MENTALLY HEALTHY WORK

What is mentally healthy work?

Mentally healthy work is work where the risks to workers' mental health are eliminated or minimised, and their wellbeing is prioritised. When work is mentally healthy, it does not cause psychological harm and may improve overall wellbeing. This is 'good work'. When work is mentally unhealthy it may be referred to as 'toxic work' which can cause psychological harm and reduce wellbeing.

KEY POINTS

☑ Organisations have a legal obligation to manage **work-related** factors that cause mental harm

☑ Factors that cause psychological harm (when managed poorly) can also create wellbeing when managed well

☑ Organisations can address these through proactive approaches such as good work design, secondary approaches that build the resources of individuals and teams to cope better, and tertiary approaches that provide support when harm occurs

What is mental harm?

WorkSafe defines mental harm as significant cognitive, emotional, or behavioural impact arising from one or more work-related risk factors. Mental harm of this kind may be either acute or chronic and may result from single or repeated exposure to risk factor(s). This is where a risk factor(s) has affected our wellbeing, potentially to the point of causing mental ill-health or illness.

What causes mental harm?

There are a number of factors at work that can cause mental harm (see page 2) - these are called 'psycho-social risks'. These are the factors that are within control of an agency and must be managed by putting in place reasonably practicable controls (interventions).

These factors relate to the work, the work environment, and work relationships. These factors can interact with each other and with external or individual factors and can result in psychological harm or wellbeing.

Government Health & Safety Lead

What is my role?

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 (HSWA), organisations (as PCBUs) have a legal duty to ensure the health and safety of workers – this includes mental health as well as physical health. This requires agencies to understand and manage the things in the workplace that can cause mental harm to their workers.

A complex challenge

Work-related mental health risks don't have a linear relationship with mental harm or wellbeing (just because a risk factor is present, it doesn't guarantee a particular outcome will necessarily occur). Psychological harm and wellbeing are outcomes of a complex system where multiple factors interact and create different outcomes. This makes it hard to predict exactly when or how harm may occur. This is why it is particularly important that (as well as good risk management) organisations also look at building the capacities and capabilities to anticipate, respond, monitor and learn from the normal variability in how work is done.

Work-related mental health risks

examples...

Work
The nature and demands of the work and how it is organised.

- Workload (too much/too little)
- Work patterns
- Work content
- Work repetition
- Time frames
- Pace of work
- Skills and work match
- Autonomy and control
- Working conditions
- Job security
- Role clarity
- Role conflict
- Role overload
- Role erosion
- Work location (remote/isolated)
- Work schedule
- Work equipment
- Traumatic events

Individual
The impact of (and interaction between) work on a person and its meaning to them

- Effort-reward (im)balance
- Work meaning and purpose
- Control (over work)
- Work-life balance
- Use of skills and competencies
- Learning and development opportunities
- Rest and recovery time

Social
The relationships and personal connections at work.

- Workplace relationships
- Bullying and harassment
- Interpersonal conflict
- Communication between managers and workers
- Discrimination
- Diversity and inclusion
- Irregular or unsocial work conditions

Organisational
The culture, climate, systems, and employment processes at work

- Organisational change
- Organisational justice
- Just culture
- Organisational resilience
- Office politics
- Reward and recognition
- Psychosocial safety climate
- Monitoring of work
- Treatment of workers (consistency and fairness)

External factors that can interact with work-related mental health risks:
- Family circumstances
- Financial circumstances
- Health/physical circumstances
- Lifestyle factors

Personal factors that can interact with work-related risks:
- Personality
- Tolerance for ambiguity
- Motivation
- Ability to cope with change
- Education and skills
- Career stage

How do we manage these?

Plan
Identify the risk(s) and how they're interacting with other factors

Do
Identify and implement evidence-based interventions

Check
Check that what we put in place is working

Act
Continually improve (mental health risks are dynamic and change constantly).

Preventative (most effective, organisational focus)

Primary interventions: address work factors that cause harm in the first place

Secondary interventions: build individual resources to cope better

Tertiary interventions: provide support once harmed

Reactive (least effective, individual focus)

Primary interventions: these are things that address issues at the source. They look at the work/workplace factors themselves to prevent problems from occurring and having an adverse effect on worker health. This may include how work is designed, how demands are managed, and how workers are supported to do their jobs.

