

Framework for a Psychologically Healthy & Safe Workplace

Improving Organizational Results & Individual Psychological Wellbeing

One in five Canadians will personally experience a mental illness in their lifetime and estimates suggest that one in ten Canadians suffer a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year. Mental illness costs the Canadian economy in excess of \$14 billion annually through health care expenses and loss of productivity, with newer estimates reaching \$35 billion. Two thirds of mental health costs are borne by employers. It has been demonstrated that a corporate strategy for mental health can significantly buffer the potentially negative effects of mental illness in the workplace.

The workplace health focus has broadened from primarily physical health to include mental health as a result of an emerging duty of care in the legal system. The duty to provide a psychologically safe/healthy workplace requires a culture of 'zero tolerance for mentally injurious conduct and strong support for respectfulness and fairness.

Such an environment fosters innovation, creativity and ingenuity which are the sparks of growth for a University. Other benefits include reduced absenteeism, presenteeism, benefits costs, WCB claims and disability rates. These strategies also improve or increase employee engagement, sustainability, recruitment and health and safety.

Forty one percent of clients accessing HPaWS services in 2012 did so because of concerns related to mental illness, relatively unchanged from 43% in 2011 and up from 31% in 2010.

Psychologically Safe Workplace Context

A “**psychologically healthy**” workplace is one where every reasonable effort is made to **promote** mental health through awareness, resources and education.

A “**psychologically safe**” workplace is one where every reasonable effort is made to **prevent harm** to mental health through negligent, reckless or deliberate mentally injurious conduct.

Thirteen psychosocial risk factors known to directly impact psychological safety are;

1. **Psychological support:** an environment where psychological and mental health concerns are supported and responded to appropriately.
2. **Organizational culture:** the environment is characterized by trust, honesty, and fairness.
3. **Leadership and expectations:** effective leadership exists that enables staff members to know what to do, how their work contributes and if change is approaching
4. **Civility and respect:** staff and faculty are respectful, considerate and collegial with one another
5. **Psychological job fit:** a good fit between interpersonal/emotional competencies, job skills and the position
6. **Growth and development:** staff members receive encouragement and support in the development of interpersonal, emotional and job skills
7. **Recognition and reward:** acknowledgement and appreciation of staff members efforts in a fair and timely manner
8. **Involvement and influence:** staff members are included in discussions about how work is done, how decisions are made and their impact:
9. **Workload management:** tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully within the time available.
10. **Engagement:** staff members enjoy and feel connected to their work and are motivated to do a good job
11. **Balance:** recognition and support for balance between the demands of work, family and personal life
12. **Psychological protection:** an environment in which psychological safety is ensured
13. **Protection of physical safety:** appropriate action to protect employees' physical safety at work.

Why Is this significant?

Research has demonstrated that employees who consistently experience high stress and low satisfaction at work suffer consequences in terms of both personal health and capacity. Perceptions related to support and fairness, if negative, are known to compound the strain and the consequences.

Health Consequences

- 3 times the incidence of cardiac problems
- 3 times the incidence of back pain
- 5 times the incidence of certain types of cancer
- 2 – 3 times the incidence of mental illness
- 2 – 3 times the incidence of conflicts
- 2 – 3 times the incidence of infections
- 2 – 3 times the incidence of substance abuse
- 2 – 3 times the incidence of injuries

Capacity Consequences

- Reduced adaptability
- Reduced ability to cope with change
- Impaired learning
- Impaired memory
- Increased helplessness
- Increased aggression and conflict or passivity

Strategies:

Institutional: The institution has the responsibility to provide a policy/procedural framework and proactive practices that build a psychologically and physically safe environment, and to endorse and reward a culture of civility, respect and equity.

Departmental: The departments have a leadership role to further grow and embed the principles into the day to day business function.

Individual: Individuals have a personal responsibility to ensure that their behaviours do not negatively impact others in a negligent, reckless or intentional way. As ambassadors for the University, individuals model the culture through collegiality and civility.

The focus on a psychologically healthy/safe work and learning environment fits within the University's health promotion strategic plan. The strategy is proactive in nature, allowing for safe disclosure and accountability of work environments that are not functioning in a manner that safeguards the psychological health of our staff members.

