

# Psychosocial Safety and Well-being Guide



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## PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY AND WELL-BEING GUIDE

### 1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this guide is to increase understanding of psychosocial safety in the workplace, outline the risk management approach to psychosocial hazards, as well as promote positive well-being amongst UQ staff.

### 2. SCOPE

This guide applies to all University of Queensland workplaces including, remote and regional satellite campuses.

### 3. OBLIGATIONS

Persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) have a primary duty of care to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the psychological health of workers, in the same way that their physical health must be taken care of.

In addition, all workers have a responsibility for workplace health and safety, specifically ensuring reasonable care for the health and safety of themselves and others.

### 4. PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

#### 4.1 What is psychosocial safety?

Psychosocial safety is the absence of harm and/or threat to mental health and well-being that an employee might experience in the workplace.

#### 4.2 What is well-being?

Well-being is a combination of a person's physical, mental, emotional and social health factors. A state of well-being is more than the absence of illness; it is a state of experiencing positive emotions, feeling engaged and a sense of thriving in everyday life.

#### 4.3 What is mental health?

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with normal stressors of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to the community.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.4 What defines a psychologically healthy and safe workplace?

A psychologically healthy and safe workplace is defined as one that promotes employees' mental health and well-being, protects mental health by reducing work-related risk factors and actively prevents and addresses mental illness and injury from occurring.

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<sup>1</sup> [World Health Organisation](#)

The attributes of a psychologically healthy workplace include<sup>2</sup>:

- Open and honest leadership
- Fair and respectful culture
- Inclusion and influence
- Good job design
- Prioritising mental health
- Work/life balance
- Employee development
- Workload management
- Mental health support

## 4.5 What are the risks of a psychologically unsafe workplace?

The risk to individuals and to university workplaces from a psychological injury could include:

- Poor individual health and/or reduced functioning
- Increased staff absenteeism
- Potential high staff turnover
- Low morale and motivation
- Lost productivity
- Inability to deliver objectives
- Increased Workers' Compensation claims

## 5. WHAT CAN CAUSE PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURIES?

In general, undertaking work activities are accepted to be good for a person's psychological and physical well-being. Good work is good for well-being. However, there are aspects of the workplace that, if not appropriately managed, have the potential to negatively affect an individual's mental health, sense of well-being, physical health, as well as the effectiveness of an organization to fulfil its operational requirements.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.headsup.org.au](http://www.headsup.org.au): Nine attributes of a healthy workplace

Workplace factors that may contribute to psychological injuries include:

- elements of the work environment;
- management practices; or
- the way that work is organised or designed.

The psychological well-being of a workforce can be enhanced by minimising the impact of known workplace risk factors and maximising the impact of potential protective factors.

A **risk factor** is a condition, behaviour or attribute that may increase the risk of injury or illness.

A **protective factor** is a characteristic associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce a risk factor's impact.

In order to create a more psychologically healthy workplace, strategies are needed at the individual, team and organisational level to eliminate or reduce risk factors and promote protective factors.

## 6. WHAT IS A PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARD?

In relation to work, a psychosocial hazard is a workplace factor, such as an adverse workplace interaction or condition of work, that compromises a worker's health and well-being.

If addressed appropriately these factors have the potential to positively influence employees' mental health, psychological safety and engagement. If these factors are not managed appropriately they have the potential to lead to psychological and/or physical injury.

Psychosocial hazards can include<sup>3</sup>:

- high and low job demands
- low job control
- poor support

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<sup>3</sup> Worksafe QLD: [Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work Code of Practice 2022](#)

- poor organisational change management
- poor organisational justice
- low recognition and reward
- low role clarity or role conflict
- poor workplace relationships
- remote and isolated work
- traumatic events
- violence and aggression
- bullying
- harassment, including sexual harassment

## 6.1 Psychosocial Risk Management

Psychosocial risks can be managed in the same systematic way as other workplace health and safety risks. A risk management approach includes:

1. Understanding the key psychosocial hazards
2. Undertaking a risk management process (identify, prioritise and control)
3. Undertake meaningful consultation with staff
4. Ensure appropriate resources and processed to control risks
5. Maintain, monitor and review control measures.

