



Australian Government  
Comcare

Practical guidance for  
**MANAGERS** and **SUPERVISORS**



**Work**  
**DEMANDS**  
**Set the standard.**



# Preventing PSYCHOLOGICAL harm

Work demands are one of the most common sources of workplace stress and psychological harm. Workers who experience high work demands such as excessive workloads, resource constraints or time pressures can often feel overwhelmed or unable to cope. Those experiencing low work demands like, repetitive or monotonous tasks, can often feel disengaged or underutilised.

**In either case, when work demand issues are not effectively managed workers are far more likely to experience work-related stress. Extreme or long-lasting stress is harmful and can lead to serious illness or injury to workers.**

Poor health outcomes from work demands are far less likely in organisations with a supportive culture that rewards workers, promotes early reporting of issues and proactive risk management. Employers have an obligation to implement systems and processes that identify and effectively manage psychosocial risks to prevent harm to workers.

## Work demands – definition

Work demands may include role overload, unrealistic time pressures, ambiguity or conflict, cognitive and emotional demands of the job, conflict arising from tasks, relationships, change management, a lack of organisational justice and a worker's sense of fairness at work.



## The role of managers and supervisors

Managers and supervisors must address health and safety issues raised by workers and take active steps to monitor and minimise workplace risks. The best way to do this is through ongoing consultation with your team and following your organisation's policies and procedures for managing risks to health and safety at work. Under the Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act, health is defined as both physical and psychological health, which can be impacted by psychosocial hazards such as work demands.

When issues regarding safety systems arise or new hazards are identified, report them to more senior levels of the organisation for resolution. You can be a role model for your team and help foster a workplace culture that supports psychological health by monitoring workload levels and ensuring tasks align with workers' skills and capability.



## Work demands – impacts

### Worker impacts

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Fatigue
- Burnout
- Anger and/or mood swings
- Problems sleeping
- Diminished performance
- Disengaged or withdrawn from work.

### Organisational impacts

- Poor workplace culture
- Negative or strained work-team relations and team dynamics
- Increased worker injury and illness
- Reduced productivity
- Higher employee turnover
- Increased absenteeism
- Customer or client complaints.



## Work demands - examples

### Time

- Unrealistic timeframes or time pressures
- Long work hours or shift work

### Cognitive – low and high

- Low: highly repetitive or monotonous tasks
- High: long periods of vigilance for infrequent events, complex or challenging decision making, or low role clarity

### Workload

- Low - long periods of insufficient work
- High - Unrealistic or unachievable amounts of work

### Emotional

- Responding to distressing situations or aggressive clients
- Exposure to traumatic events or work-related violence
- Poor workplace relationships

### Physical

- Sitting or standing for long periods
- Unpleasant or hazardous conditions (e.g. hazardous chemicals, or dangerous equipment)

### Environmental

- Remote and isolated work
- Poor environmental conditions (e.g. extreme temperatures or noise, air quality)

### Organisational change (e.g. downsizing, site relocations or new processes)

- Insufficient consideration of potential impacts
- Inadequate stakeholder and worker consultation
- Not enough practical and emotional support for workers

### Organisational justice or sense of fairness

- Inconsistent application of policies and procedures
- Bias in decision making
- Poor management of underperformance
- Low recognition and reward

### Latest data shows:

**24%**

Work pressures accounted for 24% of all accepted psychological claims.

**31%**

Percentage of costs associated with psychological injury claims.

**25**

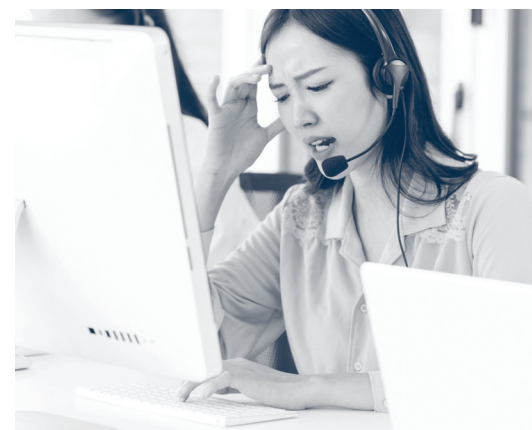
Average number of weeks off work (incapacity weeks) for psychological injury claims.

Source: Comcare claims data 2021-22

**88%**

Percentage of disease claims for mental health conditions in the public administration and safety industry (government, police, fire, emergency services).

Source: Safe Work Australia Workers Compensation Statistics 2019-20







## Work demands – risk factors

Risk factors cover two categories:

### Context (how the work is organised)

- Organisational function and culture
- Leadership
- Organisational change management
- Interpersonal relationships at work
- Role in organisation
- Career development
- Decision latitude and control
- Resource allocation.

### Content (what the job involves)

- Work environment and equipment
- Task design
- Workload
- Work schedules
- Worker skills, capabilities and training.



## Managing risks

### Step 1: identify sources of harm

- **Inspect your workplace.** Observe how the work is carried out, how workers interact, noting any rushing, delays, or backlogs.
- **Review relevant information and records.** This can include incident reports, workers' compensation claims, staff surveys, absenteeism and staff turnover data to gather information from workers, supervisors and managers.
- **Ongoing communication and consultation.** Talk with workers, managers and health and safety specialists and share information about hazards and risks.
- **Encourage feedback.** Give workers a reasonable opportunity to express their views, raise issues and contribute to the decision-making process where possible.

