

Psychological Health in the Workplace

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PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

in the Workplace

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The purpose of this Guideline is to support the Labour Program's mandate of promoting fair, safe, and productive workplaces. It is a brief introduction to the concept of psychological health and safety in the workplace. This Guideline provides relevant definitions, identifies risk factors for poor workplace psychological health, and provides practical strategies to improve workplace psychological health at all levels of an organization. It also directs readers to valuable resources regarding workplace psychological health.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Definitions	2
3. Risk Factors for Poor Workplace Psychological Health	3
4. Practical Strategies for Improving Psychological Health and Safety at Work: A Checklist	4
5. Legislative Requirements	6
6. Useful Resources	6
7. References	7

1. Introduction

Psychological health is a continuum that everyone experiences and is affected by. Having good psychological health is crucial to achieving overall health and well-being. The work environment is one of many settings that have an impact on psychological health. Given that an average Canadian worker spends 30–40 hours per week at work, it is important to maintain a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. The Mental Health Commission of Canada found that in any given week, 500,000 Canadians do not go to work due to a psychological health issue. Some causes of poor psychological health are directly attributable to factors in the workplace, including, for instance, harassment or excessive workload. A wide body of evidence suggests that poor workplace psychological health negatively affects performance at both the individual and organizational level. Among other outcomes, improving workplace psychological health can boost employee satisfaction, engagement, and productivity; it can also reduce health costs, employee turnover, and lost work time.

Below are some quick facts about psychological health and the workplace provided by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, as well as the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety:

- One in five Canadians experience a psychological health problem or illness in any given year.¹
- Psychological health problems and illnesses are the number one cause of disability in Canada.¹
- Psychological health problems cost the Canadian economy approximately \$51 billion per year, \$20 billion of which results from work-related causes.¹
- 47% of working Canadians consider their work to be the most stressful part of daily life.¹
- Psychological health problems affect mid-career workers the most, lowering the productivity of the Canadian workforce.¹
- Only 23% of Canadian workers would feel comfortable talking to their employer about a psychological health issue.²

It is clear that psychological health in the workplace impacts many Canadians. Certainly, the workplace should be a safe space for employees. Employers must, under the *Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations*, take all reasonable actions in creating and maintaining psychologically healthy and safe workplaces. Good communication and an understanding relationship are found to be two key elements of all problem solving. **This Guideline provides relevant definitions, identifies risk factors for poor workplace psychological health, and provides practical strategies for different levels of an organization to improve workplace psychological health.** The Guideline is meant to be a concise introduction to the topic of workplace psychological health. For further information on this subject, consult the resources listed in Section 6. Importantly, this Guideline is meant to supplement the more comprehensive *National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace* (CSA Z1003).

¹ Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2016). National Standard. Retrieved from <http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/national-standard>

² Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. (2016). Mental Health. Retrieved from <http://www.ccohs.ca/topics/wellness/mentalhealth/>

2. Definitions

Bad stress (Distress) Harmful stress that causes undue burden to the subjected employee, resulting in perceived or actual negative health effects.

Good stress (Eustress) Beneficial stress that makes an employee feel positively challenged in his/her work environment.

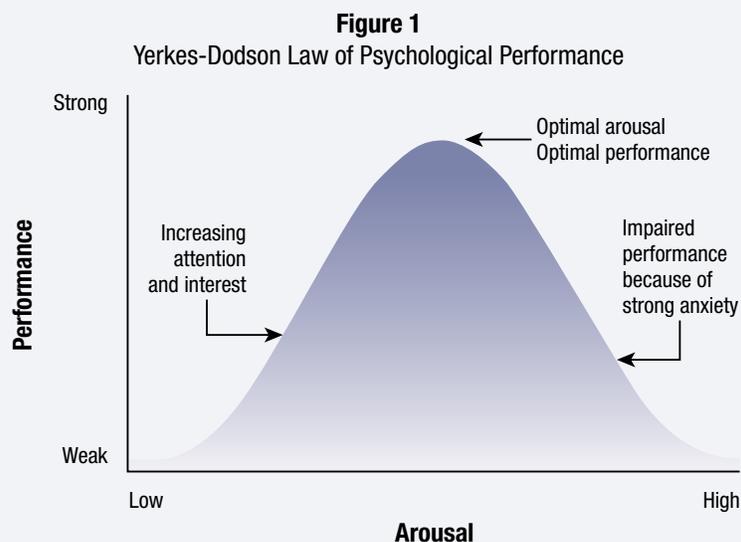
Psychological health A state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. (World Health Organization)

The capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections, and personal dignity. (Public Health Agency of Canada)

Psychologically healthy and safe workplace A workplace that promotes employees' psychological well-being and actively works to prevent harm to worker psychological health, including in negligent, reckless, or intentional ways. (Canadian Standards Association)

Did you know...

Too much stress and too little stimulation can both negatively impact psychological health. According to psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson, a bell-curve relationship can be established between arousal and performance (see Figure 1 below). Peak performance occurs when an individual experiences an optimal amount of stress, such that they feel motivated yet does not suffer from undue anxiety. Workplace performance operates by the same principle.



