Integrating Psychological Health and Safety into your OHS Program

2022

WorkplaceNL

Health | Safety | Compensation

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Integrating Psychological Health and Safety into your OHS Program

A psychologically healthy and safe workplace is one that promotes workers' psychological well-being and actively works to prevent harm to worker psychological health, including in negligent, reckless or intentional ways.

Creating a workplace that is psychologically healthy and safe is key to protecting the mental health of workers. Psychologically healthy workers are more productive and have significantly lower absenteeism and disability rates.

To achieve this, workplaces need a process to proactively identify, assess and control psychological health and safety hazards. It is good practice to include psychological health and safety in all aspects of your health and safety management system and operations.
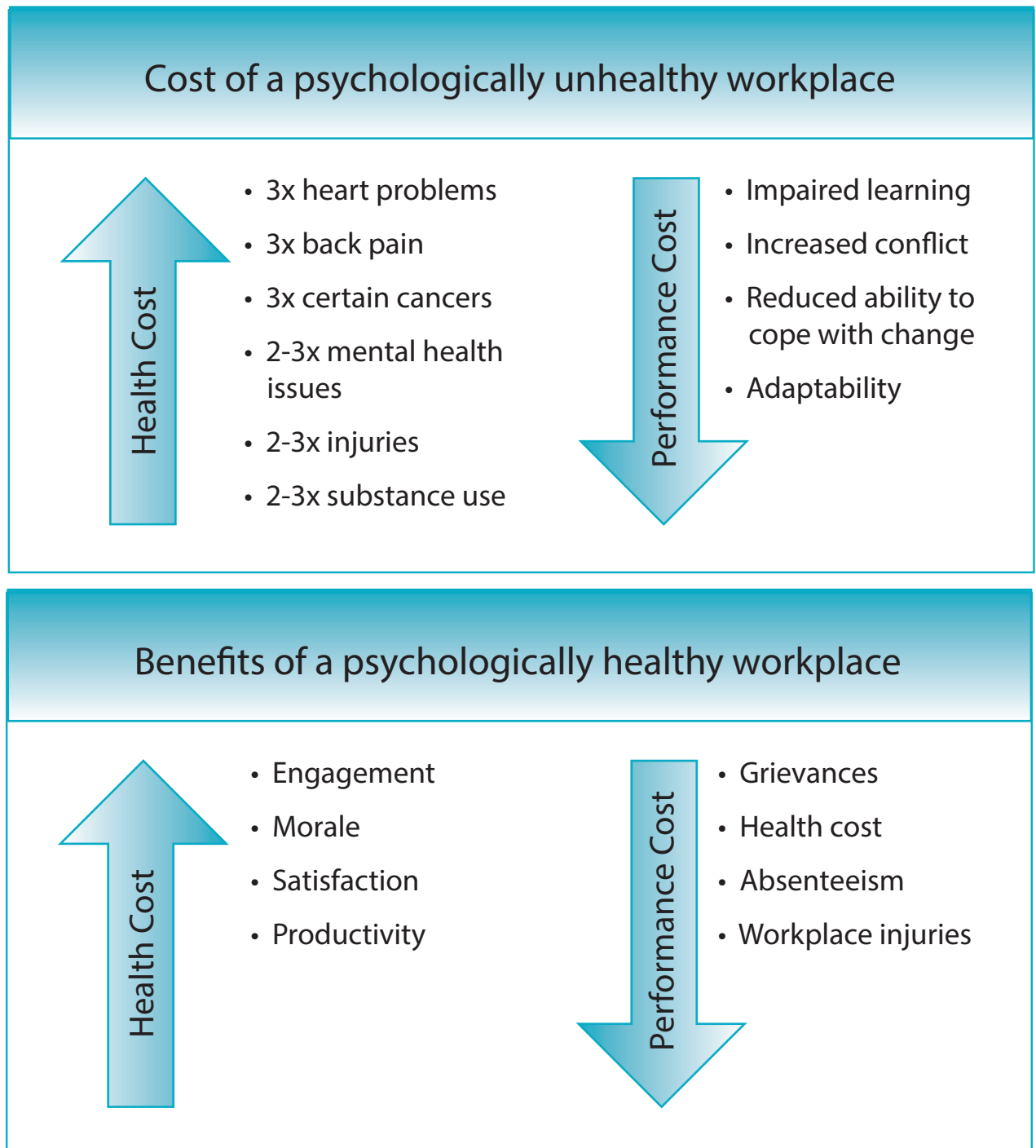
Goals of this Guide

This guide has been developed to:

- Help employers improve PHS in the workplace.

