compensation Board-Alberta  
 Alberta Safety Council  
 Alberta Construction Safety Association  
 Continuing Case Safety Association  
 Alberta Municipal Health and Safety Association  
 Alberta Health Services  
 Energy Safety Canada  
 Alberta Motor Transport Association  
 Manufacturers' Health and Safety Association

## For more information

Addressing Stigma

- [camh.ca/en/driving-change/addressing-stigma](https://camh.ca/en/driving-change/addressing-stigma)
- [guardingmindsatwork.ca/about/about](https://guardingmindsatwork.ca/about/about)

Assessment and control of psychosocial hazards in the workplace (BP024)

[ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp024](https://ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/bp024)

National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

[mentalhealthcommission.ca/national-standard/](https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/national-standard/)

Stigma: The Facts

- [mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/Stigma\\_Facts\\_ENG\\_01.pdf](https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/Stigma_Facts_ENG_01.pdf)
- [www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/stigma-why-words-matter-fact-sheet.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/stigma-why-words-matter-fact-sheet.html)
- [ontario.cmha.ca/documents/stigma-and-discrimination/](https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/stigma-and-discrimination/)

Workplace Mental Health Promotion – A How-to Guide

<https://toronto.cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/WorkplaceMentalHealthPromotionGuide.pdf>

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