Many aspects directly relate to management of human resources, and are also reflected in the Human Resource Services strategic initiatives.

Various tools and audits are available to assess work environments, and their strategic implementation can alter the productivity and engagement within the workplace. This proactive approach aids in preventing persons at risk from going off work and provides the tools to support leaders and work units in addressing behaviours/situations that are mentally injurious.

The goal of implementing a proactive work strategy is to both support individuals, departments and faculties in creating a respectful, healthy and engaging work and learning environment, and to allow for the acknowledgement of psychological risk factors where they exist and provide the tools to positively and effectively address any identified issues.

1. Psychological Support

- Psychological support is present in a work environment in which coworkers and supervisors are supportive of individuals' psychological and mental health concerns and respond appropriately as needed.
- Equally important are the individuals' perceptions and their awareness of organizational support
- When individuals perceive organizational support, it means they believe their organizational values their contributions, is committed to ensuring their psychological well-being and provides meaningful supports if this well-being is compromised.

Why is psychological support important? The more individuals feel they have psychological support the greater their job attachment, job commitment, job satisfaction, job involvement, work mood positivity, desire to remain with the organization, organizational citizenship behaviours and job performance.

The most important aspect of psychological support may be that it is especially helpful in protecting against traumatic stressors at work.

When adequate psychological support is present, individuals experiencing psychological distress will be more likely to seek and receive appropriate health care, will be better equipped to stay safe and productive at work while they recover and if an absence is required will be more likely to have a quicker and sustainable return to work.

When psychological support is lacking you see increased absenteeism, withdrawal behaviours, strain, conflict and turnover. Strain can then lead to greater issues such as fatigue, headaches, burnout and anxiety.

A workplace with good psychological support would be able to state that:

1. Our workplace offers services or benefits that adequately address individual psychological health
2. Our supervisors would say or do something helpful if an individual looked distressed while at work
3. Individuals feel supported in our workplace when they are dealing with personal or family issues
4. Our workplace supports individuals who are returning to work after time off due to a mental health condition
5. People in our workplace have a good understanding of the importance of individual mental health

2. Organizational Culture

- Is the degree to which a work culture is characterized by trust, honesty, and fairness.
- Organizational culture has been described in general as "a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a given group."
- These assumptions are a mix of values, beliefs, meaning and expectations that group members hold in common and that they use as behavioral problem-solving cues.

A workplace with a positive organizational culture would be able to state:

1. All people in our workplace are held accountable for their actions
2. People at work show sincere respect for others' ideas, values and beliefs.
3. Difficult situations at work are addressed effectively.
4. Individuals feel that they are part of a community at work
5. Individuals and management trust one another

3. Leadership and Expectations

Leadership is the foundation. Effective leadership increases individual morale, resiliency and trust and decreases individual frustration and conflict. Good leadership leads to individuals being 40% more likely to be in the highest category of job wellbeing, a 27% reduction in sick leave of individuals. A leader who demonstrates a commitment to maintaining their own physical and psychological health can influence the health of individuals as well as the health of the organization as a whole. Middle managers are at greater risk due to the fact that they must be leaders and be led simultaneously. This role conflict can lead to feelings of powerlessness and stress.

- It is evident when leadership is effective and there is support that helps individuals know what they need to do, how their work contributes to the organization, and whether there are impending changes
- Leadership styles impact psychosocial safety and health in different ways.
 - **Instrumental leadership** focuses primarily on producing outcomes, with little attention paid to the “big picture”, the psychosocial dynamics within the organization, and, unfortunately, the individual individuals.
 - **Transformational leaders** are seen as change agents who motivate their followers to do more than what is expected. They are concerned with long-term objectives and transmit vision, mission and purpose. They have charisma, give individualized consideration to their individuals, stimulate intellectual capabilities in others and inspire individuals.

A workplace with good leadership and clear expectations would be able to state that:

1. In their jobs, individuals know what they are expected to do
2. Leadership in our workforce is effective
3. Staff members are informed about important changes at work in a timely manner
4. Supervisors provide helpful feedback to individuals on their performance
5. Our organization provides clear, effective communication

4. Civility and Respect

- Is present in a work environment where individuals are respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another, as well as customers, clients and public.
- Civility and respect are based on showing esteem, care and consideration for others and acknowledging dignity.