- Prevent and reduce psychological injury to workers.

- Enhance the safety culture of the workplace.

- Identify ways to include PHS in the workplace OHS program.

- Help identify and control the psychosocial hazards present in the workplace.

Mental Health of Workers

- Management of People
- Organization of Work
- Quality of Relationships

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, 500,000 Canadians are not able to work due to psychological problems every week. The financial loss to workplaces due to mental health problems is estimated to be $20 billion annually.

A psychologically unsafe workplace has a significant cost to both workers and the business.

Evidence shows that creating a psychologically healthy and safe workplace, including promotion of good mental health and prevention of psychological harm, will create a positive return on investment.

By identifying and addressing psychological hazards (i.e. bullying, stress) in the workplace you will improve engagement and well-being of workers.

Cost of a psychologically unhealthy workplace

Health Cost ↑

- 3x heart problems
- 3x back pain
- 3x certain cancers
- 2-3x mental health issues
- 2-3x injuries
- 2-3x substance use

Performance Cost ↓

- Impaired learning
- Increased conflict
- Reduced ability to cope with change
- Adaptability

Benefits of a psychologically healthy workplace

Health Cost ↑

- Engagement
- Morale
- Satisfaction
- Productivity

Performance Cost ↓

- Grievances
- Health cost
- Absenteeism
- Workplace injuries

Resource: https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/

Employers and workers have responsibilities for OHS. These responsibilities can apply to PHS in the workplace as well.

Employer Responsibilities

Employers must:

- Protect the health, safety and well-being of workers.
- Provide proper written or oral instruction to workers regarding precautions to be taken for their protection [OHS Act., s. 5(b)].
- Have system to identify and control hazards.

Worker Responsibilities

Workers must:

- Follow safe work practices and procedures.
- Participate in training and risk assessments.

The National Standard of Canada – Creating a cultural shift

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (the Standard) was released in 2013. It is a voluntary set of guidelines, tools and resources focused on promoting workers' psychological health and preventing psychological harm due to workplace factors.

The Standard identifies 13 psychosocial factors that contribute to workplace PHS. It is tailored to the needs and existing resources of the workplace. The standard can be downloaded for free at:

https://www.csagroup.org/article/cancsa-z1003-13-bnq-9700-803-2013-r2018/

A psychologically healthy and safe workplace helps keep workers safe, engaged, and productive.

