



We're taking action to protect  
workplace mental health

# MIND YOUR HEAD

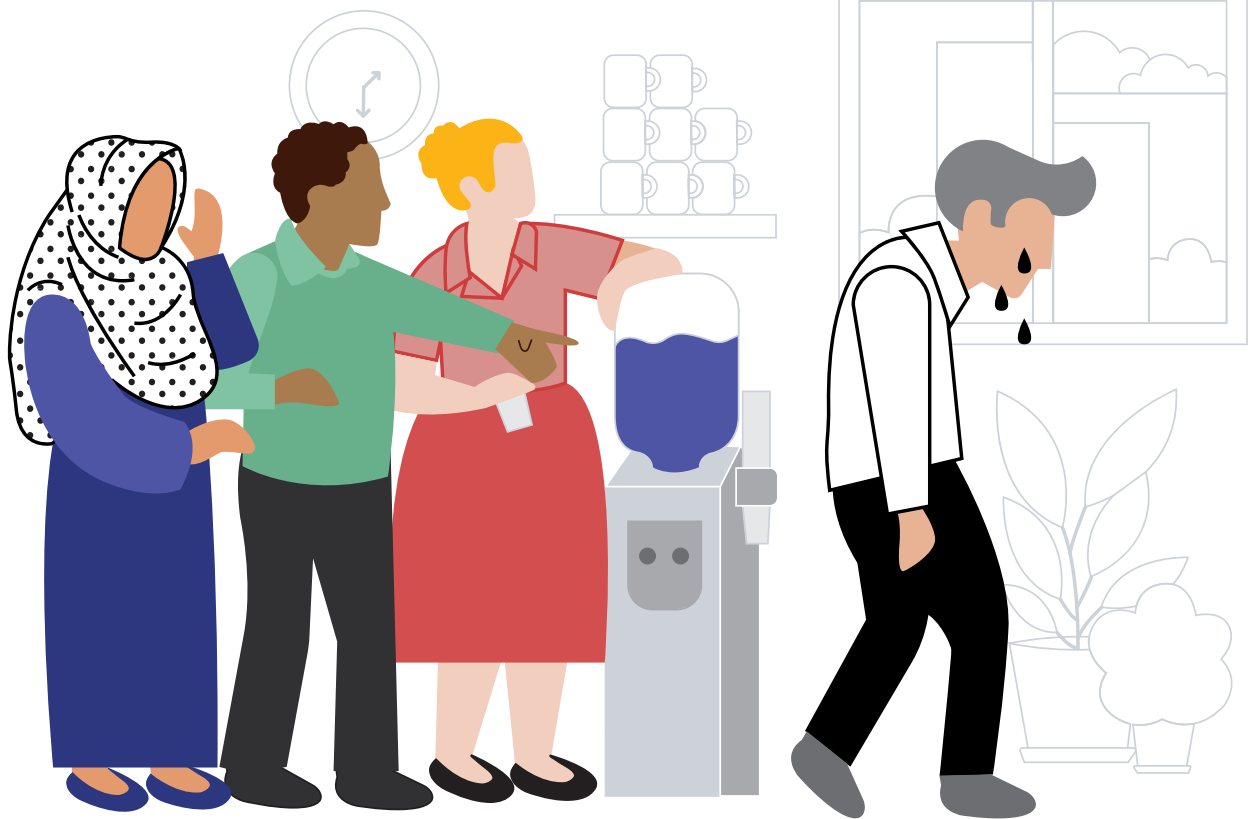
WHS Guidance For Psychological Hazards





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# Introduction

Work is a significant factor in people's mental health. We know that meaningful, rewarding, good work can impact positively on our mental health. Equally we know that issues such as high workloads, customer and client aggression and poor workplace relationships can adversely impact on workers' mental health.

Just like physical health and safety hazards, such as slippery surfaces, dangerous and unguarded machinery and badly set-up work stations, there are also workplace mental health hazards, like high and low job demands, isolated work and poor role clarity.

