



**Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission**



# Identifying psychosocial hazards and managing risks

**How to identify psychosocial hazards and manage risks to prevent harm and injury at work.**

Employers are responsible for developing and implementing strategies to prevent mental health injuries at work.

One way to do this is by proactively identifying and managing psychosocial risks and hazards.

## Identifying psychosocial hazards

Our mental health, relationships and work environment affect our behaviour and wellbeing.

We use the term psychosocial to refer to the combination of psychological and social factors that impact our mental health at work.

Psychosocial hazards are things or situations that can cause stress, harm or injury to your mental and physical health.

A hazard is anything that poses a risk to the health and safety of people in the workplace.

Some common psychosocial hazards include:

- Poor workplace relationships, such as interactions that may be harmful like social exclusion or rudeness.
- Poor support, such as not getting practical support, information, training, equipment or resources to do your job.
- Low role clarity, such as confusion over tasks, responsibilities or expectations at work.
- High and low job demands, such as sustained or repeated high or low physical, mental or emotional effort required to do your job.
- Low job control, such as having little control over how and when work is done.
- Poor organisational change management, such as a poorly communicated and managed restructure.
- Poor organisational justice, such as treating people unfairly or applying policies inconsistently at work.
- Low recognition and reward, such as low levels of acknowledgment for employee contributions, achievements and efforts.
- Remote and isolated work, such as working in locations where it is hard to access resources or support.
- Poor environmental conditions, such as the physical workplace having extreme temperatures, high noise levels or poor air quality.
- Violence and aggression, such as employees being exposed to physical and verbal abuse from customers or clients.
- Exposure to traumatic events or content, such as being exposed to distressing materials or incidents. For example, a police officer attending a homicide scene or a lawyer reviewing case material from a child exploitation case.

## Your role as an employee

If you see or experience a psychosocial hazard or concern, you can discuss it with your:

- manager
- senior leader
- health and safety representative
- union representative or union
- people and culture, human resources, health, safety and wellbeing team or equivalent
- occupational health and safety committee or equivalent.

You can also:

- talk to someone you trust within or outside your organisation about it
- report it using your organisation's incident reporting process
- [contact WorkSafe](#) if you have a question, want to raise an anonymous concern or to request a visit.

## Your role as a health and safety representative (HSR)

Like all other employees, HSRs can help identify psychosocial hazards but are not responsible for managing them.

As an HSR your role is to:

- be available for employees to raise or report psychosocial hazards
- maintain confidentiality and protect the privacy of employees who raise issues with you
- let your employer know about any issues right away so they can fix them
- consult with your employer and work group about psychosocial hazards and prevention.

## Managing psychosocial hazards as a manager or senior leader

Managers and senior leaders have more influence and responsibility in preventing, identifying and managing psychosocial hazards.

As a manager or senior leader, you should use a risk management approach to address psychosocial hazards that could cause harm or injury.

Risk management involves thinking about what could happen and how likely it is to happen.

At each step of the risk management process, you must [consult employees and your health and safety representatives](#).

## Tips and resources you can use

For practical guidance and best practice advice on managing health and safety risks you can check out the:

- [WorkWell Toolkit, WorkSafe Victoria](#)
- [Model Code of Practice: How to manage work health and safety risks, Safe Work Australia.](#)

## Managing job demands

Risk control measures for job demands should focus on good work design, including job design. Good work design considers the organisation's needs, context and work environment.

Good work design can transform the workplace to benefit everyone. Good work design can eliminate and minimise hazards and risks at the source.

You can use these resources to help you understand and design good and safe work:

- [Good work design](#), WorkSafe Australia
- [Safe design: safety basics](#), WorkSafe Victoria

You can use these resources to help you understand, reduce and manage job demands:

- [WorkWell Toolkit: High and low job demands](#), WorkSafe Victoria.

## Managing negative behaviours

Negative behaviours can include a range of poor communication and behaviour issues that are inappropriate. They can have an immediate and long-term negative impact on those involved, including those who witness them.

Negative behaviours can include:

- hostility or aggressiveness
- bullying
- work-related violence, including gendered violence.

In Victoria, employers are obligated to take reasonable steps to eliminate certain negative behaviours under the [Equal Opportunity Act 2010](#). These include:

## Discrimination

Treating someone unfavourably because of a protected characteristic such as race, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion or other personal attributes. This can occur in various forms and can be direct or indirect.

## Sexual harassment

Unwanted or unwelcome sexual behaviour that makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated. This includes verbal, non-verbal and physical conduct of a sexual nature.

## Victimisation

Treating someone unfairly because they have made a complaint, intend to make a complaint, or have assisted someone else in making a complaint about discrimination or harassment.

