Supporting Workers
with Psychological Injuries and Illnesses

WSCC

If you would like this information in another official language, call us.

English

Si vous voulez ces informations dans une autre langue officielle, contactez-nous.

French

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Inuktitut

Hapkua titiqqat pijumagupkit Inuinnaqtun, uvaptinnut hivajarlutit.

Inuinnaqtun

Kīspin ki nitawihtīn ē nīhīyawihk ōma ācimōwin, tipwāsinān.

Cree

Tłįchǫ yatı k'èę̀. Dı wegodı newǫ dè, gots'o gonede.

Tłįchǫ

Ɂerıhtł'ís Dëne Sųłıné yatı t'a huts'elkër xa beyáyatı theɂą ɂat'e, nuwe ts'ën yółtı.

Chipewyan

Edı gondı dehgáh got'ı̨e zhatıé k'ę́ę́ edatł'éh enahddhę nıde naxets'ę́ edahłí.

South Slavey

K'áhshó got'ı̨ne xədə k'é hederı ɂedı̨htl'é yerınıwę nídé dúle.

North Slavey

Jii gwandak izhii ginjìk vat'atr'ijąhch'uu zhit yinohthan jì', diits'àt ginohkhìi.

Gwich'in

Uvanittuaq ilitchurisukupku Inuvialuktun, ququaqluta.

Inuvialuktun

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DEFINITIONS

ACCOMMODATION: An adaptation or change to a job to meet an injured worker's abilities.

EXACERBATION: A temporary worsening of a pre-existing condition, where following a brief increase in symptoms, signs, or disability, the worker recovers to a baseline status, or what it would have been had the exacerbation never occurred.

HEALTH: A state of complete physical, social, and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURY: A disorder diagnosed according to the most current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).

PSYCHOLOGICAL (MENTAL) HEALTH: A state of well-being in which the individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to their community.

PSYCHOLOGICAL (MENTAL) STRESS: An individual's non-specific physical and psychological response to events or changes (stressors) in life. Distress occurs when a person's ability to cope with the stressors is overwhelmed and can result in diagnosable psychiatric or psychological disorders.

RETURN TO WORK: A process to help injured workers return to safe, productive, and suitable employment as soon as medically possible.

RETURN TO WORK PLAN: A documented plan that outlines necessary arrangements and accommodations so that an injured worker can return to work as soon as safe and medically possible.

STIGMA: Negative attitude or discrimination against someone based on a distinguishing characteristic such as mental health, disability, race, gender, etc.

SUITABLE WORK: Job tasks that are within the worker's functional abilities that are safe and do not put the worker or their co-workers at risk or hinder recovery, and are meaningful (serve a purpose or valuable function to the organization).

INTRODUCTION:
PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND THE WORKPLACE

Work plays an integral part in people's lives, and is important for positive mental health. It provides a sense of accomplishment and purpose, a routine, and social connections. Getting back to work after a workplace injury or illness as soon as medically possible improves overall recovery outcomes – especially related to psychological or mental health.

Psychological health is a continuum that everyone is on. Good psychological health is essential to overall health and wellbeing. Improving the psychological health and safety of a workplace can improve employee satisfaction, productivity, reduce employee turnover, and lost work time.

WORKPLACE RISK FACTORS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace1 (CSA2 Standard CAN/CSA-Z1003-13/BNQ 9700-803/2013) identified 13 risk factors that impact psychological health and safety in the workplace. These are:

1. Clear leadership and expectations
2. Civility and respect
3. Workload management
4. Engagement
5. Work/life balance
6. Protection of physical safety
7. Psychological protection
8. Psychological support
9. Organizational culture
10. Recognition and reward
11. Growth and development
12. Involvement and Influence
13. Psychological job demands

For more information, and assistance with identifying and mitigating these and other risk factors, see WSCC's Employers Guide to Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURY OR ILLNESS:

Psychological health concerns become illnesses or injuries when symptoms affect a worker's ability to function, such as their behavior and ability to think. This can affect work performance, productivity, attendance, and can result in safety risks. If these concerns are identified, it is important to meet with the worker to address concerns and offer support. Remember that you are not a healthcare provider, as an employer you can provide appropriate resources, and create a supportive workplace environment.

