Mental Health – Psychosocial Risk Factors in the Workplace Fact Sheets



WHAT ARE PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK (PSR) FACTORS?

Thirteen psychosocial risk (PSR) factors have been identified by researchers at Simon Fraser University "based on extensive research and review of empirical data from national and international best practices. The factors were also determined based on existing and emerging Canadian case law and legislation."

These 13 factors are discussed in detail on the Guarding Minds at Work (GM@W) website. GM@W is a free, evidence-based strategy that helps employers protect and promote psychological safety and health in their workplace. The same 13 factors are used in the CSA Z1003-13 (R2018) "Psychological health and safety in the workplace – Prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation" which is available for free from their website.

The 13 organizational factors that impact organizational health, the health of individual employees and the financial bottom line, including the way work is carried out and the context in which work occurs, are:

- Psychological Support
- Organizational Culture
- Clear Leadership & Expectations
- Civility & Respect
- Psychological Competencies & Requirements
- Growth & Development
- Recognition & Reward
- Involvement & Influence
- Workload Management
- Engagement
- Balance
- Psychological Protection
- Protection of Physical Safety

WHAT ARE THE 13 PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK FACTORS IN MORE DETAIL?

1. **Psychological Support**

A workplace where co-workers and supervisors are supportive of employees' psychological and mental health concerns, and respond appropriately as needed. For some organizations, the most important aspect of psychological support may be to

protect against traumatic stressors at work.

Why it is important?

Employees that feel they have psychological support have greater job attachment, job commitment, job satisfaction, job involvement, positive work moods, desire to remain with the organization, organizational citizenship behaviours (behaviours of personal choice that benefit the organization), and job performance.

What happens when it is lacking?

Employee perceptions of a lack of psychological support from their organization can lead to:

- increased absenteeism
- withdrawal behaviours
- conflict
- strain – which can lead to fatigue, headaches, burnout and anxiety
- turnover
- loss of productivity
- increased costs
- greater risk of accidents, incidents and injuries

2. **Organizational Culture**

A workplace characterized by trust, honesty and fairness. Organizational culture, in general, are basic assumptions held by a particular group. These assumptions are a mix of values, beliefs, meanings and expectations that group members hold in common and that they use as cues to what is considered acceptable behaviour and how to solve problems.

Why it is important?

Organizational trust is essential for any positive and productive social processes within any workplace. Trust is a predictor of cooperative behaviour, organizational citizenship behaviours (behaviours of personal choice that benefit the organization), organizational commitment, and employee loyalty. An organization that has a health-focused culture enhances employee well-being, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which helps to retain and attract employees. A work culture with social support also enhances employee well-being by providing a positive environment for employees who may be experiencing psychological conditions such as depression and anxiety.

What happens when it is lacking?

Culture sets the tone for an organization – a negative culture can undermine the effectiveness of the best programs, policies and services intended to support the workforce. An unhealthy culture creates more stress, which lowers employee well-being. A culture of profit at all costs and constant chaotic urgency can create an environment in which burnout is the norm.

3. **Clear Leadership & Expectations**

A workplace where there is effective leadership and support that helps employees know what they need to do, how their work contributes to the organization and whether there are impending changes.

Why it is important?

Effective leadership increases employee morale, resiliency and trust, and decreases employee frustration and conflict. Good leadership results in employees with higher job well-being, reduced sick leave, and reduced early retirements with disability pensions. A leader who demonstrates a commitment to maintaining his or her own physical and psychological health can influence the health of employees (sickness, presenteeism, absenteeism) as well as the health of the organization as a whole (vigour, vitality, productivity).

What happens when it is lacking?

Leaders who are more instrumental in their approach (focusing on producing outcomes, with little attention paid to the big picture, the psychosocial dynamics within the organization, and the individual employees) are more likely to hear staff health complaints including general feelings of malaise, irritability and nervousness. Similarly, leaders who do not demonstrate visible concern for their own physical and psychological health set a negative example for their staff and can undermine the legitimacy of any organizational program, policy and/or service intended to support employees. Middle managers are at greater risk because they must be leaders and be led simultaneously. This role conflict can lead to feelings of powerlessness and stress.

4. **Civility and Respect**

A workplace where employees are respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another, as well as with customers, clients and the public. Civility and respect are based on showing esteem, care and consideration for others, and acknowledging their dignity.

Why it is important?

A civil and respectful workplace is related to greater job satisfaction, greater perceptions of fairness, a more positive attitude, improved morale, better teamwork, greater interest in personal development, engagement in problem resolution, enhanced supervisor-staff relationships, and reduction in sick leave and turnover. Organizations characterized by civility and respect create a positive atmosphere marked by high spirits and work satisfaction. This civility allows people to enjoy the environment, whether they are staff, clients or customers.