3. Risk Factors for Poor Workplace Psychological Health

No.	Risk Factor	Example
1	High Demand and/or Low Control	An employee is expected to absorb the work duties of two colleagues who have been let go due to organizational restructuring.
2	High Effort and/or Low Reward	An employee goes above and beyond to provide excellent customer service, but has never been recognized by the department for her contributions or work ethic.
3	Unfair Treatment	An executive promotes one employee over another due to favouritism only, not demonstrated experience or skills.
4	Excessive Workload	An intern is assigned many more projects than he can be reasonably expected to complete during his work term.
5	Unfulfilling Work	An employee is frequently assigned to photocopying duty by senior employees, thus rarely has an opportunity to work on cases related to his competencies.
6	Low Employee Engagement and/or Influence	A company never organizes employee engagement opportunities such as town halls or potlucks, leaving employees feeling as if they did not matter.
7	Little/No Professional Development Opportunities	An employee's requests to attend a conference that would significantly help her to carry out her work duties are denied ever year.
8	Poor Physical Work Environment	A broken air conditioner has not been repaired in over a year, causing employees in the office to become overheated and irritated during the summer months.
9	Physical Violence at Work	A client forcefully shoves his legal advisor against a wall after the verdict of his trial is read.
10	Abuse of Authority	A manager takes credit for a proposal that he did not author at a stakeholders' meeting and uses his power to discourage the employee from raising concerns.
11	Discrimination	A recruiter deliberately excludes applicants based on their status, e.g. visible minorities, race, gender, marital status, disability when forwarding potential candidates for a new position to human resources.
12	Sexual Harassment	A female employee receives unwanted comments of a sexual nature regarding her appearance from co-workers.

No.	Risk Factor	Example
13	Other Harassment	An employee follows a temporary worker around the office and repeatedly asks for personal information to which she has no right.
14	Lack of Work Accommodation/ Flexibility	An employee's request to take the day off due to a family emergency is denied by his boss.
15	Non-Work Related Illnesses and/or Conditions	An employee who suffered a motor vehicle accident in the past year experiences anxiety at work.

4. Practical Strategies for Improving Psychological Health and Safety at Work: A Checklist

Level of Intervention	Strategies
Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Be supportive of peers who are experiencing stress <input type="checkbox"/> Come to work with a positive attitude <input type="checkbox"/> Ask for help and offer help in situations of workplace abuse <input type="checkbox"/> Report any incidences of workplace abuse, violence, or harassment <input type="checkbox"/> Take rest during designated breaks and holidays <input type="checkbox"/> Achieve work-life balance <input type="checkbox"/> Achieve a healthy lifestyle by eating well and exercising
Manager or Supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Clearly outline employee responsibilities <input type="checkbox"/> Be able to recognize early indicators of workplace stress <input type="checkbox"/> Accommodate employees who need flexible work arrangements <input type="checkbox"/> Provide training on workplace psychological health <input type="checkbox"/> Recognize employee contributions <input type="checkbox"/> Be accessible and actively listen to employees' concerns <input type="checkbox"/> Respond effectively to employee concerns or conflicts <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage employee participation in team-building exercises <input type="checkbox"/> Lead by example for respectful workplace behaviours <input type="checkbox"/> Keep up to date on psychological health policies

Level of Intervention	Strategies
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Involve employees in the development of workplace psychological health programs <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a policy statement that supports workplace psychological health and related initiatives <input type="checkbox"/> Assess the current workplace culture <input type="checkbox"/> Connect employees with resources on psychological health <input type="checkbox"/> Financially support workplace psychological health programs <input type="checkbox"/> Establish peer support and/or counselling networks <input type="checkbox"/> Designate one individual per organization to be the psychological health coordinator, who sits on the Policy Health and Safety Committee, and where there is no policy committee, sits on the Work Place Health and Safety Committee <input type="checkbox"/> Establish an incident-reporting system <input type="checkbox"/> Establish a conflict resolution system <input type="checkbox"/> Recognize employee contributions <input type="checkbox"/> Organize stress-reduction activities at work <input type="checkbox"/> Keep up to date on workplace psychological health research <input type="checkbox"/> Share health promotion strategies with other organizations
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Promote the <i>National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (CSA Z1003)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Establish the protection of psychological health at work as an employee's right <input type="checkbox"/> Survey the state of workplace psychological health among public and private sector industries

5. Legislative Requirements

As per the Canadian Standard Association (CSA), CSA Z795-03 Coding of Work Injury or Disease Information, occupational disease is defined as a disease associated with exposure to a chemical, physical, biological, ergonomic, or psychosocial hazard in a work place.

The *Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations* (COHSR) Part XIX, “Hazard Prevention Program” (HPP) requires employers to identify specific hazards present in their work places – including all five (5) types of hazards – and to develop a plan to mitigate those hazards.

- Part XIX Section 19.1 requires employers to “develop, implement and monitor a program for the prevention of hazards” that includes the following components:
 - An implementation plan
 - A hazard identification and assessment methodology
 - Hazard identification and assessment
 - Preventative measures
 - Employee education
 - A program evaluation.

COHSR Part XX, “Violence Prevention in the Work Place”, requires employers to take measures in preventing violence in the workplace and in ensuring that employees are protected against workplace violence.

- Part XX Section 20.2 defines work place violence as “any action, conduct, threat or gesture of a person towards an employee in their work place that can reasonably be expected to cause harm, injury or illness to that employee.” This definition encompasses violence of a physical and/or psychological nature.
- Part XX Section 20.3 obliges employers “to dedicate sufficient attention, resources and time to address factors that contribute to work place violence including, but not limited to, bullying, teasing, and abusive and other aggressive behaviour and to prevent and protect against it”.

6. Useful Resources

- <http://www.ccohs.ca/healthyminds/>
- http://www.labour.gc.ca/eng/health_safety/mental_health/index.shtml
- <http://www.psmc.ca/eng/info/index>
- http://www.enwhp.org/fileadmin/downloads/8th_Initiative/MentalHealth_Broschuere_businesscase.pdf
- <http://www.mhccleadership.ca/the-business-case/>
- <http://healthycanadians.gc.ca/healthy-living-vie-saine/mental-health-sante-mentale/improving-mental-health-ameliorer-sante-mentale/workplace-travail-eng.php>

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