

HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES

Psychological health and safety



IMPORTANT NOTE: This guideline is a resource to help the reader recognize unsafe or unhealthy work practices and conditions that could trigger a decline in mental well-being. It does not provide information about mental health conditions or diagnoses.

If your local is planning to take action on psychological health and safety, please consult your CUPE national representative or the CUPE health and safety specialist in your area. They can help you strategize for success.

If you or someone you know is concerned about or struggling with mental health issues, please access mental health support services

As trade unionists, we know we're stronger together. Don't struggle in isolation and silence.

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Introduction

We spend a lot of time at work. Work can get very stressful, whether we're dealing with difficult situations or facing emergencies. Sometimes, we experience things that affect us deeply.

As a society, we are taught that problems affecting mental health are private problems. The truth is that unsafe and unhealthy work harms our bodies, minds, families and communities.

Employers are required by law to provide healthy and safe work, but they don't always know what to do. Protecting workers from harm includes ensuring that people have work that promotes physical and psychological health and safety. Too often, the impacts of work stress are ignored and so are never dealt with at work. Workers are left to manage work stress on their own time. That isn't fair. There must be time at work to deal with the impacts of work.

Health includes the body and the mind. Psychological health and safety practices mean having work that doesn't cause problems with our mental well-being. As workers, we cannot remain silent in the face of injustice. Silence means accepting work that harms us when effective solutions are possible. We know acceptance isn't working; globally, anxiety and depression cost local economies an estimated \$1 trillion US dollars and 12 billion working days every year.

Occupational health and safety practices promote psychological health and safety by identifying and addressing stress-related hazards in work that can lead to mental injuries.

We know that knowledge transfer is the most effective way of improving safe and healthy work. This

guideline provides the foundations of knowledge transfer: information to connect the ways that work creates stress, the ways that stress-related injuries affect mental wellness and strategies to restore safe and healthy work for psychological well-being.

There are several terms to describe our state of mind while at work, including psychological health, psychological safety, mental health, mental well-being and mental wellness. For the purposes of this guide, these terms are used interchangeably.

MYTH: Mental health is not a work-related problem.

TRUTH: Our bodies and minds are both affected by unsafe or unhealthy work.

Hazard: A work-related factor or condition that could have a negative impact on your health or safety.

Connecting work to well-being

Workers spend most of their waking hours engaged in work-related activities: getting ready for it, travelling to and from it, performing it, decompressing from it and managing its impacts. It is widely recognized that good mental health is a state of well-being where a person can be who they are, cope with the challenges and stress of everyday life, perform productive and meaningful work and contribute to their community. Psychologically healthy and safe work promotes and protects the mental well-being of workers.

Behaviours that cause harm are not “normal” work conditions. The main culprit in psychologically unhealthy or unsafe work is unmanaged or uncontrolled stress. Stress does not become normal just because it happens a lot, for

the same reasons that harassment or racism do not become acceptable with repetition. For example, constant criticism or shaming from a supervisor isn’t normal. Likewise, expecting workers to overwork or accepting a culture of poor planning, leading to last-minute rushes, also isn’t normal. These are hazards that no worker should be expected to deal with.

The goal of occupational psychological health and safety is to protect and promote mental well-being by identifying and addressing stress-related hazards in work. These types of hazards are called **psychosocial hazards**.

Mental strain is as real and impactful as physical strain. In fact, it can be helpful to compare mental strain injuries to physical strain injuries. For example, you can safely lift a 50lb bag once during a shift, but you’ll need some time to recover afterward. Lifting more frequently without rest increases the risk of injury with each repetition, particularly if you do it every day. Similarly, work that requires concentration, generates stress or causes negative emotions like fear, frustration or anger also requires recovery time. If there’s not enough space, time or resources to deal with the mental demands of work or an incident and its impacts, then the risk of a mental injury increases with each repetition.

Physical health cannot be separated from mental health. Each body part works with the whole. People with a physical injury are often irritable because pain makes them uncomfortable. This is a mental impact of a physical injury. People with stress-related injuries that impact their mental wellness often have difficulty sleeping or stomach upsets. These are physical impacts of mental injuries.

