

Mental Health: Psychosocial Hazards

February 2021

What is the problem?

Work-related stress arising from COVID-19.

For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced and increased a range of psychosocial hazards in the workplace, at a time when a range of other non-work related psychosocial risks are also occurring (uncertainty about future employment, social isolation etc.).

What are the risks?

Psychosocial hazards arising from COVID-19 include:

Exposure to physical hazards and poor environmental conditions

- concern about exposure to COVID-19 at work
- poor management of WHS risks, lack of equipment and resources, such as insufficient appropriate PPE
- exposure to poor conditions such as heat, cold or noise in temporary workplaces

Exposure to violence, aggression, traumatic events and discrimination

- increased work-related violence, aggression and incivility from, customers and members of the public
- serious illness or death of colleagues or clients e.g. nursing home deaths due to COVID-19
- racism, discrimination or stigma stemming from COVID-19
- self-isolation as a result of suspected workplace exposure

Increased work demand

- increased workloads e.g. supermarket home delivery drivers doing more deliveries and longer hours
- increased time at work e.g. additional shifts as production moves 24/7 to meet increased demands

- increased workload e.g. because of increased cleaning requirements or reduction of workers in workplace due to physical distancing requirements

Low support and isolated work

- working from home or isolation from others due to physical distancing or isolation requirements results in feelings of not being supported
- reduction in number of workers at workplace completing physical tasks to maintain physical distancing requirements
- failure (perceived or real) of employers not implementing new policies and procedure to address new working arrangements

Poor workplace relationships

- increased risk of workplace bullying, aggression and harassment as pandemic continues
- workplace racism, discrimination, or stigma, including towards those that have had COVID-19 or are perceived to be a greater risk to others
- deterioration of workplace relationships as competing demands lead to less regular and effective two-way communication
- decreased opportunity for workplace social connections and interactions
- insufficient consideration of the potential WHS and performance impacts due to COVID-19

Poor organisational change management

- lack of planning as a result of the pace of the pandemic
- continual restructures to address the effects of COVID-19 and a corresponding failure to provide information and training, consult and communicate with or support workers (e.g. manufacturing companies making different products or redeploying staff to meet changes in demand)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> work required to adjust to rapid change e.g. buying new equipment or setting up new procedures 	
<p>Increased emotional distress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> limitations on workers offering the same assistance to colleagues or clients they normally would or witnessing others' distress in situations where they can't access their normal services or support e.g. a cancer ward in a hospital has restricted visitors to reduce the risk to patients. The nurses see their patients and family struggle with this isolation. 	
<p>What is a solution to the problem?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regularly ask your workers how they are going and if anything is stressing them. Where workers are distressed about the challenging conditions caused by the pandemic, acknowledge their feelings about the situation and reassure workers they are doing what they can in the circumstances Stay informed with information from official sources and regularly communicate or share this information with workers Consult your workers and representatives on any risks to their psychological health and physical health and safety Support innovations to address the psychosocial risks where you reasonably can Provide workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns Make workplace information available in a central place Inform workers about their entitlements if they become unfit for work or have caring responsibilities Inform workers about their rights under WHS laws, including the right to stop work in certain circumstances and the right not to be discriminated against or disadvantaged for raising work health and safety concerns in the workplace Proactively support workers who you identify to be more at risk of workplace psychological injury (e.g. frontline workers or those working from home), and Refer workers to appropriate work related mental health and wellbeing support services, such as employee assistance programs or the Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service 	
<p>Source The information in this solution has been sourced from Safe Work Australia, COVID-19 Information for workplaces, Retail, supermarkets and shopping centres, Mental Health (29 April 2020)</p>	
<p>Further information</p> <p>Safe Work Australia COVID-19 Information for workplaces, Retail, supermarkets and shopping centres, Mental Health Coronavirus.vic.gov.au Retail trade sector guidance</p>	