These workplace mental health hazards injure thousands of workers each year, just like physical hazards but they often fly under the radar.

Workplaces are experiencing a mental health emergency, with workplace mental injuries now the fastest growing type of workplace injury in Australia.

Mental health hazards can have a major impact on individuals, but they also affect everyone in the workplace through high staff turnover, reduced productivity and of course, an increase in workers' compensation claims.

## Mind Your Head

Mind Your Head is a joint initiative between unions and employers, supported by Employers Mutual Limited and WorkSafe's WorkWell Mental Health Improvement Fund.

The aims of this campaign are to:

- raise the priority of mental health and safety to sit equal to treatment of physical health and safety;
- educate and develop workers, HSRs, Managers and Leaders to understand work-related mental health risk factors and the relationship with WHS;
- design tools and resources for workplaces to create mentally safe systems of work;
- facilitate engagement with workers, HSRs, managers and leaders to work together to create mentally healthy work; and
- review and analyse the interventions to determine best practice and create a community that learns from each other.

## Guidance Document

This guidance document provides information of common psychosocial hazards and risk to physiological health to help HSRs identify hazards in their workplaces.

## Definitions

**Absenteeism:** absence from work.

**Employer:** means a person who conducts a business or undertaking and engages a worker or workers as defined in section 5 of the WHS Act.

**Gendered Violence:** is any behaviour, action, system or structure that causes physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm to a worker because of their sex, gender, sexual orientation or because they do not adhere to dominant gender stereotypes or socially prescribed gender roles.

**Harassment:** is unwelcome and unsolicited behaviour that a reasonable person would consider to be offensive, intimidating, humiliating or threatening. Harassment can be physical, spoken or written; can be a single incident or repeated behaviour. This can include (but is not limited to) repeated or singular instance of: unwanted sexual advances, unfair treatment due to gender, negative comments about race, being sworn or yelled at or humiliated in front of others.

**Hazard:** a situation or thing that has the potential to harm a person.

**Hierarchy of Control:** the hierarchy of risk control is a method used for controlling risks, ranked from the highest level of protection and reliability to the lowest.

**HSC:** health and safety committee: a consultative body established under the WHS Act. The committee's functions include facilitating co-operation between workers and the person conducting a business or undertaking to ensure worker's health and safety at work, and assisting to develop work health and safety standards, rules and procedures for the workplace.

**HSR/ Health and Safety Representative:** a worker who has been elected by a work group under the WHS Act to represent them on health and safety issues.

**Organisational Climate:** properties of the work environment as perceived by workers.

**Presenteeism:** being present at work but with reduced output.

**Psychological distress:** Negative emotional state

including anxiety, sadness, and depression.

**Psychosocial hazards/ factors:** anything in the design or management of work that increases the risk of work-related stress and psychological injury .

**Psychosocial risk:** possibility that harm might occur when exposed to a psychosocial hazard.

**Reasonably Practicable:** means that which is objectively, or was at a particular time, reasonably able to be done to ensure health and safety, taking into account and weighing up all relevant matters.

**Risk control:** actions taken to eliminate health and safety risks so far as is reasonably practicable, and if that is not possible, minimising the risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

**Risk:** the possibility that harm (death, injury or illness) might occur when exposed to a hazard.

**Stress response:** is the physical, mental and emotional reactions that occur when a worker perceives the demands of their work exceed their ability or resources to cope.

**WHS Act:** means the Work Health and Safety Act (in all jurisdictions except Victoria).

**WHS Regulations:** means the Work Health and Safety Regulations 2011 (Cth).

**Work Group:** means your work group of workers established under part 5 of the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Cth)('WHS Act').

**Worker:** is any person who carries out work in any capacity for a person conducting a business or undertaking, including a workers, contractors, subcontractors, apprentices, trainees and volunteers.

**Workplace bullying:** is repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed at a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety. This can include (but is not limited to) repeated: unreasonable demands and pressure targeted at a particular worker or group of workers, unfair allocation of hours or work tasks, verbal and physical abuse, undermining another's persons work performance, belittling and humiliating them.

