safe work australia

PREVENTING PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURY UNDER WORK HEALTH AND SAFETY LAWS

FACT SHEET

Overview

This Fact Sheet provides information to persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) and workers on how to address psychological health risks under the Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all persons at work.

Why is psychological health important in the workplace?

'Health' is defined in the WHS Act as both physical and psychological health.

Workers' psychological and physical health can be adversely affected by exposure to a poorly designed or managed work environment, a traumatic event, workplace violence, fatigue, bullying or harassment and excessive or prolonged work pressures. Any of these factors can increase the likelihood of workers experiencing a stress response.

Stress responses describe the physical, mental and emotional reactions which arise when workers perceive that their work demands exceed their ability to cope. Job stress is not in itself a disorder, illness or psychological injury. If job stress is excessive or prolonged it may lead to psychological or physical injury.

Increased frequency or duration of stress responses have been linked with high levels of unplanned absences including sick leave, staff turnover, withdrawal and presenteeism and more task errors. It can be a significant cause of injury or illness which may lead to depression and anxiety in the long term.

Who has WHS duties in relation to psychological hazards?

A PCBU has the primary duty under the WHS Act to manage risks associated with exposure to hazards arising from work that could result in physical or psychological harm. The duty is to ensure the health and safety of workers and other people at the workplace so far as is reasonably practicable, including by:

- providing and maintaining a work environment without risk to health and safety
- providing and maintaining safe systems of work
- monitoring the health of workers and the conditions at the workplace
- consulting with workers and their representatives on work health and safety matters, and
- providing information, training, instruction and supervision so workers can safely perform their work activities.

Workers have a duty to take reasonable care of their own health and safety and not adversely affect other people's health and safety. Workers must cooperate with reasonable policies and procedures and comply with reasonable instructions about work health and safety matters. This may include working to job descriptions to avoid role conflict or following workplace policies to prevent bullying behaviour.

Other people at the workplace, like visitors are required to take reasonable care of their own health and safety and to take care that their actions do not adversely affect the health and safety of other people.

What is involved in managing risks associated with psychological hazards?

Psychological hazards can be managed using the same risk management process applied to physical hazards (refer to the Code of Practice: *How to manage work health and safety risks*). The process is set out below:

1. Identifying the hazards

Hazards are things or situations which have the potential to cause harm including psychological injury. Psychological hazards can be identified by:

- reviewing incident reports, workers compensation claims, patterns of absenteeism, sick leave, staff turnover, staff complaints
- gaining feedback from workers through one-on-one discussions, surveys and focus groups
- observations, such as deteriorating work performance or how workers interact with others.

While hazards will vary between workplaces and jobs, the following work-related factors are known to contribute to the risk of psychological injury:

Environmental

Exposure to some physical hazards in the work environment can influence a worker's comfort and performance and may contribute to a stress response. For example non-compliance with work health and safety requirements such as exposure to poor air quality, high levels of noise, extreme temperatures and unsafe machinery.

Organisational

- job demand – the level of physical, mental and emotional effort required to do a job
- job control – the level of control a worker has over aspects of their work including how or when a job is done
- support – the level of support from supervisors and co-workers, information, equipment and resources available to allow the work to be done

- workplace relationships – the nature of relationships between workers, managers, supervisors, co-workers and clients

- role clarity – the overall scope or responsibilities of the job, clarity about the objectives, key accountabilities and management expectations of workers

- organisational change management – how change in the organisation, structure or job is communicated and the extent of worker involvement during these changes

- recognition and reward, - the nature of feedback on task performance, performance reviews, opportunities for skills development, formal and informal rewards

- organisational justice – perceptions of unfairness, consistency, bias and respect for workers.

Individual

People respond to stress at work in different ways. Individual differences may mean that some workers are more susceptible to harm from the hazard, for example a worker with a disability or illness, new and young workers.

2. Assessing the risk if necessary

A risk is the likelihood that harm will result from exposure to a hazard or group of hazards. A risk assessment involves examining the identified risk factors in more detail to determine the level of risk and help prioritise the order in which control measures are implemented.

The level of risk can be assessed by considering:

- The nature of the hazard – the capacity the hazard has to induce harm, for example exposure to low levels of conflict may be unpleasant without causing a health and safety risk whereas high levels of unmanaged conflict can escalate into workplace bullying, increase stress and cause incidents.

- The extent of exposure to the hazard – the duration, frequency and intensity of exposure, for example work-related stress may increase if workers are constantly under time pressure.

- Individual differences - how workers deal with exposure to a particular psychological hazard may vary.

When assessing the level of risk consider:

- **Level of jobs demands** – workers have

  - workloads that are excessive or create unreasonable time pressure

- work that is highly repetitive or monotonous or machine paced

- hazardous or unpleasant working environments, for example exposure to excessive or irritating noise, poor ventilation, lighting or workstation set up.

- **Low job control** – workers

  - have very little say in the way they do their work or when they can take rest breaks

  - are not involved in making decisions about work that affects them or their clients

  - are unable to refuse a service to an aggressive client

  - skills and experience are underused.

- **Poor support** – workers have inadequate

  - support from supervisors and co-workers

  - information about work priorities or training on how to do the job

  - equipment and resources to do the job

  - worker support systems – insufficient access to employee assistance programs, counselling and information on mental health or workplace policies.

- **Poor workplace relationships** – workplaces where there is

  - unresolved conflict between workers, managers, supervisors or co-workers

  - discrimination, harassment, bullying or other unreasonable behaviour by co-workers, supervisors or clients.