## 6.2 Understanding Psychosocial Risks and Controls

|                                                                                     | Descriptor                                                                                                                                                                                        | Example Controls                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <b>High Job Demands</b><br>Examples: Mentally and emotionally demanding work, time pressures, challenging work hours (e.g. shift work), physically demanding roles, poor environmental conditions | Design the work to ensure manageable workloads with achievable performance standards.<br>Regular team meetings to discuss projected workload, monitor work flow.<br>Ensure work tasks and cases are matched with the worker's capability level.<br>Address anticipated absences.<br>Allocate appropriate resources.<br>Develop personal work plans. |

|                                                                                     | Descriptor                                                                                                                                                                                      | Example Controls                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <p>Give realistic deadlines and workloads.</p> <p>Review positions descriptions to ensure up to date.</p> <p>Rotate staff through mentally/emotionally demanding tasks.</p> <p>Ensure staff are taking allocated breaks and using annual leave entitlements.</p> <p>Regular individual meetings incorporating wellbeing checks and provide avenues for support/professional supervision.</p> <p>Ensure physical workplace complies with relevant safety requirements.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|    | <b>Low Job Demands</b><br><br>Examples: Too little to do, or highly repetitive or monotonous tasks                                                                                              | <p>Design work tasks and activities so workers aren't overexposed to monotonous work.</p> <p>Implement processes to allow opportunities for job rotation to enable skill development and job variation.</p> <p>Engage in career planning conversations with workers to identify work that provides them with a sense of meaning/purpose.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|  | <b>Low Job Control</b><br><br>Examples: Where workers have little say in how they do their work, take breaks, where workers are not involved in decisions that affect them or clients.          | <p>Engage staff and allow them to participate in making decisions about the way they do their work.</p> <p>Provide opportunity for skills development.</p> <p>Recognition and development processes can be an opportunity for staff to have input.</p> <p>Consult with staff on changes, performance indicators and resources.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|  | <b>Poor Workplace Relationships, including interpersonal conflict</b><br><br>Examples: Conflict about responsibilities, relationship conflict, and/or lack of work and interpersonal boundaries | <p>Identify and minimise work design issues that may negatively affect team communication.</p> <p>Ensure all staff aware of the Code of Conduct, organisational values, and expected behaviour.</p> <p>Ensure managers have skills to identify and manage conflict and ensure managers know where to get support (e.g. HR).</p> <p>Be aware of systems and policies in place and how to access.</p> <p>Monitor the work environment for potential disagreements- manage accordingly and swiftly.</p> <p>Provide sufficient opportunities for workers to get to know each other and build positive relationships.</p> <p>Ensure all staff have up to date position description and are aware of expectations and individual/team responsibilities.</p> |
|  | <b>Poor Support</b><br><br>Examples: Organisational, supervisors, peers, lack of timely feedback, support and guidance from supervisors and / or support from co –                              | <p>Clear reporting lines to ensure staff know to whom they are accountable and where they can go to for help.</p> <p>Ensure supervisors are trained in people management and leadership skills.</p> <p>Supportive leadership skills- open door, accessible, genuine.</p> <p>Regular team and 1:1 meetings (weekly).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

|                                                                                     | Descriptor                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Example Controls                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
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|                                                                                     | workers, including work tasks                                                                                                                                                                                           | Design work to emphasise team collaboration.<br><br>Structure reward and recognition programs around team achievements.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|    | <b>Poor Change Management</b><br><br>Examples: Poorly managed changes to organisational structure, procedures, roles; lack of involvement in decisions, poor communication                                              | Ensure appropriate framework for change management.<br><br>Robust consultation and engagement with staff.<br><br>Provide reasons and background to the change.<br><br>Keep staff informed.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|    | <b>Low Role Clarity or Role Conflict</b><br><br>Examples: Staff unclear about job's objectives, accountabilities, expectations and reporting lines                                                                      | Provide up to date position descriptions, review regularly.<br><br>Provide up to date organisational charts.<br><br>Clear induction processes for new staff (organisational and work area).<br><br>Develop personal work plans.<br><br>Discuss roles and work plans at team meetings and clarify any role conflict.<br><br>Establish clear expectations for the team and ensure these are clearly understood.                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|  | <b>Poor Organisational Justice</b><br><br>Examples: Inconsistent application of policies and procedures, unfairness or bias in decisions about allocation of resources and work, or poor management of underperformance | Foster a culture of transparency, openness, respect and equity.<br><br>Implement appropriate performance monitoring and management.<br><br>Ensure there is a transparent grievance and appeal process.<br><br>Ensure workplace rules are applied fairly and consistently.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|  | <b>Low Reward and Recognition</b><br><br>Examples: A lack of positive feedback, an imbalance in recognition of efforts, lack of opportunity for skills development                                                      | Implement a regular review process with staff which ensures staff are provided with positive and constructive feedback.<br><br>Regular 1:1 meetings and team meetings where contributions are expressed and valued.<br><br>Understand that people like to be acknowledged in different ways, e.g. privately, within the team, with incentives (time, financial etc.).<br><br>Consider implementing a job rotation or mentoring system to enrich staff interest and motivation to broaden skill set.<br><br>Ensure workers are being provided with feedback that is timely, specific and practical. |
|  | <b>Remote or Isolated Work</b><br><br>Examples: Remote work locations or work where there are few or no other                                                                                                           | Review workplace layouts to ensure access to safety and security systems.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |



|                                                                                     | Descriptor                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Example Controls                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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|                                                                                     | people around, where access to help from others may be difficult                                                                                                                                                                               | <p>Ensure accommodation is lockable, with safe entry and exit, meets all relevant structural and stability requirements, and has all fittings, appliances and equipment in good condition.</p> <p>Check in and check out procedures (UQ Safe Zone).</p> <p>Ensure workers are trained in, and carry out, situational risk assessments of the safety of their work location before commencing duties.</p> <p>Maintain regular contact and communication.</p> <p>Ensure communication systems and emergency procedures are developed and in place.</p> <p>Involve the remote area in consultation, decision making and provide access to resources, training and activities available to non-remote staff.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|    | <b>Traumatic Events</b><br><br>Examples: Investigating, witnessing or being exposed to traumatic events, e.g. witnessing or investigating serious injuries, abuse, neglect, serious incidents.                                                 | <p>Rotate roles or activities to ensure adequate breaks from roles likely to involve exposure to traumatic events.</p> <p>Implement file flagging processes on potentially distressing files or cases to avoid inadvertent exposure to distressing content.</p> <p>Follow procedures to respond to critical incidents including practical support for workers, counselling/professional support services, appropriate information about available resources.</p> <p>Where repeated high-risk exposure to distressing events is an unavoidable part of the role, consider additional risk controls including reducing workload to decrease exposure, increasing breaks and recovery time, or implementing periodic health assessments.</p> <p>Ensure managers are provided with adequate information, training and instruction in how to respond and manage reported exposure of workers, including how to identify early signs of distress or psychological injury and how to offer support if required.</p> |
|  | <b>Violence and Aggression</b><br><br>An incident where a person is abused, threatened or assaulted at work or while carrying out work, e.g biting, kicking, throwing objects, verbal abuse and threats, intimidation or aggressive behaviour. | <p>Working in pairs or teams where possible.</p> <p>Ensure physical environment and security are appropriate and well-designed.</p> <p>Establish robust work systems and procedures, e.g working in isolation, opening and closing, monitoring of remote or isolated staff.</p> <p>File flagging, early warning systems.</p> <p>Training in violence prevention/de-escalation techniques.</p> <p>Zero tolerance of aggression towards workers.</p> <p>See more information in the <a href="#">Preventing and responding to work-related violence guide</a>.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|  | <b>Bullying</b><br><br>Repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards                                                                                                                                                                    | <p>Design work to minimise psychosocial hazards that increase the risk of work-related bullying.</p> <p>Communicate in-person and online behavioural expectations to all workers and clients via training and other methods,</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

|                                                                                     | Descriptor                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Example Controls                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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|                                                                                     | a worker or group of workers. A pattern of behaviour must demonstrate a persistent nature, e.g. repeated incidents of belittling or humiliating comments, subject to malicious gossip, being verbally denigrated or threatened.                                                                                                                                        | including role modelling of appropriate behaviours by leaders and line managers.<br><br>See more information in the <a href="#">Preventing and responding to workplace bullying guide</a> .<br><br>UQ specific resources can be found <a href="#">here</a> .                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|    | <b>Harassment, including sexual harassment</b><br><br>Harassment in relation to personal characteristics such as age, disability, race, sex, relationship status, sexual orientations, gender identity or intersex status.<br><br>Sexual harassment is any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that is done to either offend, humiliate or intimidate another person. | Ensure physical environment and security are appropriate and well-designed, e.g. privacy, security, good visibility of work areas and avoids restrictive movement.<br><br>Responsible service of alcohol policies at work and work events.<br><br>Regularly monitoring and reviewing work systems and practices, to evaluate effectiveness in minimising the likelihood of harassment occurring.<br><br>Standards of behaviour and procedures for what a worker should do if they experience or see harassment at work or work-related events or from third parties to the workplace (including sexual harassment).<br><br>See more information in the <a href="#">Preventing workplace sexual harassment guide</a> . |
|  | <b>Poor environmental conditions</b><br><br>Examples: Exposure to hazardous work environments that create a stress response, such as poor air quality, high or nuisance noise levels, extreme temperatures.                                                                                                                                                            | Design and maintain plant, equipment and work environments to eliminate or minimise risks associated with stressful environmental hazards.<br><br>Ensure appropriate PPE and resources are provided to workers.<br><br>Ensure workers are trained in work systems to manage risk associated with stressful environmental hazards.<br><br>Ensure systems are in place for workers to report the presence of poor environment conditions that may create a stress response.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |

## 7. LEVELS OF INTERVENTION FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS

Strategies to address psychosocial hazards in the workplace can be addressed at the primary, secondary or tertiary levels of intervention.

**Primary interventions** are targeted at the organisational level, with an emphasis on the need to identify and manage causes and practices within the organisation that may be contributing negatively to worker well-being.