When a workplace lacks civility and respect, this can lead to emotional exhaustion amongst staff. An uncivil and disrespectful workplace is associated with greater conflict and job withdrawal. A workplace that is uncivil and disrespectful also exposes organizations to the threat of more grievances. Probably the most extreme 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.

A workplace with good civility and respect would be able to say that:

1. People treat each other with respect and consideration in our workplace
2. Our workplace effectively handles “people problems” that exist between staff
3. People from all backgrounds are treated fairly in our workplace
4. Unnecessary conflict is kept to a minimum

5. Psychological Competencies and Requirements (i.e. Psychological Job Fit)

- Is present in a work environment where there is a good match between individuals' interpersonal and emotional competencies, their job skills and the position they hold.
- This means the individuals not only hold the technical expertise and knowledge for a particular position, but they also have the psychosocial skills and emotional intelligence to do the job.
- Emotional intelligence includes self-awareness, impulse control, zeal, persistence, self-motivation, empathy and social deftness.

Of note is the fact that a subjective job fit has been found to be more important than an objective job fit, meaning it is more important for individuals to feel they fit their job, rather than being assessed and matched to the job.

A workplace with good psychological competencies and requirements would be able to state that:

1. Hiring/promotion decisions consider the "people skills" necessary for specific positions
2. Our company hires people who fit well within the organization
3. Individuals have the social and emotional skills needed to do their jobs well
4. Supervisors believes that social skills are as valuable as technical skills
5. Positions make good use of individuals' personal strengths

6. Growth and Development

- Staff members receive encouragement and support in the development of their interpersonal, emotional and job skills.
- Such workplaces provide a range of internal and external opportunities for individuals to build their repertoire of competencies, which will not only help with their current jobs, but will also prepare them for possible future positions.

A workplace with good growth and development would be able to state that:

1. Individuals receive feedback at work that helps them grow and develop
2. Supervisors are open to individual ideas for taking on new opportunities and challenges
3. Individuals have opportunities to advance within their organization
4. Our company values individuals' ongoing growth and development
5. Individuals have the opportunity to develop their "people skills" at work

7. Recognition and Reward

- Is present in a work environment where there is appropriate acknowledgement and appreciation of individuals' efforts in a fair and timely manner.
- This includes appropriate and regular financial compensation as well as individual or team celebrations, recognition of years served, and/or milestones reached.
- An imbalance between effort and reward is a significant contributor to burnout and emotional distress

A workplace with good recognition and reward mechanisms would be able to state that:

1. Immediate supervisors demonstrate appreciation of individuals' work
2. Individuals are paid fairly for the work they do.
3. Our department appreciates extra effort made by individuals
4. Our organization celebrates our shared accomplishments
5. Our workplace values individuals' commitment and passion for their work

8. Involvement and Influence

- Staff members are included in discussions about how their work is done and how important decisions are made.
- Opportunities for involvement can relate to an individuals' specific job, the activities of a team or department, or issues involving the organization as a whole.

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

A workplace with good involvement and influence would be able to state that:

1. Individuals are able to talk to their immediate supervisors
2. Individuals have some control over how they organize their work
3. Individual opinions and suggestions are considered at work
4. Individuals are informed of important changes that may impact how their work is done
5. Our workplace encourages input from all staff on important decisions related to their work

9. Workload

- Is present if tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully within the time available. This is the risk factor that many working Canadians describe as being the biggest workplace stressors (i.e. having too much to do and not enough time to do it)
- There is a unique relationship between job demands, intellectual demands and job satisfaction.
- Research has demonstrated that it is not just the amount of work that makes a difference but also the extent to which individuals have the resources (time, equipment, support) to do the work well.

If any system is subject to excess load without respite it will break; this is as true for people as it is for equipment. Directed job demands reduce job satisfaction, whereas intellectual demands or decision making latitude increase job satisfaction. Even when there are high demands, if individuals also have high decision making ability they will be able to thrive. Having high decision making latitude allows for positive coping behaviours to be learned and experienced.

Increased demands without opportunities for control result in physical, psychological and emotional fatigue and increase stress and strain. This has a negative influence on performance. Emotionally fatigued individuals also have a diminished sense of personal accomplishment and an increased sense of inadequacy.