> ***WSCC may provide compensation to workers*** *who develop a psychological injury/illness that has developed at work, or arising out of and during the course of employment. An* *employer's report of incident* *and* *worker's report of injury* *should be completed and submitted to WSCC.*

SUPPORTING WORKERS

Key things to consider when supporting a worker with their psychological health, whether at work or away from the workplace due to an injury or illness:

Communication

Ensuring there is open communication between the employer and worker is essential to a worker's recovery when the worker is away from work due to an illness or injury. Ask the worker the best way to stay in touch, and who they are most comfortable communicating with (for example, they may prefer talking to their manager or human resources and not their supervisor). During any communication with the worker, words of encouragement, understanding, and reassurance should be used. For guidance, see Appendix A: Supportive Conversations.

Fear/stigma

It is normal for workers with psychological injuries or mental health disorders to fear the stigma associated with their illness or injury. This fear of stigmatization can result in avoiding important conversations, not seeking help, and exacerbating symptoms. This can become a barrier to returning to work. Despite possible stigma, workers with psychological injury or illness can be highly functional in the workplace.

> *Consider:* *Sharing educational information with staff about workplace mental health to increase visibility, reduce stigmas, assist managers and co-workers with providing early support, and reduce absenteeism.*

Isolation

Workers who are managing a psychological injury or illness may start to isolate while at work. Signs include not participating in meetings, previously eating lunch and take breaks with others, but now doing so alone, increased absenteeism, and request to work remotely. Isolation can increase mental health risks as social connections are lost or disrupted. In order to feel physically and mentally well, workers need to feel part of and supported by the wider work team, and be given the opportunity to be engaged in the workplace.

If a worker is absent from work, the longer they are away from their workplace, the harder it will be to return. It is important that connections are maintained by regular communication, and engagement with the workplace.

> *Consider:* *Sending work newsletters, or other regular work updates to the worker. Depending on the worker's symptoms, limitations, and restrictions, consider inviting them to work social gatherings.*

Worry

The worker might worry about missing out on work opportunities, their job status, and their actual work duties. This worry can exacerbate other symptoms. Support from workplace leadership, and communication from the workplace can help reassure the worker.

There may also be worry regarding what co-workers are thinking and how they will react during the RTW process.

> *Consider:* *Reassuring the worker by reminding them they have your support, and can approach you if they feel worried about their performance. You may also consider suggesting an approach for ways to communicate with co-workers as they re-familiarize themselves with their projects. Being ready with lines such as "I'm just getting back into my routine, this may take me more time." may help with re-integration into their workplace.*

RETURN TO WORK

As with a physical injury, psychological injuries can require treatment and recovery time. This may mean a worker has to be away from the workplace for a period of time for initial treatment. While this may be necessary, it is important to remember that being at work can actually help a worker's recovery. To avoid adverse psychological health affects from being away from work or the workplace, the worker should return to work as soon as it is deemed medically safe to do so.

For a worker to successfully return to work after any injury or illness, the worker needs to feel supported by their employer. When a worker is away and disconnected from the workplace for extended periods, the risks to their psychological wellbeing may be worsened.

> *Remember: The longer a worker is off work, the harder it is for the worker to return.*

RETURN TO WORK PROGRAM

Does your organization have an RTW program that includes policies and procedures? If so, these should also apply to mental health and return to work for a psychological illness or injury. See WSCC's Employer's Guide to Return to Work for guidance on developing a RTW program.

The key components of an RTW program that are important factors in returning to work for psychological injuries include:

- **Policy and procedures that support mental health:** A policy clearly outlines the organization's commitment to care for injured/ill workers. Procedures should clearly outline roles and responsibilities to minimize inaction or confusion regarding return to work for workers with mental health conditions.
- **Early and considerate contact and communication**: In person, virtual, or telephone conferences with the worker, employer, and healthcare support person (i.e. counsellor, physician, psychologist) can help increase the chances of a successful return to work. Providing information both verbally and in writing can also assist the worker if they are struggling with concentration, memory, or attention.
- **Involve the worker in identifying suitable work:** The worker should be involved in their own RTW planning and identifying suitable work. The more engagement, the greater the chance of success.
- **Return to Work Monitoring:** Create a distinct schedule for checking in and assessing the RTW process and the worker's needs.

- **Training supervisors in return to work:** Research has shown that supervisors who adopt supportive behaviours during the RTW process have greater success with worker rehabilitation.

As with physical injuries, the worker does not need to be fully recovered to return to work. Returning to work gradually, and changing the psychological demands of the work and environment are important aspects of a successful return to work.

