Psychological health and safety checklist

- Tips for leading a mentally healthy workplace

Introduction

Due to the nature of work in social sector organisations, our people experience a range of levels of stress and everyday working pressures.

Reasonable levels of stress and pressure are part of working life and can help motivate us, personally and collectively, to achieve great results.

Protecting mental health does not eliminate stress entirely and it is important to recognise the difference between 'healthy pressures' and the sustained stressors that can lead to people feeling out of their depth and struggling to cope with work or life outside work.

We hope you find this guide useful to understand the work-related factors that can positively or negatively impact psychosocial health and safety at work. It includes ways that leaders can get their heads, hearts and hands around how to actively identify and manage psychosocial hazards and risks.

Many social sector organisations are already providing great levels of care and support to their staff and this guide is designed to support leaders at all levels of awareness and experience, so please take what is relevant and useful for you.

What are Psychosocial Hazards?

Psychosocial hazards at work are aspects of work and situations that may cause a stress response and in turn, can lead to psychological or physical harm.

(Ref. SafeWork NSW. Code of Practice for Managing psychosocial hazards at work May 2021)

1. Job demands
2. Job control
3. Poor support
4. Lack of role clarity
5. Poor organisational change management
6. Inadequate reward and recognition
7. Poor organisational justice
8. Traumatic events or material
9. Remote or isolated work
10. Poor physical environment
11. Violence and aggression
12. Bullying
13. Harassment including sexual harassment
14. Conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions

1. Job Demands (High or Low)

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ There is little or no downtime, and the workload is constant and demanding ☐ Sustained or intense periods of physical or emotional effort which are unreasonable e.g. when workers lack the training, resources, skills, authority or experience to reasonably or successfully do tasks ☐ Sustained low levels of physical, mental or emotional effort ☐ Long, irregular or unpredictable work hours, inflexible work schedules ☐ High levels of time pressure and unrealistic deadlines ☐ Responding to distressing or emotional situations (e.g. dealing with confrontation) ☐ Managing other people's emotions (e.g. de-escalating an aggressive situation, undertaking disciplinary processes or assisting people who are distressed) ☐ Being asked to provide support or empathy out of your comfort zone, e.g. conveying bad news, providing advocacy or counselling ☐ Repeatedly or rapidly switching tasks so it is difficult to concentrate and complete tasks (e.g. being frequently interrupted or having to do numerous things at once)	☐ **Empower workers** in situations where they face high emotional demands (e.g. allow discretion in decision-making where appropriate to avoid client aggression or distress) ☐ Have **regular conversations** about work expectations, workloads, deadlines and instructions to ensure job demands are understood and can be managed ☐ **Regularly review** and update work policies and practices to ensure they reflect the current environment and demands ☐ Set **achievable performance targets**, with consideration for the worker's experience and skills ☐ **Provide training** if required to ensure workers have the skills to meet work demands ☐ If emotional demands or exposure to distressing events, as is sometimes the case in the social sector, ensure these are **captured in the position description** and applicants are informed at the pre-selection stage (e.g. at interview) of the demanding nature of the role. ☐ Give staff **permission to speak up** when they feel a deadline is unrealistic ☐ Monitor and take action to **address long hours** e.g. by providing flexible work hours and arrangements as well as considering time in lieu or leave without pay ☐ Check in with team members in roles where there is a trend of absences, ill-health or complaints to **identify if the job design or work pattern needs to change** ☐ Provide **quiet spaces** for people doing mentally demanding work

2. Job Control

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ No autonomy or low control over aspects of the work including how or when the job is done	☐ Create an environment where staff have **more say** over their duties, promotional prospects and safety
☐ Little participation in decision-making, lack of control over workload and pace	☐ **Encourage open dialogue** with staff over resourcing and requirements
☐ Limited ability to adapt ways of working to changing or new situations	☐ **Ask your people** what they need to do their job well
☐ Prescriptive processes which do not allow staff to apply their skills and judgement	☐ Provide opportunities for staff and volunteers to use a **range of their skills**
☐ Levels of autonomy not matched to staff or volunteers' abilities (under-use of skills)	☐ Ensure that everyone is **properly trained** for their job
☐ Lack of variety or short work cycles	