## Why prevention?

Work-related psychological injury has consequences for workers and employers.

Poor psychological health and safety costs Australian organisations \$6 billion per annum in lost productivity.

Other costs for business include: high staff turnover, reduced productivity, increased sick leave, increased workers' compensation claims, and extended return to work periods.

1 in 10 compensation claims are for mental stress/injury. During COVID-19 and work from home arrangements, these trends have accelerated with more than 1 in 3 COVID related claims being for psychological injury.

Early identification and management of risks can help minimise the potential severity of injuries, and time lost from work. This can be achieved by educating and developing workers, HSRs, and managers to:

- understand work-related mental health risk factors; and
- identify, assess, control, and review psychosocial risks in the workplace.

Workers, their unions, employers and leaders, working together can create mentally safe systems of work, and mentally safe workplaces.



Source: 'Work should not hurt' report – ACTU – 2020

## Your rights & responsibilities

A mentally healthy workplace takes positive steps to prevent harm by identifying mental health hazards, managing harm from an early stage, and supporting recovery; just like we would with physical hazards at work.

Under s 19 of the *WHS Act*, employers have a duty of care. They must provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, so far as is reasonably practicable.

The term **health** includes both physical and psychological health.

Employers also have an obligation to consult with workers through their unions on matters that affect their mental health and safety.

Employers must systematically and comprehensively:

- identify work-related hazards and risks;
- assess risks (where the degree of risk and suitable controls are not already known);
- implement effective control measures to eliminate hazards or minimise risks. The main focus on the good design and effective management of work, creating safe systems of work and ensuring
- communication and behaviour; and
- consult effectively with workers, their representatives and others where required.

An Employer has the primary duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, workers and other people are not exposed to psychological health and safety risks arising from the business or undertaking.

This duty requires employers to ‘manage’ risks to psychological health and safety arising from the business or undertaking by eliminating exposure to psychosocial hazards so far as is reasonably practicable. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate them, you must then minimise those risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

Workers have a duty to take reasonable care for their own health and safety and to not adversely affect the health and safety of other persons. Workers must comply with reasonable instructions, as far as they are reasonably able, and co-operate with reasonable health and safety policies or procedures that have been notified to workers.

Pursuant to s 18 of the *WHS Act*, regard must be had to the following matters in determining what is (or was at a particular time) **reasonably practicable** in relation to ensuring health and safety:

- a. the likelihood of the hazard or risk concerned eventuating;
- b. the degree of harm that would result if the hazard or risk eventuated;
- c. what the person concerned knows, or ought reasonably to know, about the hazard or risk and any ways of eliminating or reducing the hazard or risk;
- d. the availability and suitability of ways to eliminate or reduce the hazard or risk; and
- e. the cost of eliminating or reducing the hazard or risk.



# Hazard identification & risk assessment

## Psychological + Social = Psychosocial

Psychosocial hazards are factors in the design or management of work that increase the risk of work-related stress and can lead to psychological or physical harm.

These include job design, social, organisational and management contexts of work that have the potential to impact worker health and wellbeing.

*Cox & Griffiths, 2005*

### Step 1 – identify psychosocial hazards

Psychosocial hazards may be identified by:

- having conversations with colleagues, supervisors and union health and safety specialists;
- inspecting the workplace to see how work is carried out, noting any rushing, delays or work backlogs;

- noticing how people interact with each other during work activities;
- reviewing relevant information and records such as reporting systems including incident reports, workers' compensation claims, staff surveys, absenteeism and staff turnover data; and
- using surveys to gather information from workers, supervisors and managers.

### Step 2 – assess risks

Understand the nature of the harm that could be caused by the psychosocial hazards, how serious the harm could be and the likelihood of it happening.

### Step 3 – control risks

Implement the most effective control measures that are reasonably practicable in the circumstances and ensure they remain effective over time.



### The hierarchy of controls

The hierarchy of risk control provides mechanisms for controlling risks, ranked from the highest level of protection and reliability to the lowest.