What happens when it is lacking?

A workplace that lacks civility and respect can lead to emotional exhaustion amongst staff, greater conflicts, and job withdrawal. A work environment that is uncivil and disrespectful also exposes organizations to the threat of more grievances and legal risks.

One example of disrespectful behaviour is bullying. Exposure to workplace bullying is associated with psychological complaints, depression, burnout, anxiety, aggression, psychosomatic complaints and musculoskeletal health complaints. Bullying not only affects those directly involved, but also affects bystanders, as they too experience higher levels of stress. A number of provinces currently have legislation to address such behaviours.

5. **Psychological Competencies & Requirements**

A workplace where there is a good fit between employees’ interpersonal and emotional competencies, their job skills and the position they hold. A good fit means that the employees possess the technical skills and knowledge for a particular position as well as the psychological skills and emotional intelligence (self-awareness, impulse

control, persistence, self-motivation, empathy and social deftness) to do the job. Note that a subjective job fit (when employees feel they fit their job) can be more important than an objective job fit (when the employee is assessed and matched to the job).

Why it is important?

A good job fit is associated with:

- fewer health complaints
- lower levels of depression
- greater self-esteem
- a more positive self-concept
- enhanced performance
- job satisfaction
- employee retention

What happens when it is lacking?

When there is a poor job fit, employees can experience job strain, which can be expressed as emotional distress and provocation, excessive dwelling on thoughts, defensiveness, energy depletion and lower mood levels. Organizationally, job misfit is linked to fewer applicants in the recruitment and training process, lack of enjoyment and engagement, poor productivity, conflict, and greater voluntary turnover.

6. **Growth & Development**

A workplace where employees receive encouragement and support in the development of their interpersonal, emotional and job skills. This type of workplace provides a range of internal and external opportunities for employees to build their repertoire of competencies. It helps employees with their current jobs as well as prepares them for possible future positions.

Why it is important?

Employee development increases goal commitment, organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Employees feel that organizations care when the organization supports growth and development. Skill acquisition and career development directly enhance employee well-being. It is important to ensure that opportunities go beyond learning specific technical skills, and also include opportunities to learn personal and interpersonal skills that are critical to successfully caring for oneself and relating to others.

What happens when it is lacking?

Employees who are not challenged by their work will grow bored, their well-being will suffer, and their performance will drop. When staff do not have opportunities to learn and improve their interpersonal and psychological skills, the result can be conflict, disengagement and distress.

7. **Recognition and Reward**

A workplace where there is appropriate acknowledgement and appreciation of employees' efforts in a fair and timely manner. This element includes appropriate and regular financial compensation as well as employee or team celebrations, recognition of years served, demonstrating/acting according to organizational values, and/or milestones reached.

Why it is important?

Recognition and reward:

- motivates employees
- fuels the desire to excel
- builds self-esteem
- encourages employees to exceed expectations
- enhances team success

Employees receiving appropriate recognition and reward have more energy and enthusiasm, a greater sense of pride and participation in their work, and are more likely to treat colleagues and customers with courtesy, respect and understanding.

What happens when it is lacking?

Lack of recognition and reward undermines employee confidence in their work and trust in the organization. Employees may feel demoralized or they may quit. An imbalance between effort and reward is a significant contributor to burnout and emotional distress leading to a range of psychological and physical disorders.

8. **Involvement and Influence**

A workplace where employees are included in discussions about how their work is done and how important decisions are made. Opportunities for involvement can relate to an employee's specific job, the activities of a team or department, or issues involving the organization as a whole.

Why it is important?

When employees feel they have meaningful input into their work they are more likely to be engaged, to have higher morale, and to take pride in their organization. This feeling, in turn, increases the willingness to make extra effort when required. Job involvement is associated with increased psychological well-being, enhanced innovation, and organizational commitment.

What happens when it is lacking?

If employees do not believe they have a voice in the affairs of the organization, they tend to feel a sense of indifference or helplessness. Job alienation or non-involvement is associated with cynicism and distress, greater turnover, and burnout.

9. **Workload Management**

A workplace where tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully within the time available. A large workload is often described by employees as being the biggest workplace stressor (i.e., having too much to do and not enough time to do it). It is not only the amount of work that makes a difference but also the extent to which employees have the resources (time, equipment, support) to do the work well.

Why it is important?

Most employees willingly work hard and feel a good day's work is fulfilling and rewarding. Workload management is important because there is a unique relationship between job demands, intellectual demands and job satisfaction. Job demands reduce job satisfaction, while intellectual demands or decision-making latitude, increase job satisfaction. Even when there are high demands, if employees also have high decision-making ability, they will be able to thrive. Having high decision-making

latitude also allows for positive coping behaviours to be learned and experienced.