3. Poor Support

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Lack of encouragement, mentoring and resources provided by the organisation, management and colleagues ☐ Lack of clarity or understanding about what to do and what is expected or needed ☐ Tasks where staff and volunteers have inadequate support from managers including practical assistance and emotional support ☐ Insufficient support from colleagues ☐ Inadequate training, tools and resources for a task ☐ No clear individual development plans ☐ Unclear direction from manager leading to a staff member's performance not meeting expectations	☐ Have **regular one-one-one discussions** with staff to understand what they need to do well in their job ☐ Show compassion, listen and **be accessible** when needed ☐ **Provide constructive feedback** to improve work performance ☐ **Provide opportunities** to develop professionally ☐ **Role model** the values and behaviours that are expected ☐ Have **systems for escalating** problems to get manager support ☐ Ensure staff know **where and who to ask for support** ☐ **Build a culture** that values respect and cooperation ☐ Hold **regular team meeting**s to discuss challenges and potential support needs after emotionally challenging tasks

4. Lack of role clarity

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Uncertainty and frequent changes ☐ Conflicting roles ☐ Conflict between individuals, teams or levels ☐ Uncertainty around boundaries for a role ☐ Inefficiencies or duplication of effort ☐ Uncertainty on how to manage the responsibilities of others ☐ Ambiguous responsibilities and expectations	☐ **Assist people to understand** how their role links to the organisation's vision and objectives ☐ Ensure a **clear understanding about roles, responsibilities and expectations** when someone joins or leaves the team ☐ Have **regular check-ins** with team members, particularly during times of role changes ☐ **Encourage people to ask** if they don't understand an aspect of their role or responsibilities ☐ **Keep people informed** if potential changes may impact what, how and when they do their job ☐ Have **clear reporting lines** ☐ **Change or clarify** any tasks or processes that often cause conflict, confusion or mistakes ☐ **Be transparent** about how and why tasks are assigned to specific people

5. Poor organisational change management

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Insufficient consultation, support, information or training during organisational change (big or small) ☐ Lack of, or poor, communication to workers during period of change ☐ Lack of consideration of new hazards or performance impact when planning for, and implementing, change ☐ Overly-complex reporting lines or processes ☐ Insufficient planning for changes to tasks or structure, e.g. when staff return to work after a long health-related absence ☐ Lack of clarity or conflict between teams after mergers or rebranding	☐ **Keep people informed** if potential changes may impact how and when they do their job ☐ **Identify any resistance** to change and help people to understand what they can expect along the way ☐ **Communicate openly**, honestly and frequently using multiple channels ☐ Check in with team members regularly to **understand concerns, doubts and uncertainties** ☐ **Offer external support** for people negatively impacted by organisational change ☐ **Plan and manage return to work processes** clearly and carefully to keep the impacted individual and other team members abreast of the changes ☐ **Assess the work-related or psychosocial risk factors** that may affect mental and physical health if there are changes in the work or organisation

6. Inadequate reward and recognition

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ High levels of unhelpful negative feedback ☐ Low positive feedback ☐ Imbalance between effort and recognition ☐ Minimal opportunities to develop new or under-used skills ☐ People feeling under-valued ☐ Staff turnover or low engagement ☐ There is little or no downtime, without recognition of the personal toll on the person	☐ Ask team members what they are **motivated** by and what rewards are **meaningful** to them ☐ **Provide positive, specific feedback** ☐ Invite other team members to **share recognition** of each other's accomplishments, including wellbeing successes ☐ **Reward** good work ☐ Look for opportunities to provide both **formal and informal** recognition in a timely manner ☐ Ensure people are **paid fairly** for the work they do ☐ After busy times, **look for ways** to give team members a long weekend they didn't expect, or some extra time off, or a fun activity together ☐ Ensure performance management **focuses on things that are in the control** of the person