Secondary interventions: these focus on helping employees deal with issues more effectively by building personal resources. This may include resilience training, mental health apps mental health first aid, peer support, and health education and promotion.

Tertiary interventions: these are aimed at reactively improving the wellbeing of employees who are experiencing mental ill-heath. They provide targeted support for individuals to recover. This may include employee assistance programmes, incident support, and return-to-work programmes.

Challenge vs hindrance stressors
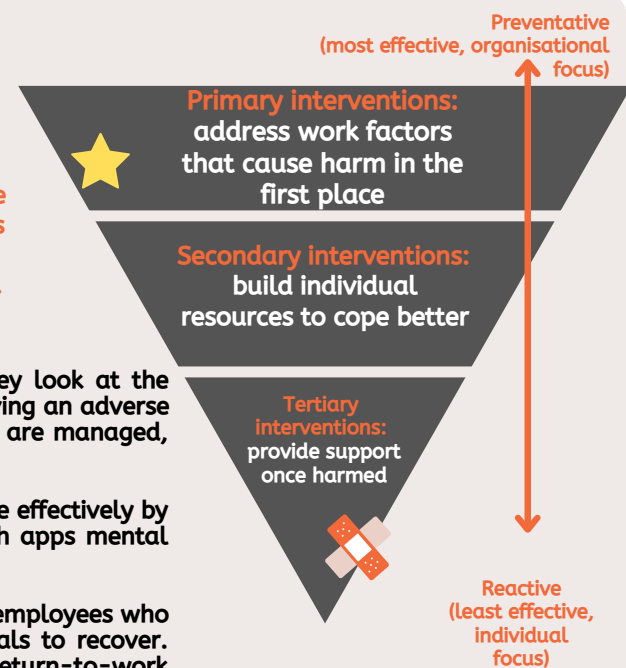
Not all risks (or 'stressors') are created equal. Challenge stressors (e.g. time pressures, responsibility, work complexity) can lead to engagement, a sense of achievement and wellbeing *if* sufficient 'resources' are available to deal with them (e.g. support, skills, control, work-life balance). Hindrance stressors (e.g. bullying, workplace politics, interpersonal conflict, role conflict) don't respond well to more 'resources' and must be directly identified and eliminated.

What makes the biggest difference?
Primary intervention focus areas

Four key features of the work environment are associated with positive outcomes for both individuals and organisations. Your primary interventions should seek to enable these features:

1. Organisational justice

The perceptions of workers being treated fairly across all areas of the organisation and aspects of the employment relationship

2. Psychosocial safety climate

The shared belief held by workers that their psychological safety and well-being is protected and supported by senior management. This is created by management visibly, meaningfully, and continually committing and prioritising the health and wellbeing of workers, along with clear communication and involvement of staff in implementing positive changes. A poor psychosocial safety climate is talked about as the "cause of the causes" of work stress and is the leading psychosocial risk factor at work capable of causing psychological and social harm through its influence on other psychosocial factors.

3. Management competence

Perception of management competence, which includes management qualities such as integrity, empowerment, conflict management, being empathetic and being accessible

4. Inclusion

Feelings of inclusion or being involved in the decisions affecting work and having access to information which affects work, including having the required resources to get the job done.

Content copied from Massey University New Zealand Workplace Barometer 2020 findings report

References and readings

1. Massey University - New Zealand Workplace Barometer 2020 Findings Report

2. Government Health and Safety Lead: *Creating mentally healthy work and workplaces*

3. Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum: *Protecting mental wellbeing*

4. WorkSafe New Zealand - *Mentally Healthy Work*

5. WorkSafe New Zealand - *Mentally Healthy Work position statement*

6. *Psychosocial Safety Climate - A New Work Stress Theory* by Maureen Dollard, Christian Dormann, Mohd Awang Idris (2019)

7. Fox, K. et al. (2022) Organisational- and group-level workplace interventions and their effect on multiple domains of worker well-being: A systematic review, Work & Stress, 36:1, 30-59

8. SafeWork Australia - Work-related psychological health and safety