A workplace with good workload management would be able to state that:

1. The amount of work individuals are expected to do is reasonable for their positions

2. Individuals can talk to their supervisor about the amount of work they have to do
3. Individuals have the equipment and resources needed to do their jobs well
4. Individuals' work is free from unnecessary interruptions and disruptions
5. Individuals have control over prioritizing tasks and responsibilities when facing multiple demands

10. Engagement

- Staff members enjoy and feel connected to their work, and feel motivated to do their job well.
- Individual engagement can be physical, emotional and/or cognitive.
- Cognitively engaged individuals devote more attention to their work and are absorbed into their job. Whatever the source, engaged individuals feel connected to their work because they can relate to, and are committed to, the overall successes 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.

A workplace with good engagement would be able to state that:

1. Individuals enjoy their work
2. Individuals are willing to give extra effort at work if needed
3. Individuals describe work as an important part of who they are
4. Individuals are committed to the success of our organization
5. Individuals are proud of the work they do

11. Balance

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 life roles: e.g. as professors, parents, partners etc. This complexity is enriching and allows fulfillment of individual strengths and responsibilities, but conflicting responsibilities can lead to role conflict or overload.

One source of imbalance is conflict between work and family roles. When employers recognize that work life balance is important, they realize the need for greater workplace flexibility. This flexibility helps minimize conflict by allowing staff to accomplish the tasks necessary in their daily lives. Balance reduces stress and the possibility that home issues will spill over into work and vice versa. Balance allows staff to maintain concentration, confidence, responsibility and sense of control at work.

A workplace with good balance would be able to state that:

1. Our workplace encourages individuals to take their entitled breaks (e.g. lunchtime, vacation time, earned days off, illness leave, parental leave)
2. Individuals are able to reasonably balance the demands of work and personal life
3. Our workplace promotes work-life balance
4. Individuals can talk to their supervisors when they are having trouble maintaining work-life balance
5. Individuals have energy left at the end of the end of most workdays for their personal life

12. Psychological Protection

- Is present in a work environment where individuals' psychological safety is ensured.
- Workplace psychological safety is demonstrated when workers 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 individuals while taking all reasonable steps to minimize threats to individual mental health

A workplace with good psychological protection would be able to state that:

1. Our workplace is committed to minimizing unnecessary stress at work
2. Immediate supervisors care about individuals' emotional well-being
3. Our organization makes efforts to prevent harm to individuals from harassment, discrimination or violence
4. Individuals would describe our workplace as being psychologically healthy
5. Our workplace deals effectively with situations that may threaten or harm individuals (e.g. harassment, discrimination, violence)

13. Protection of Physical Safety

- Staff have the equipment needed to reduce the impact of physical risks on psychological health (e.g., proper lighting, noise reduction, panic alarms, good ventilation)
- Management recognizes the impact of incidents and workplace-related injuries on employee psychological and physical health
- Timely and effective supports are available following a critical incident (e.g., defusing, debriefing, Employee and Family Assistance Programs, psychological treatment)
- The work environment does not negatively impact psychological health (e.g., crowding, isolation, noise, lighting)
- Safety programs and policies are reviewed regularly (with particular attention to their impact on employee psychological health)

Individuals who perceive their workplace as protective of physical safety will feel more secure and engaged at work. Research has shown that when employees have higher levels of confidence in safety protection at work, they experience lower rates of psychological distress and mental health problems. The sense of physical safety protection is enhanced by: adequate training with regard to physical safety, trust that the employer minimizes physical hazards, confidence that the employer responds quickly and effectively to safety incidents, and the opportunity to have meaningful input into workplace policies and practices.

A workplace with good protocols for protection of physical safety would be able to state that:

1. Management takes appropriate action to protect employees' physical safety at work.
2. Our workplace offers sufficient training to help protect employees' physical safety at work (e.g., emergency preparedness, safe lifting, and violence prevention).
3. When accidents occur or risks are identified, our workplace responds effectively.
4. Employees have the equipment and tools they need to do their job in a physically safe way (e.g., protective clothing, adequate lighting, and ergonomic seating).
5. Our workplace responds appropriately when workers raise concerns about physical safety.