Employers have a duty to ensure health and safety requires the person to eliminate risks to health and safety, so far as is reasonably practicable.

If it is not reasonably practicable, the hierarchy of control must be applied to minimize each risk.

- Eliminate hazards and associated risks. This is the most effective control measure. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate the entire hazard, eliminate as many risks associate with the hazard and use other control measure to minimize other associated risks.
- Reduce the risk so far as is reasonably possible by using a combination of:
  - altering the system of work;
  - altering workplace layout;
  - altering workplace environment; and
  - changing the object/ tools used in the task.
- Administrative control, refers to implementing work methods or procedures to limit exposure to a hazard. Including the use of Personal protective equipment (PPE) to aid in minimising exposure to a hazard. Administrative controls and PPE should be used alongside other controls to increase the effectiveness of higher-control measures.

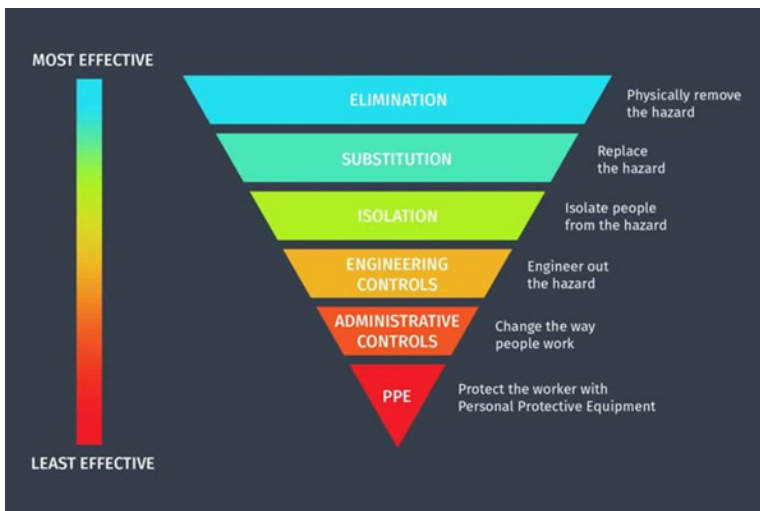
### Step 4 – continue to review hazards and control measures

Ensure they are working as planned by reviewing them regularly at your HSC meetings and by speaking with affected colleagues in your WG.

Under the WHS regulations 38, duty holders must review, and as necessary revise control measures, implemented under these Regulations so as to maintain, so far as is reasonably practicable, a work environment that is without risks to health or safety.

A review must occur in circumstances:

- when the control measure is not effective in controlling the risk;
- before a change at the workplace that is likely to give rise to a new or different health and safety risk that the control measure may not effectively control;
- if a new hazard or risk is identified;
- if the results of consultation indicate that a review is necessary; or
- if a HSR requests a review.



## Common psychological hazards

Listed below are some common workplace psychosocial hazards/ work-related factors.

When assessing the impact of workplace psychosocial hazards, consider that a combination of these factors may increase the chance of injury or illness.

1. Low job control
2. High and low job demands
3. Poor support
4. Poor workplace relationships
5. Low role clarity
6. Poor organisational change management
7. Low recognition and reward
8. Poor organisational justice
9. Poor environmental conditions
10. Remote and isolated work
11. Violent or traumatic events

### Low Job Control

Low job control occurs when workers have little control over aspects of their work, including how, and when, a job is done.

Indicators include situations where workers:

- have little control or say in the way they do their work;
- are not involved in decision making about their work;
- are required to work at a pace that exceeds staffing capabilities or resources;
- are being micro-managed and required to perform tasks in specific ways;
- have their skills and experiences undervalued or underutilised; and
- are unable to refuse to work with, or provide service to, aggressive customers or clients.

This hazard is exacerbated when paired with high job demand; situations where workers have excessive responsibility but little authority in respect to decision making.



## High and Low Job Demands

Psychological injuries may occur where job demands cannot be met, are unreasonable or where adequate resources (e.g., training equipment) are not provided.

