

Psychosocial hazards

We all know that we have the right to expect to go to work and not come physically injured: no broken bones or other physical injuries.

It is now accepted in every State and Territory that this also applies to mental health injuries.

Schools are great at identifying a physical hazards such as a broken light, and fixing it to minimise or eliminate the risk of injury caused by lack of light.

Identifying psychosocial hazards is much the same, but it is not yet a process all people are comfortable with.

What is a mental health injury?

Before we look at hazards, what is a mental health injury or what is psychological harm?

Psychological harm may include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleep disorders.

Stress is not of itself an injury. However, if that stress is prolonged or repeated or is too high this could cause psychological harm.

Stress can be an early warning of harm to come.

You do not need to know what mental health injury may or will result when looking at a risk.

It's good enough if you believe that the hazard could cause psychological harm then the hazard needs to be looked at and if necessary, made safe.

If ultimately it is decided that it was not a risk, so be it – better safe than damaged.

Risks vs hazards

We talk about both 'risks' and 'hazards' when we talk about work health and safety.

A hazard is something that has the potential to cause harm (e.g. a loose tile or an excessive workload).

A risk is the likelihood of a hazard causing harm. Risk management involves thinking about what

could happen if someone is exposed to a hazard, and how likely it is to happen.

What is the definition of a Psychosocial hazard?

SafeWork Australia have defined a psychosocial hazard as '**anything that could cause psychological harm** (e.g. harm someone's mental health)'.

It is important to focus on that phrase. It is very broad deliberately: '**Anything that could cause psychological harm**'. Take out the word 'psychological', and no one would question it.

The Department has a statutory **duty** to eliminate **psychosocial risks or**, if that is not reasonably practicable, **minimise them so far as is reasonably practical**.

What do you need to remember when looking at risks?

When looking at a potential hazard it is important to consider the impact carefully.

If the impact of the hazard would be severe or clearly significant it is relatively easy to identify the risk.

However, something minor could also pose a serious risk if it happens repeatedly or over a prolonged period of time.

Is the exposure to the hazard prolonged, frequent, and/or severe? This question needs to be considered when assessing risk.

It is also important to consider the potential hazard in the context of the actual workers you have now. If you have a worker with one leg, or a mental health condition or psychological vulnerability, the risk may be different for them than for other workers and they are entitled to be safe too.

A worker's ability is entirely different to their entitlement to be safe at work.

Psychosocial hazards

What are examples of psychosocial hazards?

It's useful to break psychosocial hazards into two broad categories, as this can help you to work out what the actual hazard is.

Those that arise from or in relation to:

1. **Job characteristics** including work environment, equipment, workload and work management
2. **Harmful behaviors** such as violence and aggression, harassment (including gendered harassment), conflict, bullying, and poor relationships and interactions

Hazards can combine and interact and it is important to consider all hazards when looking at a situation of concern. A physical risk may also link to a psychosocial risk.

For example, you are getting an existing path upgraded. Of course, you will consider physical safety, and to prevent people tripping on the works, you will provide an alternative route. This is good, but what if the path is to the T3 area, and the alternative turns a 1 minute run from Principal's office to go to support in an emergency into a 5 minute run? There might be no issue, but this still has to be considered. What if the T3 teacher is dealing with a dangerous student and this work is going to delay necessary support getting to them in time? Then you have a physical risk not directly related to the works and a psychological risk for the teacher, both of which could have been overlooked.

There is a bonus for management that does this properly, involving staff: your staff feel supported as they know that you are considering their safety. That will help them to achieve. It will reduce injuries and time off work. And staff are often more likely than a manager to identify all the hazards in some situations, which is why the Act requires that consultation and risk assessments involve the relevant workers.

Don't just look at the direct risk: consider its impacts more widely.

SafeWork Australia considers all of these common psychosocial hazards:

- Job demands
- Low job control
- Poor support
- Lack of role clarity
- Poor organisational change management
- Inadequate reward and recognition
- Poor organisational justice
- Remote or isolated work
- Poor physical environment
- Violence and aggression
- Bullying
- Harassment, including sexual and gender-based harassment, and
- Conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions

Lawyers who deal with work health and safety issues also listed these as common psychosocial hazards:

- Repeated exposure to traumatic events or material through staff requirements related to mandatory reporting and other safeguarding regimes
- Being the subject or a participant in a safeguarding investigation
- Exposure to challenging interactions with parents (from which safety orders may be implemented)
- Dealing with difficult student behaviour where staff safety may be at risk



Psychosocial hazards

Your AEU support team also deal with these common psychosocial hazards:

- Lack of time to focus on teaching and learning
- Quantity of work
- Unfair decision making processes
- Unfair distribution of work and students
- Insufficient support with violent students

If you are exposed to psychosocial hazards or incidents in your workplace then you should approach your Health and Safety Representative (HSR) and ask for support.

If you don't have an HSR yet?

You should always ensure you report all hazards and incidents on DECYP's Safety Reporting System (the SRS). Please see the **AEU Incidents, hazards, and how to report them** fact sheet for further information about how to report.

You can also kick off the process to elect an HSR at work. HSRs have lots of power to enforce health and safety at work under WHS laws.

Contact your AEU rep or organiser for more information or if you need help getting started.