Though mental injuries are often unseen, they are just as serious as physical injuries. When injuries are left untreated and their sources unaddressed, the impact on workers can get worse over time.

When workers don’t have enough rest time to recover, an injury or illness becomes a matter of time.

Workplace factors that affect mental well-being

Working conditions are set up to ensure products are made or services are provided. When working conditions are well-managed, workers are efficient and complete their tasks. In contrast, when working conditions are not well-managed, psychosocial hazards arise. Psychosocial hazards are factors that cause workers stress and which negatively affect their mental health.

There are different ways that work can be managed. There's no one-size fits all workplace approach. Instead, the management of work should consider the protective factors of work that don't affect the product or the service, but that are known to affect a worker's mental well-being:

- Psychological support
- Organizational culture
- Clear leadership and expectations
- Civility and respect
- Psychological competencies and requirements
- Growth and development
- Recognition and reward
- Involvement and influence
- Workload management
- Engagement
- Balance
- Psychological protection
- Protection of physical safety
- Management of other chronic stressors as identified by workers

The goal of programs that promote psychological safety and well-being is to examine work factors to identify and remove or control circumstances causing preventable stress. See Appendix A for more information on each of these factors.

There are several survey tools that can evaluate how these work factors are being managed in your workplace. The goal is to evaluate working conditions and practices, not individuals or their actions. A good example of this type of survey tool is the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ) found at www.StressAssess.ca. This is a validated, peer-reviewed, scientific tool that effectively targets work practices and proposes practical solutions for those targets. It works very well with the “Stress Prevention at Work Checkpoints” resource produced by the International Labour Organization.

Intersectionality

Members of equity-deserving groups may have additional stressors to deal with, like violence or discrimination based on race, culture, origin, ability, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation. Intergenerational trauma, like from colonization or racism, can cause mistrust of the healthcare or security systems we typically count on for help. Any action proposed must be respectful and inclusive.

Psychosocial hazards and stress-related injuries

If stress is causing injuries in a workplace, that means psychosocial hazards are present.

Stress

Biologically, stress is a normal reaction designed to get a need met. It can feel like growing pressure. In everyday circumstances, when something sudden happens, there are three phases of stress:

1. Stress comes (reacting to a need).
2. Stress is responded to (dealing with the cause of stress).
3. Stress is over (the body relaxes).

This is a general stress reaction. As a common work example, you have a big presentation to make. The stress builds as the date for the presentation gets nearer. You make your presentation. The stress goes away after you're done.

The key takeaway is that the body's reactions to stress are meant to end. Stress becomes unhealthy when it is persistent at work and doesn't go away when you're away from work.

Acute stress reactions

When a situation is dangerous rather than uncomfortable, the stress response can also be a powerfully protective mechanism that allows people to deal with emergency situations. When this happens, hormones like adrenaline and cortisol signal that there is danger and rushes energy and strength to react. This explains how some people can do incredible things in emergencies, like lifting heavy objects to save people trapped underneath.

This reaction is an acute stress reaction, called the fight, flight, freeze or fawn response (4F response).

- Fight — standing your ground and fighting off the threat
- Flight — running away to save yourself
- Freeze — becoming a statue, hoping to avoid being noticed, like a deer caught in headlights
- Fawn — trying to appease the threat to avoid the consequences of the threat

The response is instinctual, more like a reflex than a decision. This is why predicting how people will respond can be difficult. Each situation is unique.

Critical incidents

A situation that will produce a 4F response is called a critical incident. When this happens, the reactions can affect a person's physical health as well as their mind, emotions and behaviour. It can be just one type of reaction or several types. Here are some examples of each type of reaction:

- Physical: Fatigue, flushing, sweating, chest pains, headaches
- Mind: Nightmares, loss of focus and concentration, poor decision-making
- Emotions: Fear, anger, guilt, grief, irritability, or anxiety
- Behaviour: withdrawal, having a hard time relaxing or resting, increased substance use

This is not a complete list of all possible reactions. When person reacts to an unusual situation, their reaction can be unusual as well. Regardless of how a person reacts, they will need rest and support to recover their well-being. For more information on critical incident stress, visit cupe.ca.