### Step 2: assess and prioritise the risk

- **Understand the nature of the harm.** This involves asking important questions about the level of risk, its likely causes and likelihood of it happening to prioritise how and when to take action. Please note, this step may not be necessary if you are dealing with known risks to psychological health and safety that have known control measures (see next section).
- **Ongoing communication and consultation.** This can include discussions with workers, HSRs, worker representatives, conducting focus groups (6-10 workers) and staff surveys to identify potential risks, whether risks are impacting workers and understand the source of the risk.



## Supportive leadership = supportive workplace culture

Poor health outcomes are much less likely to result from work demands in a workplace with supportive leaders that are approachable and responsive to dealing with worker concerns and demonstrate an understanding of the issues faced by their teams. Supportive leadership helps create a supportive workplace culture that promotes early reporting of issues and proactive risk management. Supportive leadership can include checking on work related matters and creating a safe environment to discuss personal matters that may be impacting a worker's ability to respond to or cope with work demands.



# Implementing effective control measures

## Step 3: control risks focusing on job design



### Time demands

- Ensure staffing levels align with expected outputs and workers have enough time to complete tasks.
- Ensure workers take breaks and allow for sufficient time between rostered shifts.
- Give workers the opportunity to provide input into work pace and timing.
- Set realistic and achievable targets.
- Monitor workloads during peak periods, such as Christmas.
- Regularly review workloads to ensure workers have sufficient support.
- Help employees develop personal work plans to help them prioritise tasks.
- Encourage workers to speak up at an early stage if they feel their workload is excessive.



### Cognitive or emotional demands

- Rotate tasks and schedules where possible to provide job variety and to lessen the impact of repetitive and monotonous tasks.
- Give workers some control over the way they do their work, including work pace and order of tasks.
- Ensure there is enough time for regular breaks that provide a 'time-out'.
- Have support systems in place for workers that make complex or difficult decisions, e.g. a second person to assist.
- Provide training and ongoing support to workers on how to diffuse difficult or confronting situations.
- Consider training and regular check-in procedures for workers.



### Physical demands

- Allow regular breaks and rotate repetitive manual tasks between workers where possible.
- Make the physical environment as comfortable as possible, such as changes to the workstation, equipment, or the way the job is done.
- Substitute heavy manual tasks with machinery to reduce physical workloads where practicable.
- Ensure workers are well trained and physically capable of doing the work.



### Organisational change demands

- Reassess workload during change and reallocate or reprioritise as needed.
- Consult workers about potential impacts and listen to their views.
- Engage workers through regular consultation and communication during changes, including supports available.



### Organisational justice demand

- Inform workers about dispute escalation and resolution mechanisms that are available via the organisation's WHS unit or Human Resources. Encourage feedback from workers on organisational processes and procedures, and performance management.
- Provide ongoing training in issues management and dispute resolution.

## Tip for managers

Role model expected behaviours, such as taking breaks and not sending emails outside agreed hours.



## Step 4: monitor and review controls

You should continue to work with your employer to monitor and review control measures to minimise the risk of work demands and ensure they remain effective. Where necessary, you may need to revise the approach, including when a new hazard or risk is identified or a control measure is not adequately minimising the risk. It is also important before a significant workplace change, e.g. systems or process change. Consultation with workers and their Health and Safety Representatives (HSR) is critical throughout each step of the risk management cycle, including monitoring and review.



## For more information

### Comcare

#### Preventing harm

- [Working Well – An organisational approach to preventing psychological injury](#)
- [Psychosocial hazards](#)

#### For managers and supervisors

- [Office Safety Tool - Senior managers and executives](#)
- [How managers can support worker mental health](#)
- [Comcare Regulatory Guides](#)
- [People at Work](#) - free psychosocial risk assessment tool for workplace leaders.

#### Mental health

- [Your mental health responsibilities at work](#)
- [Comcare mental health initiatives](#)
- [Mental health stigma in the workplace](#)

### Safe Work Australia

- [Work related psychological health and safety – A systematic approach to meeting your duties](#)
- [Safe Work Australia Model Code of Practice - Managing psychosocial hazards at work](#)

### Codes of Practice

- [How to Manage Work Health and Safety Risks Code of Practice 2015](#)
- [Managing the Work Environment and Facilities Code of Practice 2015](#)

### Additional resources

- [Working Together: Promoting Mental Health and Wellbeing at Work – Australian Public Service Commission and Comcare.](#)
- [Management Standards on Stress – UK Government Health Safety Executive.](#)
- [Workload Management: An Environmental Scan of current and emerging practices – Victorian Public Sector.](#)
- [Psychological health and safety in the workplace – Prevention, promotion, and guidance to staged implementation – National Standard of Canada.](#)

## Comcare's role

As the national work health safety and workers' compensation authority, Comcare's legislated functions include securing the health and safety of workers and workplaces through responding to incidents, educating employers, and encouraging leaders to foster a positive workplace culture. We recognise work demands and other psychosocial hazards can cause workers psychological or physical harm and we are committed to supporting our jurisdiction of more than 400,000 workers and 200 employers.