**Secondary interventions** are primarily aimed at improving worker strengths and capability, including education and training, as well as the provision of resources to assist with individuals with stress management, resilience, interpersonal skills and conflict management.

**Tertiary interventions** are supportive steps implemented after an injury or illness has occurred, including facilitating appropriate rehabilitation or return to work programs, provision of an Employee Assistance Program etc.

The goal of any organisation should be to manage the risk at the source, rather than rely only on interventions to assist workers after an injury has occurred.

## 8. JOB DESIGN

Job design is an example of a primary intervention to address psychosocial hazards. In the context of psychosocial hazards, job design is the process of determining the job tasks, roles, duties and processes to best promote employee psychological health and well-being. This includes the provision of:

- adequate resources to undertake the duties,
- consideration of work pace and timing,
- flexible working hours where possible,
- appropriate skill utilisation and task variety,
- adequate support and feedback,
- decision making input or control whenever practical,
- manageable emotional demands,
- opportunities for learning, training and career development.

## 9. PROMOTE A POSITIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE

Workplace culture is the collective view of employees. Workplace culture can shape how people interact and engage with others, how things get done and what is acceptable behaviour.

Where there is a negative workplace culture employees may be at greater risk of exposure to psychosocial hazards. A toxic or hostile work environment will likely result in poor workplace relationships, increased worker apathy, stress and burnout, as well as increased absenteeism, attrition and reduced organisational outcomes.

In contrast, a positive workplace culture can boost employee wellness and help serve as a protective factor against psychosocial risk.

Applying psychosocial risk management measures can help to shape a positive workplace culture. Establishing a culture of caring and trust through supportive leadership is also essential.

### 9.1 Leadership competencies for healthy workplaces<sup>4</sup>

Leaders play a vital role in the psychological health and safety of workers and creating a positive workplace culture. Leaders with a 'people focus' can help protect and buffer workers against psychological injury and enhance individual well-being at work. Where possible, supervisors and managers should develop and utilise the following competencies to support healthy workplace environments.

#### 9.1.1 Communication and collaboration

To support the growth and development of workers clear exchange of information is required. Leaders need to be transparent in decision making, change management, feedback and what a worker needs to do their job successfully.

Leaders should encourage inclusion by getting to know their teams and inviting contributions from all team members. Importantly, regular and timely feedback and recognition is a significant contributor to a worker's well-being in the workplace. In addition, encouraging collaborative efforts will also help to support a worker's success and well-being, as well as a positive workplace culture.

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<sup>4</sup> National standard of Canada for psychological health and safety in the workplace

### 9.1.2 Positive role-modelling

Leaders need to act in ways to support the values and behavioural expectations in the workplace. By serving as a facilitator of 'psychologically safe' interactions a leader can reinforce expectations and trust within the workplace. Additionally, role-modelling appropriate psychological self-care, including self-regulation and work-life balance, will support workers to enhance their own psychological well-being.

### 9.1.3 Problem solving and conflict management

Leaders should demonstrate clear, fair and consistent approaches to resolving conflict. Facilitating effective discussion, consultation and seeking worker contributions to problem solving is also a sign of healthy leadership.

### 9.1.4 Safety and Security

Security and safety involves supporting a safe environment through proactive, prompt, and effective responses to any threats to psychological or physical safety. Along with supporting physical safety, appropriate environmental conditions and security, leaders should ensure team cultures that encourage trust and connection with others. A psychologically safe work environment limits 'interpersonal risk', where a worker feels encouraged to speak up around sensitive issues or share novel ideas without concern of negative judgement or consequences.

### 9.1.5 Fairness and Integrity

Effective leadership involves engaging workers in an honest, sincere and ethical manner. Fairness and integrity involves leadership that is transparent, and consistent, where there is fairness and equity in decision-making.

## 9.2 Promote well-being for the individual

In addition to addressing psychological risks at the organisational level, as part of an integrated approach to psychological safety and well-being in the workplace, consideration of how to enhance individual well-being is also important. While not a substitute for addressing psychological hazards at the source (i.e. addressing

organisational factors) secondary interventions aimed at enhancing individual strengths and capabilities should be considered.

This can be achieved by supporting staff to participate in programs or initiatives designed to build effective skills in coping resources, managing stress, self-awareness, effective communication skills and resilience.

Promotion of, supporting and role-modelling flexibility and work-life balance suitable to the individual's personal circumstances can not only improve an individual's level of well-being, it can also provide numerous benefits to the organisation, including employee retention, engagement and morale.

In addition, building organisational capacity through training and education of staff in recognising and supporting mental health concerns can assist addressing individual well-being concerns at the early intervention stage.

Ensuring workers have access to and awareness of support services available to them, such as the [Employee Assistance Program](#) is also an important aspect of an integrated approach to psychological safety and well-being in the workplace.

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