Signs of work-related decline in mental well-being

The human body requires care and maintenance to continue to function properly (rest and recovery). These needs are not negotiable. Workplace policies that prioritize efficiency and austerity create increased workloads for fewer staff. This causes a sharp decline in mental well-being for far too many workers. But when human needs are not met, an injury or illness (or worse) is inevitable.

Here are some signs that poor management of psychosocial hazards may be causing unmanageable stress in workers:

- People can't report mistakes without punishment, so they stop reporting.
- Feedback isn't acted upon.
- People feel disconnected from their work and their co-workers.
- Staff shortages occur because of sick leaves, quitting or early retirement.
- Productivity declines and morale suffers.
- Rates of absenteeism and presenteeism are high.
- There's an increase in injuries and illnesses.
- Suicide occurs.

A big challenge is that workers often don't report exposures to psychosocial hazards. Sometimes, it's because they don't know that stress causes preventable injuries and illnesses. Often, a workplace culture of non-reporting exists because of stigma, peer pressure, an inability to talk about these issues to managers and supervisors, a lack of awareness about growing problems or the belief that nothing will change.

Having these factors in the workplace costs employers a lot of money:

- Almost half of working Canadians are facing mental health challenges.
- Poor mental health costs Canadians about \$50 billion in costs and lost productivity.
- Mental health problems account for 30% of short-term and long-term leaves.
- Work has a negative emotional impact on 1 in 3 Canadian workers.
- It is expensive to replace workers who have left the workplace or who are on leave.
- Employee assistance plans and employee benefits costs.

There are other costs as well.

In contrast, preventing mental health injuries is cheaper and less risky than dealing with the consequences of unaddressed psychosocial hazards. The return on investment in mental health support programs is four to ten times the initial investment. This is information that's important to share with the workplace parties.

Finding solutions to control psychosocial hazards

The occupational health and safety system in your workplace is the right tool to address these concerns.

The role of occupational health and safety activists is to examine working conditions and practices to identify hazards, including psychosocial hazards. Once hazards are identified, recommendations for appropriate control measures will be made.

There are examples of control measures that could be used to deal with psychosocial hazards described in Appendix B and from the International Labour Organization in their resource "Stress Prevention at Work Checkpoints."

For more information on occupational health and safety activist activities and resources, like identifying hazards and making recommendations or conducting investigations or workplace inspections, visit cupe.ca.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to effectively manage situations, even the unexpected, as we go about our daily lives. Unexpected events can vary from not very disruptive (like a minor change in plans) to complex problems requiring assistance (like a disaster, injury or death).

Research tells us that workers are more resilient when they:

- are competent
- feel confident in their decision-making and skills
- feel like they contribute to a greater good
- perform work that aligns with their core values
- feel connected to their work
- can decide how to perform their tasks
- have the skills to adapt to change

These are protective **psychosocial work factors**.

If a discussion on resilience is proposed, then the discussion can be guided to what research tells us will most benefit workers. The choice of education and training program should be focused to increase these resilience protective psychosocial factors in workers. You can learn more at cupe.ca.

Prevention versus self-help

Employers generally want to do the right thing. But problems occur when employers implement solutions for workers without talking to workers about what would make the most sense for them.

Employers also want to spend as little money as possible to solve problems. That's why we need to show that targeting psychosocial hazards is the most cost-effective way to deal with stress at work.

It's important to focus on resilience-building at the organizational level, not just on the level of the individual worker. By focusing on the organization's practices, every worker will be included, instead of the worker-by-worker approach.

Many employers will offer wellness programs that are designed to teach workers how to cope with stress.

These types of programs promote exercise by organizing sports activities, providing gym memberships or teaching mindfulness or relaxation. These are all excellent practices.

The problem is that none of these techniques reduce the overall amount of stress that a worker has to deal with. At best, these techniques make a worker able to handle more stress before they're overwhelmed.

MYTH: Workplace wellness programs are the answer to all workplace stress.

FACT: Wellness programs provide skills, but don't replace psychosocial hazard control programs.

Bargaining

One of the best ways to protect workers from hazards is to develop collective agreement language to address psychosocial hazards. Specific contract language for psychological health and safety could include:

- recognition and identification of psychosocial hazards causing harm to workers
- agreements to address workplace specific factors, including workload, harassment, discrimination, bullying and critical incidents
- provisions for training to address psychosocial hazards, including anti-oppression training
- agreements to adopt the national standard on psychological health and safety in the workplace (CSA-Z1003-13)
- protocols to respond to critical incidents

Bargaining priorities are set by the membership, so it's important to organise around safe and healthy work.