What happens when it is lacking?

Any system subject to excess load without reprieve will break. This is as true for people as it is for equipment. Increased demands, without opportunities for control, result in physical, psychological and emotional fatigue, and increase stress and strain. Emotionally fatigued individuals also have a diminished sense of personal accomplishment and an increased sense of inadequacy. Excessive workload is one of the main reasons employees are negative about their jobs and their employers.

10. **Engagement**

Employees enjoy and feel connected to their work and where they feel motivated to do their job well. Employee engagement can be physical (energy exerted), emotional (positive job outlook and passionate about their work) or cognitive (devote more attention to their work and be absorbed in their job).

Engaged employees feel connected to their work because they can relate to, and are committed to, the overall success and mission of their company. Engagement is similar to, but should not be mistaken for job satisfaction, job involvement, organizational commitment, psychological empowerment, and intrinsic motivation.

Why it is important?

Engagement is important for individual satisfaction and psychological health, and leads to:

- increased profitability for company
- greater customer satisfaction
- enhanced task performance
- greater morale
- greater motivation
- increased organizational citizenship behaviours (behaviours of personal choice that benefit the organization)

What happens when it is lacking?

Organizations that do not promote engagement can see:

- negative economic impact in productivity losses
- psychological and medical consequences
- have greater employee turnover
- workplace deviance (in the form of withholding effort)
- counterproductive behaviour
- withdrawal behaviours

11. **Balance**

Present in a workplace where there is recognition of the need for balance between the demands of work, family and personal life. This factor reflects the fact that everyone has multiple roles employees, parents, partners, etc. These multiple roles can be enriching and allow for fulfillment of individual strengths and responsibilities, but conflicting responsibilities can lead to role conflict or overload. Greater workplace flexibility enables employees to minimize work-life conflict by allowing them to accomplish the tasks necessary in their daily lives.

Work-life balance is a state of well-being that allows a person to effectively manage

multiple responsibilities at work, at home and in their community. Work-life balance is different for everyone and it supports physical, emotional, family and community health and does so without grief, stress or negative impact.

Why it is important?

Recognizing the need for work-life balance:

- makes employees feel valued and happier both at work and at home
- reduces stress and the possibility that home issues will spill over into work, or vice versa
- allows staff to maintain their concentration, confidence, responsibility, and sense of control at work
- results in enhanced employee well-being, commitment, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviours (behaviours of personal choice that benefit the organization), job performance and reduced stress

What happens when it is lacking?

When work-family role conflict occurs (that is, roles within the workplace and outside it are overwhelming to a person or interfering with one another), health and well-being are undermined by accumulating home and job stress. This imbalance can lead to:

- constant tiredness
- bad temper
- inability to progress
- high job stress resulting in dissatisfaction with work and being absent either physically or mentally

These effects can then lead to additional stress-related illness, as well as higher cholesterol, depressive symptoms, and overall decreased health. The impact on the organization can include increased costs due to benefit payouts, absenteeism, disability, and turnover.

Not all employees will have the same work-life balance issues. Age, cultural, gender, family and marital status, care-giver demands, socioeconomic status and many other factors affect an employee’s work-life balance. Organizations will benefit from having flexible arrangements to address this issue.

12. **Psychological Protection**

Workplace psychological safety is demonstrated when employees feel able to put themselves on the line, ask questions, seek feedback, report mistakes and problems, or propose a new idea without fearing negative consequences to themselves, their job or their career. A psychologically safe and healthy workplace actively promotes emotional well-being among employees while taking all reasonable steps to minimize threats to employee mental health.

Why it is important?

When employees are psychologically protected they demonstrate greater job satisfaction, enhanced team learning behaviour and improved performance. Employees are more likely to speak up and become involved. They show increased morale and engagement and are less likely to experience stress-related illness. Psychologically protected workplaces also experience fewer grievances, conflicts and liability risks.

What happens when it is lacking?

When employees are not psychologically safe, they experience demoralization, a sense of threat, disengagement, and strain. They perceive workplace conditions as ambiguous and unpredictable. This demoralization can, in turn, undermine shareholder, consumer, and public confidence in the organization.

13. **Protection of Physical Safety**

This factor includes the work environment itself. Steps can be taken by management to protect the physical safety of employees. Examples include policies, training, appropriate response to incidents or situations identified as risks, and a demonstrated concern for employees' physical safety.

Why is it important?

Employees who work in an environment that is perceived as physically safe will feel more secure and engaged. Higher levels in the confidence of the safety protection at work results in lower rates of psychological distress and mental health issues. Safety is enhanced through minimizing hazards, training, response to incidents, and the opportunity to have meaningful input into the workplace policies and practices. The concept of 'safety climate' is linked to this factor as they both relate to the larger culture or climate of the organization.