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Implementing a psychological health and safety (PHS) plan into your OHS program
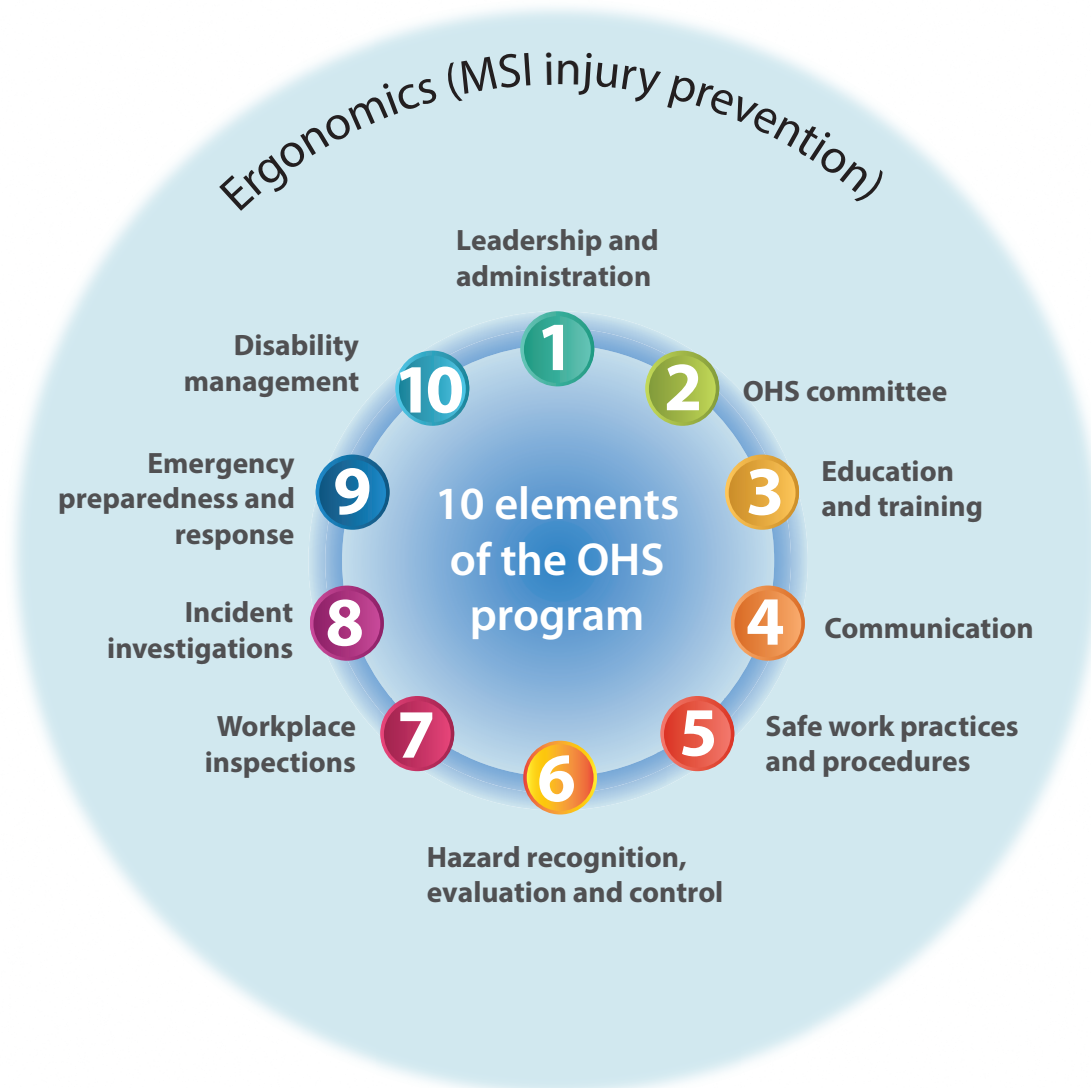
An OHS program is a written plan of action designed to prevent injuries and occupational diseases. In Newfoundland and Labrador, workplaces with 10 or more workers are required to have a written OHS program. The goal is to eliminate or reduce injury and illness caused by unsafe work or unhealthy working conditions. Having a management system that identifies and manages PHS hazards, as well as all other types of hazards, is an important part of an OHS program.

Reducing the risk of psychological harm and supporting mental health requires intention, planning, action and commitment of the employer. A process to identify the real and potential psychological hazards should be developed, implemented, and maintained.

WorkplaceNL promotes an OHS program made up of ten elements.

Ergonomics (MSI injury prevention)

10 elements of the OHS program

1 Leadership and administration

2 OHS committee

3 Education and training

4 Communication

5 Safe work practices and procedures

6 Hazard recognition, evaluation and control

7 Workplace inspections

8 Incident investigations

9 Emergency preparedness and response

10 Disability management

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to shaping a positive and supportive experience for all workers. What works for your organization depends on the type of work, the size of the workplace, current practices and available resources. Employers can make significant improvements to the culture of the workplace and the mental health of workers by making PHS a priority. Even small steps can make a big difference. Here are some ways to consider the psychological well-being of workers based on the 10 elements of the OHS program.

1. Leadership and Administration

Leaders are the drivers of workplace culture and play a critical role in promoting health and safety in the workplace. They are in the strongest position to positively influence the working environment, management practices and experiences of workers. Strong leadership and commitment to health and safety is the foundation of a strong health and safety culture.

Commitment must start at the top and be encouraged at all levels. Leaders must demonstrate a visible, active commitment to a psychologically healthy and safe workplace and lead by example by being a positive role model for mental health.

Engaging workers in all aspects of health and safety, including promotion of good mental health, can inspire commitment and positively impact culture.

