# Psychosocial Hazards (Stressors)

## Introduction

The term 'psychosocial' relates to the combined influence that psychological factors and the surrounding social environment have on a person's physical and mental wellness and their ability to function.

From a workplace perspective, 'psychosocial' refers to the hidden workplace.

For example, social and cultural norms or the way people interact with each other, or the system of work.

- 'Psych' refers to the mindset of the individual(s).

- 'Social' refers to the work environment – that is, the work culture, communication, or how work is done.

Psychosocial hazard identification assesses risks and how they are controlled and managed.

It is important to understand how to control psychosocial hazards or stressors which can lead to conflict, distress, poor physical health or occupational illness, and long-term absence from work.

This Information Sheet gives practical advice on what psychosocial hazards are, and the roles and responsibilities of employers and employees in relation to managing psychosocial hazards.



## Typical Psychosocial Hazards

Typical psychosocial hazards in the workplace include:

- Bullying
- Conflicting demands and lack of role clarity

- Lack of control over the way work is done and / or the work rate
- Lack of support from colleagues and/or management
- Poor communication or lack of communication
- Shift work
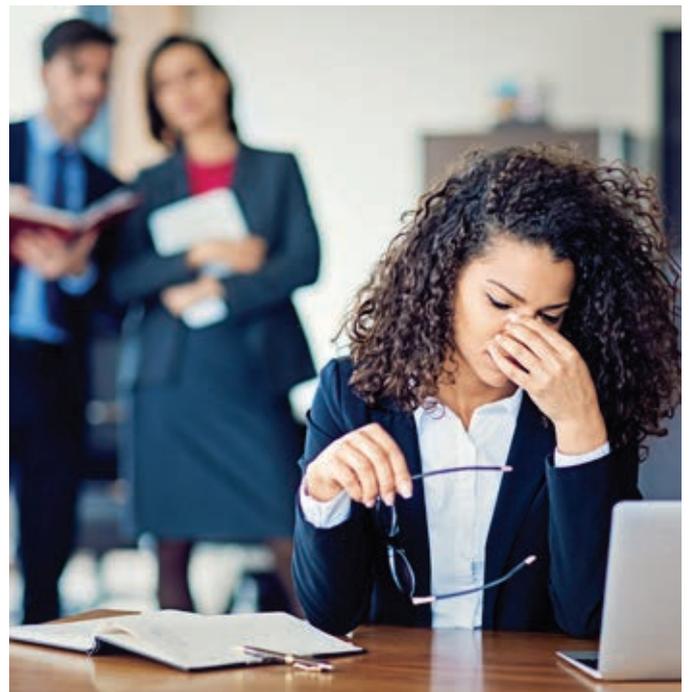
> Job insecurity

> Remote working

> High dependency clients

> Poorly managed organisational change

> Lone working

**A good psychosocial environment enhances performance and wellbeing. Certain work types and/or working environments (i.e., lone working, remote work, shift-work and repetitive work), can contribute to psychosocial risk.**

## What do I have to do as an employer?

Psychosocial hazards can be managed in a systematic way and involve consultation, as other workplace safety and health risks.

Employers have a responsibility to manage known psychosocial hazards. They should:

> Identify psychosocial hazards through carrying out a risk assessment.



> Put in place control measures for all identified hazards.

> Keep records and documents of procedures and policies.

> Ensure policies and procedures are brought to the attention of employees.

> Ensure managers/supervisors are competent / trained to appreciate how to best deal with psychosocial hazards and keep records of issues arising. Please note that records may be informal or formal, and this will help identify trends so that action can be taken in a timely manner.

> Provide protective support such as Occupational Health or Employee Assistance Personnel (EAP). Please note that an EAP is a mitigating measure, but of itself is not enough to make for a control.

Any issues and complaints should be dealt with fairly, consistently, and transparently and records must be kept in line with GDPR data requirements.

## What do employees have to do?

Employees' responsibilities include:

> Follow the policies or procedures in place for dealing with psychosocial hazards.

> Carry out the work that they were trained for.

> Bring to their employer's attention issues that make them unable to manage or do their work.

> Behave in a reasonable, respectful, and proper way, treating everyone with dignity and respect while at work.

> Cooperate with any investigation or assessment regarding a colleague's behaviour, and truthfully responding to any such enquiries put to them.

> Report any unacceptable and/or dangerous behaviours such as bullying or conflict.

## How do I carry out a risk assessment for psychosocial hazards?

A risk assessment identifies what could cause harm to people. It allows you to put in place control measures for eliminating or reducing the risk of harm in your workplace.

In the case of psychosocial hazards, a risk assessment should identify and manage high risk hazards which a reasonable person would consider harmful. Not all aspects of all workplaces can be captured in every risk assessment, but each place of work should have an assessment done.

Key areas to consider when assessing psychosocial hazards and risks are:

> The type of work being done, for example exposure to graphic content / difficult customers / threatening behaviours (harm/violence) / long hours driving / using heavy machinery

> The work system - for example shift work / remote work,

> The type of complaint(s) made, and

> The workplace culture - this can be assessed through survey or looking at absences or complaints to identify a trend

For more information on risk assessments and psychosocial audits visit www.workpositive.ie

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## What are the main stressors assessed in a psychosocial risk assessment?

