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.

Worker duties and obligations under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*

Workers must take reasonable care for their own health and safety at work and to ensure they do not adversely affect the health and safety of others. This includes raising any issues or concerns with managers as early as possible, including any issues or concerns with psychosocial hazards such as, work demands.

Remember under the **WHS Act**, health is defined as both physical and psychological health. If you need extra support or guidance, talk with your manager or supervisor in the first instance. If this is not possible, reach out to your health and safety representative at work, a colleague or support service (e.g. Employee Assistance Program).

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- Disengaged or withdrawn from work.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
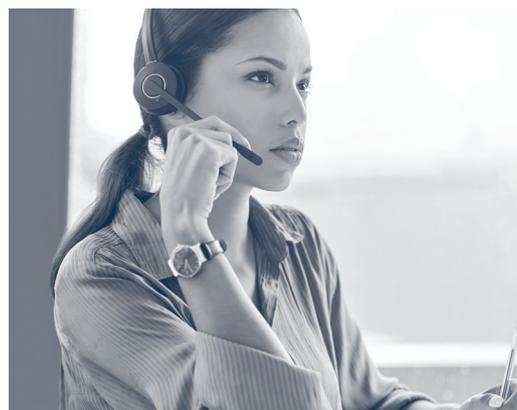
Work demands – risk factors

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.

Things to look out for

While many workers can experience either high or low work demands, the following groups are considered at greater risk of psychological or physical harm:

- New or younger workers
- Workers with an existing disability, injury or illness
- Workers who have been exposed to a traumatic event
- Workers who are currently experiencing difficult personal circumstances.
- Workers from a culturally or linguistically diverse background
- Workers in public facing roles, e.g. frontline workers.

Stress and work demands

It is important to note that stress is not the same as work demands or work pressures. Workers can experience stress for many reasons, such as when workplace demands are greater than the resources available, however workers can usually cope with demanding work when:

- Demands are not excessive and ongoing
- Managers, supervisors and colleagues are supportive
- Workers are given an appropriate level of autonomy
- Safety systems intervene early to moderate work demands and reallocate tasks when workers are struggling.

Other psychosocial risks

Other psychosocial risks can also be contributing factors to work demands, including:

- **Low job control**. Workers have little control over how or when their job is done, or work is tightly managed (e.g. scripted call centres). This can include jobs where workers are not involved in decisions that impact their clients, have no say in the timing of breaks or changing tasks, and are unable to refuse dealing with aggressive clients (e.g. police services).

- **Low role clarity**. Workers are in roles where there is uncertainty about or frequent changes to tasks and work standards or important information about tasks, priorities and targets is not available or shared. This can also include conflicting job roles, responsibilities or expectations.

Psychosocial risks are often interrelated

Psychosocial risks should not be viewed in isolation. Workers may be exposed to multiple work demand types and psychosocial hazards. Some may always be present and others only occasionally. For example, poor workplace relationships (emotional demand) can be the result of related risks such as remote and isolated work (environmental demand), bias in decision making (organisational justice demand) or low role clarity (See Other psychosocial risks section).

For more information

Comcare

Preventing harm

- Working Well – An organisational approach to preventing psychological injury
- Psychosocial hazards

For employers

- 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.**
- Beyond Blue

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.

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ACTIONS for workers

If you are feeling overwhelmed or unable to manage the demands of your work, this can become detrimental to your health and potentially impact the rest of your team. Here are some actions you can take to help manage the risk and support those around you:

- **Raise issues early.** Talk with your manager or supervisor about your workload and discuss any concerns as soon as possible to ensure tasks can be reallocated or reprioritised. If relevant, discuss personal issues that may be contributing to the impact of work demands.

- **Take regular breaks.** Ensure you take the opportunity to step away from your work during rostered or scheduled breaks – and encourage your colleagues to do the same.

- **Ask for help (and offer help).** Reach out to your manager when you are feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope and support your colleagues when they need help.

- **Foster a supportive workplace culture.** Early reporting and supporting colleagues also contribute to a positive work environment where teams actively promote respectful relationships and work-life balance.

- **Access training and education.** Speak to you manager about available training to help you manage the demands of your job, such as how to diffuse difficult situations or courses that focus on time or project management.

- **Escalate when needed.** If you're unable to speak directly with your manager or no action has been taken, follow internal resolution procedures and explore other available options e.g., make a report via Human Resources, talk with your Health and Safety Representative (HSR) or consult a union representative.

- **Reach out for further support.** Access support services available via your employer such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or services available via external providers such as Beyond Blue (See **For more information** section).

Worker feedback = safer workplaces

Workers should share their views and participate in consultation opportunities in their workplace. For example, be proactive in team meetings and provide input into the way work gets done, such as work pace, and clarify roles and responsibilities. Workers can also participate in staff surveys or workshops where possible and submit feedback via your organisation's WHS systems. Remember consultation with workers and their Health and Safety Representative (HSR) is also a legal requirement for employers under the WHS ACT, so far as reasonably practicable.