Leaders must understand the need to support the mental health and well-being of the workers and the wide range of benefits of a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. They need to understand why it is important and establish clear expectations.

To support and promote PHS, leaders can:

☐ Speak openly about mental health.

☐ Provide workers with access to information and support for mental health.

☐ Treat mental health as you would physical health – integrate good health and safety management into all business decisions, policies and procedures.

☐ Train and support managers in mental health awareness.

☐ Allocate necessary resources for change.

☐ Promote work-life balance to support employee's mental health.

☐ Develop and promote a PHS policy statement.

☐ Create and actively promote a respectful workplace program.

☐ Create a harassment prevention plan according to NL OHS Regulations.

☐ Reduce stigma through education and communication.

☐ Plan work so that it does not cause unnecessary stress and excessive workloads.

☐ Create a supportive environment for workers who may be experiencing poor mental health, mental illness or returning after an injury.

☐ Support and consult the OHS Committee in promoting PHS in the workplace.

2. OHS Committee

An OHS Committee's most important role is to promote health and safety in the workplace.

OHS Committees can also promote PHS, help identify psychological hazards and make recommendations to the employer about how to address them.

To support and promote PHS in the workplace, OHS Committees can:

- ☐ Become familiar with factors that impact workers' mental health.
- ☐ Lead by example in contributing to a respectful workplace, free from bullying and harassment.
- ☐ Identify psychological hazards and make recommendations to the employer for corrective action.
- ☐ Identify and support a process for workers to bring forward concerns about PHS.
- ☐ Promote and support mental health awareness to help reduce stigma.
- ☐ Include PHS as a standing item on the meeting agenda.
- ☐ Support the employer in promoting a psychologically healthy and safe workplace.

3. Education and Training

Proper instruction in all aspects of health and safety provides workers with the knowledge and skills to stay safe in the workplace. Education and training are an important part of an OHS program and have a positive impact on the OHS practices of workers. Employers who want to see an improvement in the health and safety of their workers need to invest in effective education and training.

Educating workers about mental health is an important part of creating a healthy and safe workplace. Workers need to know both the physical and psychological hazards at work that may harm them. Investing in employee's interpersonal, emotional and job skills adds to their growth and development, improves productivity and enhances the safety culture.

To support and promote PHS in the workplace, provide training in:

☐ A respectful workplace program.

☐ The Harassment Prevention Plan, required by the NL OHS Regulations.

☐ Mental health awareness, including recognizing early signs and symptoms of mental health harm or injuries.

☐ Trauma response where trauma is a possible hazard.

☐ Mental health awareness during lunch and learns, wellness sessions or designated days.

☐ Mental health first aid proram.

☐ Peer support.

4. Communication

Benefits of focusing on communication and collaboration in the workplace include:

- Workers know is expected of them.
- Tasks are executed correctly.
- Priorities are clear.
- Miscommunication and errors are reduced.
- Employee potential is optimized.
- Challenges are identified and resolved earlier.

Putting your PHS plan into action can only work if everyone understands what is being done and why it matters to them and the organization. Communication strategies should be planned for all levels of the organization in consultation with workers. Effective communication is continuous, is not a one-time message, and is repeated and reinforced throughout all aspects of the business. Consider various ways for communicating, that is suitable to all workers.

Suggestions for communicating PHS to workers include:

☐ Raise awareness of how each employee can contribute to positive change by talking about PHS in the workplace.

☐ Provide opportunities for employee feedback.

☐ Consider an open-door policy to encourage open communication, feedback and discussion.

☐ Keep employee discussions focused on workplace practices and processes that are part of their day-to-day experience in the workplace, not on individual health issues.

5. Safe Work Practices and Procedures

Safe work practices and procedures help ensure that workers know the safest way to do their job. They are developed based on risk assessments and should include input and suggestions from workers. PHS should be a consideration in all safe work practices and procedures.

When developing and updating safe work practices and procedures:

☐ Develop safe work practices or procedures specific to PHS (for example, stress management, helping a coworker in distress, respectful workplace, trauma, etc.).

☐ Make sure the steps or the process outlined in the safe work practices or procedures do not contribute to or introduce a psychological hazard.

☐ Consider and include the controls for psychological hazards as identified in the risk assessment. Consult with the OHS Committee, Representatives or Designate, as well as the workers who are completing the task.