7. Poor organisational justice

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Unconscious bias in recruitment practices ☐ Unclear policies which lead to people making their own interpretations ☐ Inconsistent, unfair, discriminatory or inequitable management decisions ☐ Inconsistent, unfair, discriminatory application of policies, including poor procedural justice	☐ Ensure processes, policies and procedures are **unbiased, transparent and consistently applied** across the organisation, including recruitment ☐ **Equitably consider** career development opportunities (e.g. promotions and pay) for all staff ☐ **Encourage staff and volunteers to raise concerns** if there is perceived discrimination against any individual or groups of people ☐ **Provide a way** for team members to report safety issues, concerns or appeal decisions ☐ **Protect** team members who raise safety concerns from discrimination, e.g. confidential hotline, policy wording ☐ **Meet reasonable needs** for any staff requiring modifications or adjustments that are appropriate and necessary to accommodate individual characteristics or differences so that they may enjoy the same rights as others, e.g. providing screen reading software/vision aids or access to all-gender toilets

8. Exposure to traumatic events or materials

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Repeated reading, hearing or seeing accounts of traumatic events, abuse or neglect without adequate debriefing support ☐ Experiencing fear or extreme risk to the health or safety of themselves or others without adequate debriefing support ☐ Exposure to natural disasters or seriously injured or deceased persons without adequate training/and or debriefing support ☐ Exposure to individuals or communities experiencing distress, without adequate training and/or debriefing support ☐ Being asked to step into another role in the organisation where the team member or volunteer is not adequately trained to deal with traumatised clients and/or communities	☐ **Invest in training** to help staff recognise early warning signs of trauma in themselves and others ☐ Provide **professional supervision** and support ☐ Ensure adequate opportunities to **debrief** ☐ Learn how to **detect early warning signs** of vicarious trauma ☐ Ensure team members take breaks for their own **self care and recovery** ☐ **Avoid exposing** non-essential workers to traumatic events ☐ Flag or password **protect files** with distressing content to stop people opening them accidentally. ☐ **Rotate staff** through different roles to minimise the number of traumatic events or materials they are exposed to ☐ Train workers on how to respond to incidents to **reduce the number of decisions** they have to make ☐ **Inform job applicants** what the job will involve and if it could involve exposure to trauma. ☐ **Normalise discussions** about the emotions and feelings team members may experience after exposure to a traumatic event ☐ **Check in regularly** with team members to get a sense of how they are feeling and what support they need as a team and as individuals

9. Remote or Isolated Work

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Team members feeling isolated and disconnected socially ☐ People are working in locations where they have little or no interaction with other staff or volunteers ☐ It is difficult or limited for them to access to help, resources or communications ☐ Fragmented or the feeling of meaningless work ☐ Unreliable or limited access to technology ☐ Reduced access to support networks, including family	☐ **Take a consultative approach** with staff to understand their flexibility needs and agree on where, when and how they work ☐ **Ask for feedback** from remote or isolated workers on how they would like to stay connected ☐ Set up **rules and norms** around hours of phone and email contact to maintain work life balance ☐ **Openly discuss** any stress points caused by technology and remote communicating ☐ Provide **good technical support** systems ☐ **Encourage people to speak up** if they have specific needs that would support them to be able to work more effectively remotely e.g. special equipment or system access ☐ Nominate a contact person/**buddy** to check in with regularly ☐ **Create a point of contact** (peer worker) who they can discuss stress or mental health issues with ☐ Encourage those who work from home to **take regular breaks** and move regularly ☐ **Invite them** to involve their family and friends as additional support

10. Poor physical environment

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Increased levels of physical ill-health and absences ☐ Lack of space, poor lighting or excessive noise ☐ Exposure to unpleasant or hazardous working conditions ☐ Inadequate equipment availability, suitability or maintenance ☐ Staff preferring to work from home because of discomfort at work ☐ Staff or volunteers with accessibility needs not being addressed	☐ Provide generous levels of **natural light, fresh air** and appropriate artificial lighting ☐ Incorporate **greenery** - even if just a few pot plants ☐ Enable team members to have control over their environment to **adapt for their needs** ☐ Check if you can provide **ergonomic furniture** to make it physically comfortable ☐ Check that people working from home have a **physical space** that is safe and appropriate for the work they do ☐ **Encourage** people to **speak up** if their workplace set-up isn't working ☐ **Invite ideas** from team members on suggested improvements