The main categories to consider are:

> Demands

> Controls

> Supports

> Relationships

> Roles

> Change

**Demands** - the type and the amount of work given to a person based on their training, general suitability, and capacity for these demands.

**Controls** - what has been done for example policies and procedures developed, training given, or changes made to systems of work.

**Supports** – what supports have been put in place to combat psychosocial hazards (for example training, support from colleagues, managers having clear procedures and policies in place, occupational health supports and employee assistance programs.).

**Relationships** - managing workplace relations is important and this is done through competent managers, a safe and supportive work culture, policies and procedures, and training.

**Role** – employees being informed of and understanding their job role and boundaries, and other employees having a reasonably clear idea of that role. This provides clarity as to what people are required to do.

**Change** – any change occurring in the workplace must be adequately communicated to employees in a way which allows them process and understand the impact of change on their duties and responsibilities.

By identifying psychosocial hazards in the workplace (for example strained relationships or patterns of bullying), employers can put in place controls). This can include having an Anti-Bullying Policy in place, facilitating a session on communication, making available the Anti Bullying Policy to all employees, and providing a way for people to discuss any issues arising between individuals or within a group or between teams/groups. With a small input or change at an early stage, the likelihood of a need for further difficulties can be reduced.



## The hazard of Bullying at Work

Workplace Bullying is 'repeated inappropriate behaviour, by an individual or a group, against another person or group, which a reasonable person would consider to be undermining of an individual's rights to dignity and respect at work'.

Particular care is needed around people's understanding of the term bullying. A small percentage of workplace conflict meets the criteria of bullying. Where a complaint of bullying arises, clear procedures will allow effective management of the issue. All cases should be assessed and monitored, so that the complaint and potential conflict has been resolved and good relations restored, as far as is reasonably practicable. Records should be kept.

Certain assumptions need to be understood to assess bullying complaints.

These include that:

> All people at work are entitled to be treated respectfully.

> There is a standard which most people understand as to what this behaviour looks like.

> Those in charge of places of work have a duty to know that those they manage behave reasonably to others.

> If a complaint is made, a consistent standard of behaviour should be applied to assess each complaint.

> Remedies should be put in place by the employer where behaviours are identified as unreasonable – even if they have not been identified as bullying.

> Improper behaviour at work is the responsibility of the employer to manage.

> Where behaviours are identified as bullying, records should be kept.

When managing workplace bullying consider the following controls:

> Provide regular sessions on appropriate interpersonal communications at work and at induction.

> Provide adequate and competent management and supervision.

> Highlight changes in workplace practices in a timely fashion so that employees have the opportunity to engage and discuss.

> Those found to have bullied must have their behaviour controlled. This can be done through a mixture of methods – for example, monitoring, behaviour management, training, and clear instruction.

> Please note that the disciplinary process is outside the remit of the Health and

Safety Authority - but the employer has a duty and must ensure that the identified hazardous behaviour is stopped, and evidence must be provided for this. Please refer to the IHRC for further information on the disciplinary process.

Link out to HSA Code of Practice on Bullying

Link out to hsalearning.ie training on bullying

Link out to IHRC for further information on the disciplinary process for Bullying

## Definitions and Further Information

### Psychosocial

Psychosocial relates to people, individuals, and groups at work. This term relates to the interaction between psychological factors (i.e., internal to the individual) and social factors (i.e., individual interaction with the external environment). It mainly focuses, for occupational purposes, on the influences of social factors on an individual, especially their perception, interpretation, behavioural and cognitive reaction to these social factors.

However, there is also an important influence from the individual to the social, in that it is partly the people at work who create the climate which then, itself, influences the individual.

### Psychosocial Hazards

Hazards of a psychosocial nature will include aspects of a business, place of work and systems of work, which a reasonable person would find challenging to the point of being potentially harmful. They do not include every item at work which can be annoying or difficult. A psychosocial hazard is bounded by certain legal particulars. Certain aspects of the work environment are not managed and increase the likelihood for harm to individuals at work. These are often cited as social factors at work which could include the work environment, training and management, equipment, and hazardous relationships.

### Risk

The chance or likelihood that someone will be harmed by the hazard.

## Work Related Stress

Work Related Stress (WRS) is stress caused or made worse by work. It refers to when a person perceives their work environment to be overly taxing, so that their reaction involves feelings of an inability to cope, which invoke fear in that individual. This may be caused by perceived or real pressures, deadlines, and threats within the working environment. For a work-related stressor to be removed, it may require a change to the work environment, or it may require a change that the individual needs to make - for example how they understand the work environment, or how they react to it.

## Workpositive.ie

A free on-line and confidential psychosocial risk assessment resource Workpositive.ie is hosted by the Health and Safety Authority and the State Claims Agency. When used it will give a written, recorded assessment at a given time of the psychosocial hazards that exist at a place of work and a snapshot of the overall work environment. Depending on the size of the company users can compare between departments and teams and across functions.

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