☐ Monitor the use and effectiveness of safe work practices and procedures. Review them on a regular basis, and make improvements as necessary.

6. Hazard Recognition, Evaluation and Control

Psychological hazards are elements of the work environment, management practices or organizational practices that pose a risk to an employee's mental health and well-being. Some common psychological hazards include exposure to harassment, violence or traumatic events. Long term exposure to less severe psychological hazards, such as increasing job demands or role ambiguity, can also impact psychological health.

When psychological hazards are not addressed it can negatively impact team work, productivity, absenteeism, worker turnover and client service. In addition, psychological hazards that are not controlled can lead to an increase in workplace incidents and injuries.

A process for hazard recognition, evaluation and control is a key part of any OHS program. If you already have a process for addressing hazards in the workplace, this can be used to address psychological hazards. The purpose of a psychological hazard assessment is to identify preventative and protective measures at an organizational level, not an individual worker level.

Assessing psychological hazards should include consideration of thirteen psychosocial risk factors identified in the Standard.

1. Psychological Support

A work environment where coworkers and supervisors are supportive of workers' psychological and mental health concerns and respond appropriately as needed.

2. Workplace Culture

A work environment characterized by trust, honesty and fairness.

3. Clear Leadership and Expectations

A work environment where there is effective leadership and support that helps workers know what they need to do, how their work contributes and when change is coming.

4. Civility and Respect

A work environment where workers are respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another, as well as with customers, clients and the public.

5. Psychological Competencies and Requirements

A work environment where there is a good fit between workers' interpersonal and emotional skills and the requirements of their job.

6. Growth and Development

A work environment where workers receive encouragement and support in the development of their interpersonal, emotional and job skills.

7. Recognition and Reward

A work environment where there is acknowledgement and appreciation of workers' efforts in a fair and timely manner.

8. Involvement and Influence

A work environment where workers are included in discussions about how their work is done and how important decisions are made.

9. Workload Management

A work environment where tasks and responsibilities can be accomplished successfully within the time available.

10. Engagement

A work environment where workers feel connected to their work and are motivated to do their job well.

11. Balance

A work environment supportive of the need for balance between the demands of work, family and personal life.

12. Psychological Protection

A work environment where workers' psychological safety is ensured.

13. Protection of Physical Safety

A work environment where management takes appropriate action to protect the physical safety of workers.

Once the risk of an injury has been identified, it must be evaluated to determine how much risk workers face as part of the work activity.

This is an important step to determine the priority given to controls to eliminate it from the workplace or reduce risk to workers.

As you work through the process, consultation with staff and supervisors is vital. Communicating the findings of the assessment to all workers is important to make sure that everyone is made aware of the actions taken to solve issues. Assigning responsibility to make sure that the controls are implemented as discussed is also key to the success.

When conducting a PHS risk assessment consider the following:

☐ Recognize psychological hazards may not be as easy to identify as risks to our physical health and safety.

☐ Assess the results of employee feedback or surveys, harassment or bullying complaints, absenteeism data, grievances, and feedback from the OHS Committee may assist in the hazard identification process.

☐ Determine who might be harmed by the psychosocial risk factor, the likelihood of harm and the severity of harm.

☐ Develop and implement a plan to address the risks, with controls designed to eliminate, or minimize the risk to as low as reasonably practical.

☐ Monitor and review the PHS plan to make sure the implemented controls are effective.

7. Workplace Inspections

Inspections help identify hazards that could make the workplace unsafe. They provide opportunities to see if current controls are working and offer a chance to communicate with workers on how they view the workplace and what hazards they see. Involving workers in the health and safety of the workplace increases engagement and helps workers feel valued.

By listening and observing, worker concerns or complaints about PHS during workplace inspections can also be noted. For example, you can ask workers about the stressors they experience at work. The process should be confidential whenever possible. If there are areas of concern, these items should be reported to the supervisor or delegated person.

 The goal of a workplace inspection is not to fully assess if psychological hazards are present or to make a diagnosis about a person's state of mental health. It is to observe and talk to workers to note if there is an area of potential concern where further assessment or discussion may be necessary.

To incorporate PHS into your workplace inspections:

☐ Update your checklist to include psychological hazards.