IMPLEMENTING A RETURN TO WORK PLAN FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURIES

DEVELOPING AN INDIVIDUAL RETURN TO WORK PLAN

Just as in the case of a physical injury, an employer is not entitled to ask for confidential medical information from workers. The employer can, however, request information about psychological, cognitive, or behavioural abilities to help with developing a RTW plan. This is where communication with the worker's healthcare provider (counsellor, physician, psychologist) is key in the RTW process. Once identified, these abilities need to be compared against the worker's job demands, and any barriers that have been identified. This comparison of functional abilities can be done by the worker and employer completing a Job Demands Analysis. Visit WSCC's website for a sample Job Demands Analysis Form.

It is very important to keep the worker engaged in their own RTW planning, especially when determining their current abilities and identifying suitable work. When arranging meetings with the worker, be aware that the workplace might be a trigger for worsening symptoms. It might be necessary to meet off site, or virtually.

The worker should also be given the opportunity to have a support person with them so that they feel more comfortable. The process of RTW planning itself may reveal aspects of the worker's loss of work capacity, or ability to handle work responsibilities, which could increase anxiety and worsen symptoms. It is important to always focus on the workers abilities, what they are still capable of doing, and the ways they can actively contribute to the workplace.

Follow the below steps to identify suitable work:

1. Review the demands and duties of the worker's pre-injury or illness job position. (See the Job Demands Analysis on our website.)
2. Using the worker' restrictions and abilities, identify any barriers for the worker returning to work by finding gaps between the work that needs to be done, and what the worker can do. (see WSCC Functional Abilities – behavioural, cognitive, and emotional form on website)
3. Explore any outside barriers that might get in the way of a successful return to returning to work. Consider factors like their commute, or a higher number of necessary appointments.
4. Discuss potential modifications to overcome any barriers that are identified: remember to focus on the worker's current abilities. See Appendix B: Workplace Accommodation Ideas.
5. If the essential job duties cannot be modified, consider a different position, or alternative duties within the organization that the worker can perform (with or without modifications).

Ensure that you listen to the worker, and ask what their needs are for a smooth return to their work. Ask "what would help you be successful in getting back to work?" See Appendix A: Supportive Conversations for other ways to support your worker in return to work planning.

> *Note:* The employer and worker must agree to the suitable work that is identified. If an agreement cannot be reached, the WSCC will mediate the situation.

Work Modification and Accommodations

The worker's return to the workplace needs to be handled with sensitivity to avoid potentially making symptoms worse. Common strategies for a smooth return to work include:

Modification or Accommodation	Description and reasoning	Examples
Reduced Hours	Adjust the hours to slowly reintegrate the worker back into the workplace, while progressively building tolerances.	For example: • Weeks 1-2: four hours of work per day • Weeks 3-4: six hours of work per day • Weeks 5-6: eight hours of work per day • Allow time for scheduled rehabilitation appointments.
Alternative Duties	Duties that the worker did not perform pre-injury.	• A different job position • Assist with tasks that have not been completed due to low priority, work load • Special projects
Modified Duties	Modify pre-injury job tasks, or methods to complete the job tasks.	• Increased time to complete tasks, or flexible deadlines • Written instructions rather than verbal • Prioritize tasks, and create a schedule to help complete them
Work Environment	A change in work environment may allow the worker return without triggering symptoms.	• Working in a different cubicle • Working in a private office or area that allows for easier symptom control (adjustable lighting, for example) • Working in a different building or work site
Training	Consider if your worker requires education, training, or refresher courses for their job. Training can increase confidence and tolerances.	• Specialized training – conflict resolution, for example • Training on new equipment, or new processes • Cross-training in other positions

More specific ideas for identified limitations and restrictions are listed in Appendix B: Workplace Accommodation Ideas.

> *Remember: Worker safety must be a priority. When providing any new job duties or tasks, remember to ensure that the worker has appropriate job training, orientation, and understands all hazards and controls.*

DOCUMENT RETURN TO WORK PLANS

All RTW plans need to be documented. Written documentation can assist both the worker and employer to stay on track and help with recovery timelines. It should identify:

- work schedule;
- timelines;
- work duties and modifications; and
- monitoring and follow up schedule.

See WSCC's sample Return to Work Plan by visiting the Return to Work – Forms and Templates section of our website.

> *Key to Success: Work together to develop and document a Return to Work Plan.*

MONITOR RETURN TO WORK PLANS

As you implement the worker's return to work, the RTW plan you have developed may need to be adjusted. It is important to monitor RTW plans:

- to ensure that the plan continues to meet the specific needs of the worker and the organization; and
- to improve the overall Return to Work program and processes for future workers requiring return to work planning.

Monitoring your worker's RTW plan and progress should involve:

- **Informal check-ins**: Informal check-ins should be daily, decreasing in frequency as the worker progresses in their recovery.
- **Formal reviews**: Formal reviews should be at least bi-weekly, or whenever concerns arise. Discuss concerns with the appropriate persons (WSCC, RTW Coordinator, union).