Job demands include:

1. emotional demands (e.g., dealing with emotionally challenging matters, needing to suppress genuine emotions);
2. mental demands (e.g., work pressure, requirements to work hard and fast); and
3. physical demands (e.g., working in physically awkward postures for long periods, working in very hot or cold environments).

Indicators include environments where workers:

- have workloads that are excessive or create unreasonable time pressure;
- have very little say in the way they do their work or when they can take rest breaks;
- are not involved in making decisions about work that affects them or their clients; and
- have skills and experience that are underused.

## Poor Support

When workers don't get the support, they need from leaders and colleagues, it can harm their health and wellbeing.

Indicators include situations where workers:

- are not given clear work goals;
- are not provided with an adequate induction, information or training;
- don't have access to additional supports such as Employee Assistance Programs;
- are not able to ask for flexible working arrangements;
- are not given constructive feedback so they can improve; and
- are not given help when they take on new or challenging tasks.



## Poor Workplace Relationship

Unresolved conflict or strained relationships between co-workers or with managers can cause psychological injury.

Indicators include situations where there is:

- workplace bullying, aggression, harassment including sexual harassment, discrimination, or other unreasonable behaviour by co-workers, supervisors or clients;
- poor relationships between workers and their managers, supervisors, co-workers and clients or others the worker has to interact with as part of their job;
- unresolved conflict between workers and their managers, supervisors or co-workers;
- no clear guidelines about how workers are expected to behave; and
- a workplace culture that encourages disrespectful behaviour and ideas.

## Low Role Clarity

Low role clarity means that people are not sure what their responsibilities are or what is expected of them.

Indicators include situations where:

- tasks and work expectations change without notice to workers;
- there are conflicting job roles, responsibilities or expectations from multiple managers; and
- workers are not sure who to report to.

## Poor Organisational Change Management

Organisational change can present a psychological hazard when it is poorly managed or communicated. All modern awards and EBAs must include a term that requires consultation about changes to regular rosters or ordinary hours of work, but this does not itself provide a control for psychological hazards.

Indicators include situations where:

- changes are not explained properly, or workers are not asked for their view before making major decisions;
- workers are not given enough practical support during change;
- communication systems are poorly managed leading to rumours and misinformation about changes;
- workers are not given opportunities to participate in the change process; and
- workers are not given enough time to think about and respond to changes.

## Low Recognition and Reward

Where workers' efforts and achievements are not recognised this can result in them feeling unappreciated and increases the risk of work-related stress and psychological injury.

Indicators include situations where there is:

- lack of positive or constructive feedback;
- imbalance between workers' efforts and the formal and informal recognition of these efforts;
- lack of opportunity for skills development; and
- underused workers' skills and experiences.

## Poor Organisational Justice

Poor organisational justice is when people are not treated fairly, or there is inconsistency or bias in the workplace.

Indicators include situations where:

- policies and procedures are applied inconsistently;
- there is unfairness or bias in decision making, work allocations, and shift allocations;
- underperforming workers are not given the support they need to improve;
- hiring or promoting practices aren't related to performance, or where recruitment methods are inconsistent.

## Working in Isolation

'Working alone, remotely or in isolation' is any work where a workers is unable to get immediate assistance from colleagues or other people.

Indicators include situations where workers are:

- working alone physically – unpacking in a warehouse;
- working away from others – a long haul truck driver;
- out of hours work – outside of standard working hours such as shift work;
- long distance travelling – freight transport drivers;
- working unsupervised – public transport, taxi and limousine drivers;
- workplace isolation – working on a farm or in a geographically isolated location; and
- working in isolation with the public – public transport drivers.

## Poor Environmental Conditions

Working in poor quality and hazardous working environments, such environments with poor air quality, high noise levels, extreme temperatures, and unsafe machinery is hazardous to both physical and psychological health.

Indicators include situations where:

- work is highly repetitive, monotonous or machine paced;
- workers work in hazardous or unpleasant working environments; and
- workers are exposure to excessive or irritating noise, poor ventilation, lighting or workstation set up.