☐ Ask workers for their input while performing the inspection to help identify any areas of concern.

☐ Follow up on any psychological hazards that were previously identified.

☐ Include areas that may be at risk in relation to psychological safety (such as areas where workers are working alone, providing client care, handling cash, working under high stress conditions, poor lighting, etc.).

8. Incident Investigations

Almost all workplaces have a process for incident reporting and investigation. The purpose of incident reporting and investigation is to find the root cause of the incident and make sure it doesn't happen again. Incidents that have the potential to impact or harm a worker's psychological health should be investigated to identify preventive and corrective actions.

Actions to investigate incidents related to PHS:

☐ Revise the current investigation process to include PHS incidents such as work-related psychological injuries, traumatic events and fatalities.

☐ Develop an Incident Report Form for incidents related to psychological injuries, traumatic events or fatalities.

☐ Establish:

   ◦ Roles and responsibilities for all parties involved in the investigation, including reporting.

   ◦ Investigation procedures for workplace violence and bullying as a part of the harassment prevention plan.

   ◦ Processes to maintain employee confidentiality and privacy.

9. Emergency Response

It is important to have emergency response plans, training and resources in place to deal with psychological emergencies just as you do for other emergencies, such as fire or medical incidents.

To prepare for psychological emergencies or emergencies that can affect the PHS of the workplace:

☐ Identify the possible emergencies, such as mental health crisis or a traumatic event.

☐ Consider training your staff in Mental Health First Aid and post names on your bulletin board along with other first aiders.

☐ Prepare a laminated card for managers and supervisors that includes a list of who to call: internal contacts, mental health first aiders, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providers (if applicable) and crisis resources.

Your workplace may deal with high risk situations which over time have an impact on workers. Occupations such as social work, health care workers, first responders and correctional officers are all examples of occupations where there is risk for compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and post-traumatic stress. Make sure proper measures are in place to support workers in these roles.

10. Return to Work

A return to work program is an important aspect of being prepared to support a worker to recover and successfully return to work. A return to work program should be respectful, individualized and inclusive of the worker.

Sometimes mental health problems, related or unrelated to an injury, may lead to an extended absence from work. In most cases, return to work is quite common. Returning to work can often be an important part of an individual's recovery from a mental health problem. The workplace can play an important role in ensuring a successful return.

To support and promote psychological health and safety in the workplace, a return to work program should:

☐ Plan for an employee's return to work as soon as suitable after they leave the workplace by offering safe, suitable and modified work if required.

☐ Assign an appropriate person who is responsible for coordinating the return to work plan. This may include communication with health professionals, worker representatives, direct supervisors and WorkplaceNL.

☐ Train supervisors on the importance of being respectful, supporting, positive and empathetic at all stages of the RTW plan. As well, supervisors should be aware of the importance of following up when the worker returns and problem solving during the process.

☐ Focus on the needs and functions of the individual worker that are:
   ◦ Flexible.
   ◦ Adaptable, including the ability to be graduated.
   ◦ Supported by all parties involved in the RTW plan.
   ◦ Developed with involvement from the employee.
   ◦ Communicated to all workers.

Remember that despite the best effort of all parties, workers experiencing a mental health problem may have greater challenges in returning to work within a reasonable period of time in a reasonable capacity, due to the nature of the injury, illness or medical condition. Repeated return to work attempts may be unsuccessful. In this case, there may need to be further consultation with all parties regarding future options and support.

Resources

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety

https://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/assembling_pieces/

Healthy Minds @ Work

Canadian Mental Health Association

https://mentalhealthweek.ca/toolkit/

Guarding Minds @ Work

A Workplace Guide to Psychological Health & Safety

Government of Canada

Mental Health in the Workplace

Mental Health Commission of Canada

https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/implementing-standard#implementation

National Standard of Canada Psychological health and safety in the workplace — Prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation

https://www.csagroup.org/documents/codes-and-standards/publications/CAN_CSA-Z1003-13_BNQ_9700-803_2013_EN.pdf

Workplace Strategies for Mental Health

https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/psychological-health-and-safety/psychological-health-and-safety-management-system

https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/20-questions-for-leaders-about-workplace-psychological-health-and-safety

https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/psychological-health-and-safety/policy-recommendations

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