- Gain member support to include these topics in the bargaining package and make them a priority.
- Discuss psychosocial hazards and their effects at membership meetings.
- Increase member awareness by highlighting some of the benefits of addressing psychosocial hazards. This may get more people involved in brainstorming potential solutions.

To develop specific language, work with your CUPE health and safety representative and your national representative.

FACT: One of the best ways to protect workers from hazards is to develop collective agreement language that compels employers to address psychosocial hazards.

External resources

Psychological health and safety is an emerging field in occupational health and safety. However, there is already a growing body of evidence that shows workers are experiencing harm.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada is an organization that provides a lot of data on mental health and its application to the workplace. They have many resources to help generate meaningful conversations about mental health in the workplace. Knowledge is power!

www.mentalhealthcommission.ca

In 2013, the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) developed Canada's national standard on psychological health and safety (CSA-Z1003-13). Unlike the other CSA standards, this resource is currently free to access. It provides a comprehensive framework for workplaces to address psychological health and safety. Copies can be downloaded from

www.csagroup.org.

CSA-Z1003-13 details criteria for creating and maintaining a psychologically safe and healthy workplace using a structured, documented process. It ensures that work is organized to promote psychological safety. To use this resource, the employer must be on board. The following steps can help to bring the employer on board:

- It can be raised during labour-management meetings or during discussions surrounding leaves and benefits.
- The Health and Safety Committee or Health and Safety Representatives can make a recommendation to the employer that such a standard is adopted by the workplace.
- It can be addressed by the local during contract negotiations.

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- “Mental health at work.” September 28, 2022
www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work

Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW)

- Stress Assess tool and app
www.ohcow.on.ca/resources/apps-tools-calculators/stressassess/

Mental Health Commission of Canada

- “Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada.” 2013
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Appendix A – Description of work-related psychosocial factors

Psychological support: Resources are available to workers, making them feel valued and like they belong. They have the time and space to manage the impacts of work while they are still at work.

- **Organizational culture:** Everyone in the organization shares values of trust, justice, honesty, and accountability.
- **Clear leadership and expectations:** People know who is responsible for what and trust in their leaders.
- **Civility and respect:** Everyone can expect respect and fairness in their interactions.
- **Psychological competencies and requirements:** Workers have the necessary skills needed to manage the impacts of their work.
- **Growth and development:** Employers invest in the skills and professional development of their workers.
- **Recognition and reward:** Workers feel appreciated and that their work is valued.
- **Involvement and influence:** Workers are involved in decision-making when it impacts their work.
- **Workload management:** Workers have the time to perform their tasks with skill and meet their obligations successfully.
- **Engagement:** Workers are motivated and feel a sense of ownership of their work.
- **Balance:** Workers have the capacity to successfully manage the demands of life.
- **Psychological protection:** Employers are protecting workers from work-related harassment or stigma.
- **Protection of physical safety:** Workers feel safe and know that their work will not make them sick.
- **Management of other chronic stressors as identified by workers ***

*Note: Chronic stressors are stressful circumstances that happen often in your type of work organization when compared to an office setting. For example, in many workplaces, exposure to critical incidents is common.

For more information on these topics, please visit the following free resources:

- Mental Health Commission of Canada www.mentalhealthcommission.ca
- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety Mental Health site www.ccohs.ca
- Canadian Standards Association (CSA) for the CSA-Z1003-13 National Standard: Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace www.csagroup.org
- Guarding Minds at Work www.guardingmindsatwork.ca
- Workplace Strategies for Mental Health (Canada Life) www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com

Appendix B – Examples of control measures

The hierarchy of controls

The hierarchy of controls is a ranked list of control options for hazards, with the most effective controls listed first. It can be applied using these five questions:

1. Can this hazard be eliminated?
2. Can this hazard be substituted with something less harmful?
3. Can we apply an engineering control (physically separating the workers from the hazard)?
4. Would administrative controls reduce the risk (this includes rules that control the way work is performed, like scheduling, staffing, policy and safe work procedures)?
5. Is personal protective equipment required?