- **Poor role clarity** – workplaces where there is

  - conflicting job roles and responsibilities

  - uncertainty about work expectations.

- **Poor organisational change management** – workplaces where:

  - organisational change has been poorly managed

  - there is inadequate communication to workers of the changes.

- **Low recognition and reward** – workplaces where there is

  - an imbalance between worker effort and associated recognition and reward

  - recognition of good task performance

  - lack of opportunity for skills development.

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Preventing Psychological Injury Under Work Health and Safety Laws · May 2014 · · · Page 3

- **Poor organisational justice** – workplaces where there is
  - inconsistency or bias in the implementation of the procedures
  - poor management of underperformance.

These eight risk factors are interrelated so should not be considered in isolation. A combination of these risks may increase the likelihood of psychological injury.

3. Controlling the risks

A PCBU must eliminate the risks to workers' health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable. If this is not reasonably practicable then the PCBU must minimise those risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

The risk of psychological harm can be minimised by implementing effective control measures addressing the work environment and systems of work. Control measures aimed at individuals are usually less effective.

The types of controls used will vary depending on what is reasonably practicable for each workplace. A combination of controls may be needed to reduce the risk of psychological injury.

The aim is to achieve the best fit between the working environment, the systems of work and the needs and capabilities of workers.

Control measures that may be considered include:

Environmental

- the work environment – implementing the hierarchy of controls, for example
  - placing a barrier between customers and bank tellers where there is a risk of workplace violence
  - having higher partitions between workstations to reduce noise
  - increasing lighting in darker areas.

Organisational

- the systems of work and the design of work and work processes, for example
  - workforce planning to ensure there is a balance between work demands/time pressure and workers capacity to meet those demands
  - consulting with workers when determining performance targets
  - defining job roles so the work activities and the scope of the work are clear
  - making time frames for completing work

reasonable and achievable
  - providing the worker more control over how the work is done by consulting and agreeing to work procedures before work commences. Where a worker has autonomy to make decisions about their work load, rate and pace of work, the risk of injury from work demands may be minimised.
  - flexible work arrangements where possible, by allowing a degree of freedom in how work is done
  - suitable planning, management and communication processes for organisational change
  - providing support systems, for example buddying and mentoring for new workers
  - rewarding workers' efforts
  - providing regular feedback on worker performance
  - engaging workers in decision-making
  - providing systems for workers to raise concerns and report unreasonable behaviour.

Training and education

Workers need to understand their role and have the relevant skills to do the job. Providing information, instruction, training and supervision can help to protect workers from psychological health risks.

Training, instruction and information should include:

- workplace practices concerning psychological health and organisational values
- induction information on the expected workplace behaviour and conduct including all relevant policies and procedures, for example the prevention of bullying, harassment and violence at work
- management training to assist managers and supervisors support workers, identify hazards and risks at work and manage conflict.

Individual

- protecting workers from workplace conflict, bullying, harassment and discrimination, for example
  - developing policies and procedures that set the standard of workplace behaviour and enable workers to raise concerns and report unreasonable behaviour

- providing access to Employee Assistance Programs or counsellors.

The least effective approach is to try to change the worker's behavioural responses as this does nothing to change the inherent risks. Health and wellbeing programs and worker resilience training may still be a useful supporting approach, when combined with higher order controls including work design and management.

4. Maintaining and reviewing control measures

The control measures put in place to protect health and safety should be regularly reviewed to ensure they are effective. Control measures should be reviewed:

- when a psychological injury occurs
- before making changes in the organisation or to work procedures, and
- if new information becomes available to indicate a control measure may no longer be the most effective.

Review of controls may identify a worker is not coping with the work or particular task and is showing warning signs of stress or distress. Intervening at this early stage may prevent the development of a psychological injury.

Consulting your workers

A PCBU must, so far as is reasonably practicable, consult with their workers or their representative on health and safety matters. Consultation with workers at each stage of the risk management process can assist in identifying and controlling psychological hazards and risks in the workplace.

Consultation involves sharing information, giving workers a reasonable opportunity to express their views and taking into account those views before making a decision on health and safety matters.

Consultation is required on specific matters, for example:

- Decisions about the most effective controls for the identified hazards and risks.
- Policies and procedures—conflict resolution, preventing and responding to workplace bullying, aggression and violence in the workplace and managing work-related fatigue.
- Workplace changes—reasonable workplace adjustments for a worker returning to work, changes to organisational structure, for example when downsizing.

Further information on consultation is in the Code of Practice: *Work health and safety consultation, co-operation and co-ordination*.

Further information

- Workers' Compensation Legislation and Psychological Injury fact sheet
- *Preventing and Responding to Workplace Bullying*
- *Dealing with Workplace Bullying* – a worker's guide
- *Managing the Risks of Fatigue At Work*
- *Fatigue Management* – a worker's Guide
- *Hazardous Manual Tasks Code of Practice*
- *Work Health and Safety – Consultation Cooperation and Coordination Code of Practice* Work Health and Safety *Queensland - Tip Sheets* (13)
- Worksafe Victoria – *Stresswise - A Guide for Employers in the Public Sector*
- Safe Work South Australia guidance on *preventing and responding to violence at work*
- *People at Work Project*
- Comcare and Australian Public Service Commission published *Working Together: Promoting mental health and wellbeing at work. http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications-and-media/current-publications/mental-health*.