11. Violence and aggression

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Lack of safety for one or more team members ☐ Violence or threats of violence from other workers or clients ☐ Aggressive behaviour such as yelling or physical intimidation ☐ Workers being blamed for delays or inability to provide the service or response the client wants ☐ Assault ☐ Repeated absence or resistance to attending the workplace ☐ Micro-aggressions during interactions with other team members	☐ Communicate and take a **zero tolerance approach** ☐ Ensure you have **supporting policies and procedures** in place ☐ Be alert and **look for signs** of violence and aggression, including micro-aggressions ☐ **Respond quickly** after being alerted to an incident ☐ Look for ways to create a **respectful workplace and relationships** ☐ **Know the process** in your organisation for responding to violence or aggression ☐ **Role model** the behaviours that are expected ☐ **Reduce wait times** for services by transferring calls to other areas during peak times ☐ Provide a **secure workplace and control** who has access to it (including public access to facilities such as toilets)

12 & 13. Bullying and Harassment, including sexual harassment

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively influence it:
☐ Repeated unreasonable behaviour towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety (includes bullying by workers, clients, visitors or others) ☐ Increased levels of conflict within the team ☐ Regular absences or team members avoiding each other ☐ Changes in an employee's performance ☐ Low individual or team morale ☐ Harmful behaviour that does not amount to bullying (such as single instances) but creates a risk to health or safety ☐ Harassment due to personal characteristics such as age, disability, race, nationality, religion, political affiliation, sex, relationship status, family or carer responsibilities, sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status ☐ Sexual harassment - any unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, in circumstances where a reasonable person, having regard to the circumstances, would anticipate the possibility that the person harassed would be offended, humiliated or intimidated.	☐ Communicate and take a **zero tolerance approach** ☐ Ensure you have **supporting policies and procedures** in place ☐ Be alert and **look for signs** of bullying and harassment ☐ **Respond quickly** after being alerted to an incident ☐ Look for ways to create a **respectful workplace and relationships** ☐ **Know the process** for responding to a bullying claim ☐ **Role model** the behaviours that are expected

14. Conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions

How it might negatively show up at work:	Ways to positively impact it:
☐ Poor workplace relationships or interpersonal conflict between colleagues or from other organisations or clients ☐ Frequent disagreements, disparaging or rude comments, either from one person or multiple people, such as from clients. A worker can be both the subject and the source of this behaviour. ☐ Inappropriately excluding a worker from work-related activities ☐ Social or physical isolation ☐ Poor relationships between manager and individual ☐ Lack of social support (perceived or actual) ☐ Microaggressions	☐ Seek to **understand the root cause** of the conflict ☐ **Promote positive** working to avoid conflict ☐ **Don't put off** dealing with unacceptable behaviour ☐ Focus on creating a **culture of high safety, high caring and respect** ☐ Encourage team members to **give feedback** to others that might improve working relationships ☐ **Acknowledge the different working styles** and lived experiences within the team ☐ If in conflict, **discuss different** ways that people view the same situation - there's no right or wrong, just different. ☐ Ask people if there are other **work-related factors**, or factors outside of work, that are contributing to the conflict. ☐ Focus on creating an **inclusive workplace**

Note: An assessment of the work-related or psychosocial risk factors affecting workers' (mental and physical) health should be undertaken whenever there are changes in the work or in the organisation of work which may have a negative impact on health.

References:

Work Australia, (2022), *'Model code of practice - managing psychosocial hazards at work'* Safe Work Australia, accessed 28 October 2022
WHO (World Health Organisation) (2022); *Guidelines on Mental Health at Work Guide,* WHO (World Health Organisation), accessed 28 October 2022

Worksafe Victoria (2021); *'Demonstrating leadership commitment to workplace mental health in your medium or large business,'* Workwell Toolkit; accessed 28 October 2022

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