You can use these resources to help you understand, prevent and manage negative behaviours:

- [Managing negative behaviours](#), VPSC resources to help manage bullying, harassment or conflict in the workplace
- [Preventing and responding to work-related gendered violence including sexual harassment](#), WorkSafe Victoria
- [Workplace bullying](#), WorkSafe Victoria.

## Managing trauma

Trauma is an event that someone experiences as harmful or life-threatening.

It can negatively affect mental, physical, emotional, social, or spiritual well-being.

Trauma is usually a response to an incident or event, but it can also come from:

- Cumulative trauma – trauma that repeatedly occurs over time can have a cumulative impact.
- Vicarious trauma – trauma that can occur after exposure to someone else's trauma.

These resources can help you understand, reduce and manage trauma:

- [Cumulative trauma framework](#), Public Sector Interdepartmental Committee and the FBG Group
- [Vicarious Trauma Prevention and Awareness Toolkit](#), Community Public Sector Union
- [WorkWell toolkit: exposure to traumatic events](#), WorkSafe Victoria
- [Vicarious Trauma Institute resources](#).

## Risk management process

Employers and senior leaders can follow this risk management process or use their own to help manage risks associated with psychosocial hazards.

The key steps are:

- Step 1: Identify hazards
- Step 2: Assess risks
- Step 3: Control the risks
- Step 4: Monitor, review and improve.

### Step 1: Identify hazards

Identifying psychosocial hazards early will help your team and organisation maintain a mentally healthy work environment.

You can proactively identify and monitor psychosocial hazards by analysing the data and information your organisation collects. You should regularly monitor and review your annual work plans so you can make adjustments as needed.

For example, you can collect and analyse information from:

- employee opinion surveys including the People matter survey
- employees who share concerns or report issues
- stakeholder and customer feedback
- an increase or decrease in personal and sick leave days taken, absenteeism and employee turnover
- feedback from your occupational health and safety team or representatives
- exit interviews and surveys
- health and safety incident and inspection reports

- feedback from your occupational health and safety team or representatives
- major organisational or workforce changes such as a restructure.

## Step 2: Assess the risks

Once you've identified the hazards, you need to assess the risk based on:

- the source of the risk
- who is likely to be exposed to the risk
- if hazards are occurring in isolation or together
- how likely it is people will be exposed to the risk, including the duration and frequency of exposure
- the seriousness of the risk, including its severity and potential impact on people's mental and physical health.

Psychosocial hazards often interact and compound each other. This increases the overall risk of harm or injury.

For example, if an employee is exposed to an aggressive customer and is dealing with a high workload and has limited support, the combined stress can increase their risk of harm or injury.

Once you've assessed the hazards' likelihood, frequency and severity, categorise the risks as low, medium or high.

For example:

- Low risks are unlikely to happen and have low impact.
- High risks are likely to happen and will have a moderate to high impact.

You can learn more about [preventing mental injuries](#) in the WorkWell toolkit.

Next, you'll need to prioritise the risks to focus on the most significant issues first.

## Step 3: Control the risks

As an employer, you must take reasonable steps to eliminate or reduce occupational health and safety (OHS) risks.

You can use the [hierarchy of control](#) method to help you fulfill your OHS responsibilities.

The hierarchy of control is a step-by-step approach to eliminating or reducing risks. It ranks risk control measures from the highest level of protection (removing the hazard) to the lowest and least reliable (providing support tools or resources).

Example of the hierarchy of control measures for work-related stress:

1. Elimination – try to prevent or remove the hazard or stressor completely. For example, using [Good work design](#) principles to protect workers from harm to their health and safety.
2. Substitution – if you can't eliminate the hazard, replace it with something less stressful. For example, rotate tasks among employees to prevent burnout.
3. Isolation – separate the employee from the source of stress. For example, re-assign them to another project or team.
4. Engineering controls – make physical changes to the work environment to reduce stress. For example, offer stand-up desks or improve the office layout to reduce noise and distractions.
5. Administrative controls – change work methods, procedures or how work is done to minimise stress. For example, offer flexible work arrangements and access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAP).
6. Personal protective equipment (PPE) – provide safety resources or equipment to minimise risks. PPE helps manage stress caused by exposure to physical hazards that may cause concern or distress. For example, providing protective equipment to an employee responding to an emergency.

## **Step 4: Monitor, review and improve**

Regularly monitor and review the effectiveness of your risk control measures. You can do this through:

- follow-up surveys
- feedback sessions
- monitoring key indicators like absenteeism and employee turnover.

Adjust your risk controls and strategies to improve based on ongoing assessment and feedback.