Moving through these questions in order allows health and safety activists to choose the most effective control, as the first “yes” answer is the best possible control. In some cases, the risk related to hazards may require the use of multiple layers of controls (both engineering and administrative, for example).

Employers may argue that the hierarchy of controls does not appear to apply to psychosocial hazards. However, there are many options available when an employer cannot completely remove a hazard in the workplace.

1. Elimination

To eliminate psychosocial hazards, they must first be identified. Some factors to consider when designing work is how the worker will interact with the entire system and how the system itself can increase stress. Many psychosocial hazards can be removed if the employer considers:

- the attention required to perform the job
- the memory and information processing required to perform the job
- how the work system, process or equipment can create or lead to error
- the sensory environment (how much information the worker needs to receive to do the job safely)
- where and how workers interact with technology and equipment

2.-3. Substitution and engineering controls

Where hazards cannot be eliminated, employers should ensure that residual risks are minimized as much as possible. Options for minimizing risk may include changes to work design and work organization by:

- Substituting a physical hazard with something less hazardous, thereby reducing the worker's concern.
- Substituting hazardous ways of working with less hazardous alternatives by Redesigning the work or the system of work.
- Isolating the hazard to eliminate exposure.

4. Administrative controls

Examples of administrative controls include:

- allowing enough time for tasks to be completed in a safe way
- allocating work tasks to the appropriate number of staff
- allowing workers to take breaks as needed to manage fatigue
- consulting workers about major organizational changes that may affect them
- improving the work environment by reducing the physical demands of the job through appropriate design (for example, reducing noise, ensuring proper lighting levels)
- ensuring workers have the proper tools, equipment, and materials to do the job
- defining workers' roles, expectations and reporting structures clearly

Additionally, many administrative controls are part of the everyday operation of the workplace. It is important that these practices are clear and concise and that workers have had the time and training to know and understand them. Guiding documents can include:

- organizational policies and standard operating procedures
- violence, harassment and sexual harassment prevention or workplace civility policies that provide clear descriptions of expected work behaviours for supervisors, workers, clients or customers
- clear processes for reporting and responding to psychosocial hazards or hazardous conditions
- training to develop awareness and appropriate skills in relation to psychosocial risks

5. Personal protective equipment

When psychosocial hazards can't be removed or reduced using other mechanisms, employers must provide personal protective equipment (PPE). For example, hazards like light glare can be controlled with protective eyewear.

It is important to note that the category each solution fits in is less relevant than whether the control makes the workplace safer. You can find additional materials on the hierarchy of controls and the health and safety process at cupe.ca.

Routes of exposure

Controls for psychosocial hazards to protect workers are placed in the same way as for any other hazard: at the source, along the path or at the worker. Following the hierarchy of controls, we prefer to control hazards at the source when possible because it covers everyone. When controls are implemented at the level of the individual worker, then only the workers who have the right education, training and equipment will be protected. If the control measure fails, then the worker is fully exposed.

For example, noise can be incredibly stressful and distracting. If an office is next to a piece of heavy machinery that makes a great deal of noise, then working in that office would be very difficult. The increase in concentration would likely cause headaches and tension in the neck and shoulders. It could cause anxiety and affect heart health. It could also affect a person's ability to manage more stress. Good health and safety practices challenge us to find controls at the source to prevent or minimize exposures to stress or trauma.

Monitor and evaluate controls

The health and safety committee should review any new work configuration to ensure it is functioning as planned and has not created new hazards.

The committee should ask:

- Have the controls solved the problem?
- Do the controls effectively reduce or eliminate the hazard to workers?
- Have any new hazards been created?
- Are new hazards appropriately controlled?
- Are risks caused by any new hazards less severe than the original risk being addressed?
- Do the monitoring processes determine when or where the control is or is not working?
- Have workers been adequately informed about changes?
- Have orientation and training plans been modified to deal with the new situation?
- Are any other measures required?

Additionally, the committee should remember that if a new work process or piece of equipment has been brought into the workplace, then both training and emergency plans must be re-evaluated to ensure that the changes have been incorporated into the plans.

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