For a sample RTW Monitoring Form template, visit the Return to Work – Forms and Templates section of our website. If the RTW plan requires adjustments, document them, sign off, and submit the revisions to the WSCC.

> *Key to Success: Modify the RTW plan to match the worker's recovery and changing abilities.*

APPENDIX A: SUPPORTIVE CONVERSATIONS

SUPPORTIVE CONVERSATIONS

Ideally supportive communication should have begun prior to the injury or illness occurring. Managers and supervisors should be approachable, and should take steps to normalise conversations around mental health to encourag open dialogue. Regular one-on-one meetings and catchups are a great place to ask workers how they're doing. If done regularly, this will help build trust and give workers a chance to raise concerns at an early stage, before they become a risk.

When a worker is unable to remain at work due to their psychological health, it's important to keep lines of communication open. As an employer, it is important to demonstrate support through regular conversation with the injured or ill worker to assist with their recovery and ultimately their safe return to work.

Preparing for a Supportive Conversation

There may be hesitancy around what to say and do when it comes to psychological injuries and illnesses. Before starting a conversation, consider the following:

- **Do you have the time?** Make sure you can commit to an in-depth conversation.
- **Do you have the capacity and are you willing to listen?** If you yourself are having a bad day, consider postponing the conversation until you're ready.
- **Be prepared**.
    - o Review the plan with someone else, ideally someone from Human Resources.
    - o Know that the worker might become emotional, embarrassed or upset.
- **Check in.** Ask the worker if it is a good time. If not, ask when a good time would be for them.
- **Think of what you value in the worker.** Use concrete examples of work that they have done that is of value to boost self esteem, and reinforce their value to the team.
- If you are meeting in person, choose a place that is informal and private to help the worker feel more comfortable.

It is also important to be aware of the supports that your workplace offers. If a worker confides that they may need additional support, it is important to be able to respond with good information, or help them find support. Some examples might include:

- Providing details of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at your workplace, or a list of support resources that may exist where they live.
- Referring to applicable workplace policies and procedures that may offer guidance.
- Redesigning aspects of the job or work that are high risk for psychological harm.

Having a Supportive Conversation:

Here are some questions and tips to consider:

Ask: Are you okay?	- Try to be as relaxed as you can. - If the worker is at work: Be specific about things that have given you concern, such as "I've noticed you seem less chatty than usual. How are you doing?"
Listen	- Take what is said seriously. - If they need time to think, be prepared to sit patiently in silence. Don't rush, interrupt, or try to "fill in the blanks" of the conversation – allow the worker to take their time. - Encourage explanations: remind the worker that you genuinely care about them and want to understand. - If the worker gets angry or upset, that's okay. Stay calm and don't take it personally. Let them know you're asking because you're concerned.
Encourage Action	- Don't ask "IF" you can help, instead ask: "HOW can I help?" - Ask: "What would be a good next step, and can we take it together?" - Ask: "What do you need from me to move to the next step?" - Depending on where the worker is in their recovery and rehabilitation, options for action might include talking to their healthcare provider or Employee Assistance Provider, or discussing a return to work plan.
Check In	- Remember to check in to see how the worker is doing. To demonstrate support, regular check ins are needed. - Ask if the next steps you discussed worked, and if not, is there a better way? - Don't judge or criticize for inaction. - Stay optimistic.

When worker is already away from the workplace:

- Reassure them that you will be a support to them during their absence, and that their job will be there when they return.
- Maintain regular communication: Agree on the frequency and method of contact early on, and confirm this in writing. Keep checking that the current arrangement is still working
- Staying in touch with colleagues can support a smooth return, so encourage work colleagues to keep in touch.
- Keep the worker in the loop about important developments at work so they still feel connected.

Do not:

- Probe, or attempt to find a diagnosis.
- Make accusations.
- Bring personal anecdotes into the conversation (don't assume other experiences mirror this worker's experience).

Return to Work Conversations

When discussing work duties and possible modified or alternate duties, the following questions could be used to assist:

- When you return to work, what will allow you to be successful and still have energy at the end of the day?
- Are there any tasks or job duties that you feel would be easier to complete?
- What can your supervisor do to support your successful return to work?
- Are there any tasks or job duties that you would like additional training or re-training on?
- How can feedback be provided in a constructive and positive way?
- How would you like to see any future issues be handled?

