

# Creating healthier work, not tougher workers



## Using the right words

Words matter when it comes to advocating for mental health in work. Two important words to know are psychological and psychosocial. Let's understand their differences and why they are crucial for fighting for healthier work.

Employers and regulators often lean towards a psychological approach to mental health in work, while labour representatives support a psychosocial approach.

A psychological approach focuses on the individual worker and their personal characteristics. It assumes that work doesn't affect mental well-being and that any mental health problems a worker has are personal.

In contrast, a psychosocial approach recognizes that work has an impact on mental well-being. It focuses on identifying and eliminating work-related hazards that harm workers to restore good protective work practices.

External factors like pandemics, inflation and systemic oppression significantly influence mental well-being. Ideally, work practices should provide support in facing these collective challenges.

## Why is this important?

A psychological approach to mental health in work focuses on individual resiliency. This means making workers "tougher."

However, most employers and union representatives are not trained psychologists. They lack the expertise to diagnose or provide appropriate solutions for psychological issues.

A psychological approach also relies on case-by-case accommodations, ignoring ongoing mental health hazards that affect all workers.

In contrast, a psychosocial approach looks at how work organization and culture impact mental health. It looks for features of work that can injure workers or make them sick. Features of work that can injure mental health are called **psychosocial hazards**.

By focusing on psychosocial hazards, we shift the emphasis from individuals to the work itself. A psychosocial approach aims to create healthy work instead of making individual workers more resilient.

# Is my work healthy?

## Signs of toxic work

If your workplace exhibits these signs, it may be psychosocially toxic. This will impact the health of all employees — it's just a matter of time.

### **Absenteeism**

- People frequently miss work when they could be present.

### **Presenteeism**

- People come to work even when they should be taking time off due to sickness or vacation.

### **High staff turnover**

- Employees leave unexpectedly because they just can't take it anymore.

### **Increased musculoskeletal injuries**

- Work stress causes muscle tension, leading to injuries over time.

### **Multiple leaves**

- Many individuals are on sick leave, stress leave or leave for injuries.

### **Difficulty in hiring new workers**

- Workplace reputation suffers and current employees don't recommend it.

### **Difficulty retaining new hires**

- New workers experiencing toxicity leave.

### **Reliance on casual or temporary staff**

- Unpredictable income is stressful for workers, and employers who rely on casual or temporary workers often do so to avoid paying for benefits that keep staff healthy.

## Signs of healthy work

Healthy work promotes positive interactions and minimizes psychosocial hazards. In healthy work, workers:

- Enjoy their work and look forward to coming in
- Take ownership and pride in their work
- Are engaged and complete tasks with enthusiasm
- Address and resolve conflicts promptly and creatively

Healthy work also has a low turnover rate because employees are happy and stay. Hiring new workers is easy, but rare.

## What to do?

The occupational health and safety system handles work hazards, including psychosocial hazards. Workers have the right to know about work hazards and how employers will reduce exposure. Workers also have the right to participate in the health and safety process.

Every workplace should have a mental health strategy that targets psychosocial hazards. This strategy should include an occupational health and safety policy and program. The joint health and safety committee or a union health and safety representative should be involved in the strategy. If your workplace lacks a mental health strategy, the union should discuss it in joint health and safety committee and labour management meetings.

### 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 health care or security systems we typically count on for help. Any action proposed must be respectful and inclusive.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

**CUPE National Health and Safety Branch** 1375 St. Laurent Boulevard, OTTAWA, ON K1G 0Z7  
Tel: (844) 237-1590 (toll free) Email: [health\\_safety@cupe.ca](mailto:health_safety@cupe.ca)