



# Jeremy Lightfoot on *mentally healthy work*

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e all know that good mental health is good for our organisations. When our people are happy, healthy and well, they are more productive and engaged, take less time off and stay with our organisations longer. So it's not

surprising that workplace wellbeing has been such a significant area of focus over recent years, with a particular growth in generalised individual and team wellness initiatives, like resilience training, mental health first aid, welfare staff and EAP.

The aim of these initiatives and interventions is to build the ability of individuals and teams to withstand day-to-day pressures. They also ensure the appropriate support mechanisms are in place for people when they are experiencing mental health and wellbeing challenges.

While these types of initiatives play an important role in supporting good mental health and wellbeing at work, they aren't necessarily the most effective way of managing the risk of harm from work, particularly when used in isolation.

Psychological health and safety at work (or mentally healthy work) is an important area of health and safety that is often poorly understood and has until recently received far less attention than physical health and safety. While closely related to wellbeing, psychological health and safety seeks to systematically address work factors that have the potential to harm people's mental health.

Rather than focusing on supporting individuals, psychological health and safety seeks to improve the way people experience their work and work environment (including organisational climate). This is done by identifying, assessing, managing and monitoring work-related psycho-social risk factors, which include things like the volume and intensity of work, work type, work relationships, organisational change, job security, role clarity and more.

Fortunately, the same factors that have the potential to cause mental harm when experienced negatively also strengthen wellbeing when they are experienced positively. For example, work relationships can cause harm if they are domineering or oppressive, but can improve wellbeing if they are supportive and nurturing. So, when we do psychological health and safety well, not only do we prevent harm to our workforce, we go further and also help our people to be well and thrive – supporting engagement, productivity, and retention in our organisations.

WorkSafe has signalled their intent to prioritise the way that work-related psychosocial risks are being eliminated or minimised, through their formal 2020 position statement on Mentally Healthy Work. They've also committed to building their internal capability to better regulate this area in New Zealand. It's clear that mentally healthy work is not only financially and morally the right thing to do, but also a legislative requirement that we must be prepared to meet.



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The Government Health and Safety Lead (GHSL) exists to support us, as Chief Executives, and our health and safety teams to continuously improve our approach to health and safety – both physical and psychological.

Over the past few years, the GHSL has engaged with agencies across the public sector to understand where we are placing our efforts to support and improve people’s mental health and wellbeing. What was clear is that agencies have put considerable effort into developing interventions that build individual resilience to cope better with work stressors, and support people when they are experiencing mental health and wellbeing challenges. However, there’s been less focus on addressing the work factors that may be causing the harm.

We have a duty under the HSWA to provide the highest level of care and to design the risk out of work where practicable so our people aren’t exposed to psychologically hazardous work in the first place. This means firstly looking at how we can change the work before we change the person. A key theme identified in the GHSL’s engagements is the relatively low understanding and capability at all levels relating to psychological health and safety, particularly creating good work by design. Without this necessary capability being in place, it is understandable that our agencies’ efforts would be targeting mental health and wellbeing interventions which may not be as effective, particularly in isolation.

That is why I am excited to be the Chief Executive champion for a new Mentally Healthy Work Capability programme being piloted in 2023 by the GHSL.

This capability programme has separate streams for executive/senior leaders, senior health and safety and human resources leaders, and H&S/HR practitioners to build an appropriate understanding of psychological health and safety relevant to their role. The GHSL has partnered with New Zealand and international experts in work-related psychological health and safety and WorkSafe, to design this programme specifically for public sector agencies.

As Chief Executives, our role is not to be an expert in psychological health and safety – and the capability programme does not seek to make us one. Instead, our role is to champion and prioritise organisational strategies and interventions that progressively improve the way our people experience work and their work environment. To do that requires us to understand some of the key concepts involved. This is what the Chief Executive capability workstream seeks to provide us with.

This is a new area for all of us, and it is the start of a journey that I am excited to be taking Corrections on. I hope you will join me in supporting this programme.

*The programme will be kicking off in early 2023 and expressions of interest are currently open – please reach out to the GHSL if you are interested in being part of this.*

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**/ Department of Corrections**