Remember: Do not wait until a worker is taking time off work or returning to work to express genuine care for their well-being in the workplace. Supportive communication includes active and reflective listening, as well as expressing empathy and support. It needs to happen throughout a worker's time at the workplace.

APPENDIX B: WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATION IDEAS

This table provides ideas for accommodations or modified work to help you and your worker start identifying suitable work, and developing a return to work plan.

Remember: Look at the limitations and restrictions provided by the healthcare provider, and compare them to the worker's job demands to identify where an accommodation may be needed.

Limitation/Restriction	Accommodation/Work Modification
Self-Supervision	- Provide a detailed task list and clear timelines - Co-worker support, such as working in teams or with a partner - Provide clear priorities, and assistance if a conflict in priorities arises - Provide an alternate supervisor or co-worker to contact, when necessary
Supervision of Others (if the worker is in a supervisory role)	- Discuss behaviors that may be interpreted as problematic - Identify a mentor to call about challenging supervisory situations - Reduce/remove supervisory duties if required
Multi-Tasking and Handling Time Pressures	- Meet with supervisor/leader at regular intervals to establish timelines, schedule and task prioritization. - Modify workplace processes to allow employee to focus on one task at a time and/or support the employee to perform fewer tasks until capacity increases - Provide opportunities for training/retraining on some tasks to support proficiency - Separate tasks into categories: those that must be performed simultaneously, and tasks that can be performed individually - Remove or reduce distractions from work area
Cooperation with Others	- Provide expectations for respect in the workplace for all employees - Develop processes and strategies to deal effectively with conflict - Provide tasks with limited teamwork until capacity or tolerance increases
Tolerance to Confrontation	- Review with employee your workplace policies and procedures for dealing with confrontational situations - Provide training, including simulation training about confrontational situations that the worker may be exposed to - Increased support in situations where confrontation may arise - Alternate duties that minimize the risk of confrontation
Responsibility and Accountability	- Employer should identify potential impact of errors in judgement for specific tasks and put in place control measures to address it - Use checklists to guide judgement in routine tasks and ensure task completion - Create list of decisions that should be discussed with a supervisor until capacity increases
Deadlines	- Be flexible with hours of work, deadlines, or time of day tasks are completed - Define priorities and timelines and provide checklists of tasks that need to be completed in order of priority - Establish regular check-ins with supervisor to ensure work is on track - Avoid tight timelines, or provide sufficient resources to meet tight deadlines - Break large tasks down into a series of smaller tasks

Attention to Detail	- Removal of non-essential job functions to allow greater concentration - Break large tasks into smaller steps - Encourage taking breaks when concentration declines - Checklists including quality control measures - Ensure lighting is appropriate. Provide a workspace with access to sunlight or provide a UV light for the workspace. Working in Natural light can assist with attention
Tolerance to Distractions	- Provide a quiet workspace - Encourage wearing headphones or earplugs to reduce noise distraction - Encourage reduction of workspace clutter - Consider modifications to reduce specific stimuli for example, redesign workspace to minimize visual distractions, such as higher cubicle walls - Use white noise machines
Cognitive Demands (Decision Making)	- Employer should identify potential impact of errors in judgement for specific tasks and put in place control measure to address it - Use procedures or checklists to guide judgement in tasks - Create list of decisions that should be discussed with a supervisor until capacity increases - Take frequent breaks when concentration slips
Tolerance to Emotional Stimuli	- Consider providing a work coach or designated support person to assist employee - Allow for phone calls to access emotional support during the work day - Allow time off to attend counselling sessions or medical appointments
Reading	- Consider providing instructions using an audio recorder - Assign tasks that don't require reading, or have minimal reading requirements
Writing	- Provide voice to text software - Assign tasks and duties that don't involve writing
Communication: Difficulty Handling Feedback	- Consider modifying how you provide instructions and feedback (i.e. written feedback may provide increased clarity and improved ability for recall versus verbal) - Scheduling regular feedback meetings with supervisor
Decreased Memory	- Provide recording devices for meetings to allow playback of information - Prioritize written instructions and information over verbal - Organizer with reminders for example phone or outlook calendar reminders to complete at scheduled time
Computer Work	- Provide training where necessary - Consider providing anti-glare screens - Encourage frequent, short breaks from screen time - Provide hard documents for review and editing to reduce screen time
Ability to Learn	- Provide individualized training – review with worker their preferred methods for learning (for example, written instructions, verbal instructions, video instructions, or job shadowing) - Offer training refreshers and opportunities to regularly practice skills - Provide minutes of meetings and training sessions - Use flow-chart to indicate steps in a task