

What is psychological health and safety and why is it important?

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Psychological health comprises our ability to think, feel, and behave in a manner that enables us to perform effectively in our work environments, our personal lives, and in society at large. Psychological health problems occur on a spectrum, from common psychological difficulties such as from fatigue to severe psychological disorders.

Psychological safety is different - it deals with the risk of injury to psychological well-being. Improving psychological safety in a work setting involves taking precautions to avert injury or danger to employee psychological health that is within the influence and responsibility of an employer.

While psychological health and safety are deserving of equal protection it is important to note that, from a strategic perspective, ensuring safety in the sense of preventing psychological harm is a prerequisite to the promotion of health.

A psychologically healthy and safe workplace is one that promotes employees' psychological well-being and actively works to prevent harm to employee psychological health due to negligent, reckless, or intentional acts.

Why is psychological health and safety important?

There are many reasons employers should assess and address the psychological health and safety of their workplace:

- Current and emerging legal and regulatory mandates articulate employer responsibilities in this area
- Compelling financial incentives exist for employers to reduce costs and improve the bottom line
- Scientific and practical evidence exists that demonstrates the impact psychosocial factors have on employee well-being

The legal and business case

The health case

The argument for addressing psychological health and safety varies across sectors, regions, companies, and teams or branches within organizations. For many, the impetus is a desire to provide a great and safe place to work for all employees. For others, the strongest driver will be financial, including productivity, growth, and attraction of talent or investment. Still others will be motivated by the need to comply with organizational, legal, or regulatory obligations.

Psychosocial risks are the class of hazards in the work environment known to represent threats to the psychological health and safety of employees. Psychosocial risks are now recognized scientifically, and their reduction is seen in the context of the emerging legal duty to provide a psychologically safe workplace similar to the duty to provide a physically safe workplace.

Basic human rights and needs

The psychosocial factors also support certain basic human needs at work. Only those needs that can reasonably be addressed in the workplace are included. These basic needs can also be represented as rights that are protected in one way or another by various provincial and federal statutes.

Stated in this manner, the workplace can be seen to have a crucial role in at least protecting, and possibly promoting:

1. Dignity and respect for the person – the need for a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and inclusion
2. Security, integrity and autonomy of the person - the need to feel safe both physically and psychologically
3. Organizational justice - the need to feel that one belongs to a community in which there is respect for due process and fair procedures

To one degree or another, the psychosocial factors described in Guarding Minds all revolve around the protection and promotion of these three major clusters of needs and rights.

Employer liability

Some of the psychological distress observed in the workplace is brought in by employees, while some is created or at least aggravated in the course of the work experience. The concept of psychological distress must be distinguished from the concept of mental illness. For example, a person may experience harassment and suffer psychological distress as a consequence, but may not be diagnosed as mentally ill. Psychological distress, as reported by employees, includes sub-clinical depression and anxiety as well as severe demoralization, disengagement, and alienation.

Psychological injury should also be considered when assessing your organization's psychological health and safety. The defining aspect of psychological injury is that some person or persons are responsible for it in whole or in part. Psychological injury involves harm to a person that results from someone else's negligent, reckless, or intentional conduct.

When such conduct occurs in the workplace, the employer may face some liability for it, either directly or by association.

Guarding Minds helps employers maintain a psychologically safe workplace, which may assist in meeting evolving legal requirements.

[Considering the Costs](#) provides more information about the legal and business case for psychological health and safety.