

# HEALTHIER WORKPLACES, NOT TOUGHER WORKERS

## USING THE RIGHT WORDS

Two words you will probably encounter as a union activist working on mental health are **psychosocial** and **psychological**.

Although these words sound similar, they have very different meanings. It's important that we use the right words when fighting for healthy workplace environments.

When it comes to mental health in the workplace, labour representatives advocate for a **psychosocial approach**. But employers and regulators often prefer to take a **psychological approach**.

A **psychological approach** to mental health in the workplace focuses on the individual worker. It presumes that the workplace does not impact mental health, and that any mental health issues a worker experiences are personal in nature.

In contrast, a **psychosocial approach** to mental health in the workplace focuses on how the workplace impacts workers' mental health. Taking a psychosocial approach involves identifying and eliminating workplace hazards that can negatively impact workers' mental health.

## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

A **psychological approach** to mental health in the workplace focuses on individual resiliency – that is, the idea that individual workers need to become “tougher.” However, most employers and union reps are not trained psychologists. They cannot diagnose psychological issues or propose appropriate solutions, like improving resiliency.

Another problem with the **psychological approach** is that by focusing on individual workers, it relies on case-by-case accommodations for mental health issues. This does nothing to correct ongoing mental health hazards in the workplace that impact all workers.

In contrast, a psychosocial approach to mental health in the workplace focuses on how workplace organization and culture impact mental health. It looks for features of work that can injure workers or make them sick (hazards). Features of work that can injure mental health are called psychosocial hazards.

Focusing on psychosocial hazards shifts the emphasis away from individuals and onto the workplace. A psychosocial approach means creating a healthy workplace – not creating tougher workers.

## WHAT FACTORS IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

Psychosocial risk factors are workplace elements that can pose risks to workers' mental health and safety if not properly managed. These can include, but are not limited, to:

1. Psychological support
2. Organizational culture
3. Clear leadership and expectations
4. Civility and respect
5. Psychological competencies and requirements
6. Growth and development
7. Recognition and reward
8. Involvement and influence
9. Workload management
10. Engagement
11. Balance
12. Psychological protection
13. Protection of physical safety
14. Diversity and inclusion
15. Isolation and loneliness

## IS MY WORKPLACE HEALTHY?

### Signs of a healthy workplace

If your **workplace supports positive psychosocial interactions**, all workers will benefit. A healthy workplace has few psychosocial hazards. When they occur, they are addressed quickly. In a healthy workplace, workers:

- Enjoy coming to work
- Feel more ownership and pride in their work
- Are more productive
- Take less sick time
- Resolve conflicts in a timely, creative fashion

Healthy workplaces also do not see a lot of turnover. Hiring workers is easy, but it doesn't happen often. Happy workers tell everyone they know how great it is to work there, and they don't leave.

### Signs of a toxic workplace

If your **workplace is psychosocially toxic**, all workers will eventually get sick – it's just a matter of time and exposure. Signs of a toxic workplace include:

- Absenteeism: when people are not at work when they should be.
- Presenteeism: when people are at work when they should not be (for example, when they are sick or are supposed to be on vacation)
- High staff turnover: people leave unexpectedly because they just can't take it any more
- High number of musculoskeletal injuries: workplace stress is directly related to muscle tension, which leads to injuries if there is no relief
- High number of leaves: multiple people are off on sick leave, stress leave, and leave for injuries
- Difficulty hiring new workers: the workplace develops a bad reputation as employees will not recommend working there
- Difficulty keeping new hires: new workers experiencing toxicity leave
- High number of casual or temporary staff: not knowing how or if they will be paying their bills is stressful for workers – and employers who rely on casual or temporary workers are often doing so to avoid paying benefits that keep staff healthy

## WHAT TO DO

Hazards, including psychosocial hazards, are dealt with by the Occupational Health and Safety system in the workplace.

Workers have a right to know what hazards are present in their workplace and how employers are going to reduce their exposure to these hazards. Workers also have a right to participate in the health and safety process.

Every workplace should have a mental health strategy focused on reducing psychosocial hazards, including an occupational health and safety policy and program. The Joint Health and Safety Committee or a health and safety representative should be involved in that strategy. If your workplace does not have a mental health strategy, this should be discussed in the Joint Health and Safety Committee and in labour management meetings.

For additional information on how the workplace can impact your mental health, and what health and safety committees can do about it, please see the [CUPE Occupational Mental Health Guideline](#) and the [National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace](#).

:kd/cope491