

September 2020

POSITION STATEMENT

Supporting mentally healthy work

This position sets out what we expect persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) to do to support mentally healthy work.

What is mentally healthy work?

Mentally healthy work is work where risks to people's mental health are eliminated or minimised, and their mental well-being is prioritised.

In contrast, mental health harm or mental ill-health is the significant cognitive, emotional, or behavioural impact arising from, or exacerbated by, work-related risk factors. Mental health harm may be immediate or long-term, and can come from single or repeated exposure.

Supporting mentally healthy work is important

There are a range of risks at work that can affect a worker's mental health. They include unacceptable work interactions (such as bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment), work-related stress, and fatigue.

Research shows that work can lead to a range of mental health harms. If sustained, these can lead to mental ill-health, illness and/or physical injury. For example, anxiety, depression, musculoskeletal disorders, and impaired immune systems are all associated with unhealthy work environments.

Organisational factors at work, such as work culture or unreasonable deadlines, as well as individual factors, like poor management techniques, can both lead to mental harms.

We recognise it's hard to identify and manage risks around mentally-unhealthy work. It can be hard to find out whether the cause of harm was work-related, or related to other parts of the person's life. That's why the role of the PCBU is to provide the best work environment, without digging into the person's history.

Having a mentally healthy work environment can also reduce the likelihood of injuries (as stress can cause distraction) and musculoskeletal disorders (which are correlated with stressful work environments).

What does the law require?

The Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 (HSWA) requires PCBUs to provide and maintain a work environment that is without risks to safety and health, including mental health, so far as is reasonably practicable.

What does WorkSafe expect PCBUs to do?

As with other risks, we expect PCBUs to identify mental health risks and eliminate them from work so far as reasonably practicable. If the risks can't be eliminated they should be minimised.

People respond to stress in different ways, but PCBUs should try to prevent harm at its source. Identifying risks, and ways to control them, should be done in consultation with workers. Having clear policies that set out acceptable behaviour can also help.

Work that has low job control, low support, poor environmental conditions, or exposure to trauma can increase the likelihood of harm occurring. That's why PCBUs should follow principles of good work design, such as:

- make sure people understand their role
- increase workers' ability to make their own decisions about their work
- offer a good balance between effort and reward
- take a long-term view of productivity
- focus on retaining staff and promoting work-life balance.

Our role

As the regulator for work health and safety, we support mentally healthy work by looking across the whole workforce. We'll do this by:

- recording and collating data about work-related stressors and their outcomes
- providing guidance for workers and for PCBUs.

What we'll do if we become aware of a mental harm issue

We're unlikely to intervene in one-off cases. However, WorkSafe may consider intervening where a PCBU has failed to manage significant work-related mental health risks.

Situations that might prompt us to consider intervening include:

- multiple incidents arising at one PCBU,
- if a high level of harm resulted from the failure to manage risks, or
- industry-wide or organisation-wide failings.

We'll make intervention choices based on our strategic priorities, and on whether we are the best placed agency to intervene.

In many cases, people suffering harm should speak to their employer first, using existing employment relations approaches, or should access support such as Employee Assistance Programmes.

There's more information on our website:

worksafe.govt.nz