What happens when it is lacking?

Failure to protect physical safety results in workplaces that are likely to be more dangerous. Not only could employees be injured or develop illnesses, those who do not see their workplace as physically safe will feel less secure and less engaged.

What are other issues in the workplace that may affect mental health?

Along with the 13 PSRs listed above, there several other key issues in the workplace that affect employee mental health. Within each issue are various factors that organizations need to consider in their efforts to create a mentally healthy workplace. The following is adapted from "Workplace Mental Health Promotion, A How-To Guide" from The Health Communication Unit at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto, and the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario.

Stigma and Discrimination – Stigma is a personal attitude and belief that negatively labels a group of people, such as those with mental illness. Stigma creates fear and consequently results in discrimination which discourages individuals and their families from getting the help they need.

Stress – Stress refers to potentially negative physical or mental tensions experienced by a person. A stressor is any event or situation that an individual perceives as a threat; precipitates either adaptation or the stress response. Stress can come from both good and bad experiences, so the effects of stress can be positive or negative. Stress is not all bad – without stress, there would be no productivity or engagement. Stress becomes a problem when individuals are not able to handle an event or situation and become overwhelmed.

Demand/control and effort/reward relationships – Major causes of job stress come from problems with conflicts in demand vs. control as well as effort vs. reward. When the demand and control an employee has at work changes, stress results if either factor is not increased or decreased proportionately. The same is true for the relationship between effort and reward. Changes to the organization can make for a more mentally healthy workplace, especially when employees feel appropriately rewarded for their effort and in control of their work.

Presenteeism – Presenteeism is the action of employees coming to work despite having a sickness that justifies an absence, therefore they are performing their work under sub-optimal conditions. When employees come to work not mentally present due to an illness, extreme family/life pressures or stress, they are not giving themselves adequate time to get better. Presenteeism can occur because employees feel

- they cannot afford to take the day off
- there is no back-up plan for tasks the individual is responsible for
- when they return to work, there would be even more to do
- committed to personally attending meetings or events
- concerned about job insecurity related to downsizing or restructuring

Job Burnout – Job burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion caused by long-term exposure to demanding work situations. Burnout is the cumulative result of stress. Anyone can experience job burnout. However, professions with high job demands and few supports can increase the prevalence of burnout and reduce engagement. Helping professions, such as jobs in health care, teaching or counseling, often have high rates of burnout.

Burnout has three main characteristics:

1. exhaustion (i.e., the depletion or draining of mental resources)
2. cynicism (i.e., indifference or a distant attitude towards one's job)
3. lack of professional efficacy (i.e., the tendency to evaluate one's work performance negatively, resulting in feelings of insufficiency and poor job-related self-esteem)

Harassment, Violence, Bullying and Mobbing – Most people think of violence as a physical assault. However, workplace violence is a much broader problem. It is any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment. Workplace violence includes:

- threatening behaviour – such as shaking fists, destroying property or throwing objects
- verbal or written threats – any expression of an intent to inflict harm
- harassment – any behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms or verbally abuses a person and that is known or would be expected to be unwelcome. This act includes words, gestures, intimidation, bullying, or other inappropriate activities.
- verbal abuse – swearing, insults or condescending language
- physical attacks – hitting, shoving, pushing or kicking
- bullying – repeated, unreasonable or inappropriate behaviour directed towards an employee (or group of employees) that creates a risk to health and safety
- mobbing – ongoing, systematic bullying of an individual by his or her co-workers – this includes rudeness and physical intimidation, as well as more subtle and possibly unintentional behaviour involving social ostracism and exclusion

Most jurisdictional occupational health and safety acts have been expanded to include harm to psychological well-being. Organizations should not tolerate any violent behaviour including aggression, harassment or threats of violence. Violent or aggressive behaviour hurts the mental health of everyone in the organization and creates a psychologically unsafe work environment filled with fear and anxiety.

Substance Use, Misuse and Abuse at Work – Substance use, misuse, abuse and coping strategies can have a significant impact on mental health at work. Addictions and mental health conditions are often coupled (called a concurrent disorder). However, it is often the addiction that first gets noticed, especially in the workplace.

Generally, substance use becomes a problem when an individual has lost control over their use and/or continues to use despite experiencing negative consequences. Employers should look for warning signs that indicate an employee may be struggling with substance abuse. Some signs of substance abuse are similar to those caused by increased stress, lack of sleep and physical or mental illness. Don’t assume that an employee has a substance abuse problem; however, ignoring warning signs will only make the problem worse if someone is indeed struggling.

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