## Violent and Traumatic Events

Workplace incidents which expose people to abuse, the threat of harm, or actual harm, can cause fear and distress which can lead to psychological injury. Trauma doesn't just affect the workers who are there at the time. Hearing stories or watching security footage about distressing incidents can result in second-hand trauma ('vicarious trauma') for some people.

Risk is increased in situation where:

- the workplace has not done risk assessments for potential exposure to physical and emotional trauma;
- there are no procedures to document previous incidents;
- there are no guidelines to follow for when a traumatic event happens in the workplace;
- workers can't access peer support programs or services such as an Employee Assistance Program;
- managers are not given training in how to manage workplace trauma.

## What to do if an injury occurs?

If you, or someone else, is at immediate risk of harm to themselves or others, contact emergency services on 000.

For 24 hour, 7 day telephone mental health support call:

- Lifeline - 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue - 1300 22 4636
- Suicide callback service - 1300 659 467

### Right to Workers' Compensation

Anybody injured or made ill at work has a right to worker's compensation, including paid leave and compensation for medical costs. This applies to both physical and mental injuries and can occur at the workplace or offsite. Each state and territory has its own worker's compensation scheme, although if you work for a select number of large national employer, you may be covered by [Comcare](#).

### Making a Workers' Compensation Claim

To make claim for workers' compensation follow these basic steps:

1. Report the injury to your employer – keep a copy of the report form if available.
2. Consult your treating doctor.
3. Request a workers' compensation certificate from your doctor if you require time off work for your injury and/or your doctor believes that you require a reduction in your hours or change in duties because of your injury.
4. Complete a [workers' compensation claim](#) form.
5. Submit the claim form and certificate of capacity to your employer as soon as possible.
6. Keep copies of everything, including details of:
  - when and how you believe you were exposed;
  - your symptoms and when you started experiencing them;
  - when you told your employer;
  - when you visited the doctor;
  - when your employer or their insurer spoke with you – either in person or over the phone;
  - your claim form; and
  - the certificate of capacity for your records.
7. Speak to your union delegate. Never meet with anybody without your delegate and request all questions be in writing.

#### Your employer:

- cannot refuse to receive the claim form; and
- cannot sack you for making a workers' compensation claim. If this does occur, contact your union immediately for assistance.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Am I required to disclose my mental health condition to my employer?

Workers are not required to disclose information about a mental health condition to their manager or supervisor if the mental health condition does not affect how they do their job.

If you have a mental health condition, you are protected under the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act of 1992 and various State and Territory human rights legislations. This includes both direct and indirect forms of discrimination, so if an employer doesn't make reasonable adjustments for a worker with a mental health condition, it may constitute discrimination, even when no 'direct' discrimination may have occurred.

### Are "sick days" and "mental health days" the same thing? Can I use personal leave when I'm experiencing a mental health or stress injury?

Under the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth), all full-time employees have a right to take 10 personal leave days per year under the National Employment Standards (some may have more under a union EBA). This can be for mental or physical health needs. In addition, employers cannot discriminate against employees experiencing mental health issues.

### My employer or their representatives is insisting on attending my medical appointment, can they do this?

No. Medical appointments are private; there is no law that permits your employer attending without your consent. Workers' compensation legislation sets out requirements for workers and employers to encourage a successful return to work but there are no provisions for your employer or a representative of their insurer to attend your private medical appointment. Further, the Fair Work Ombudsman does not condone or support employer's attendance at medical appointments.

If your employer makes this request follow these steps:

1. It is essential you get that request in writing, including the reason for the request.
2. Inform your employer that you are getting advice.
3. Contact your union.- it is essential you get advice as to the reasonableness of this request.
4. Do not let an employer representative attend your medical appointment.
5. Medical appointments are private.
6. If a case conference is organised, then speak to your union and make sure you have a support person or representative with you, always.

### I'm being bullied at work, what should I do?

If you are being bullied at work your boss needs to know. If there is an elected HSR at your workplace, they also should be made aware, as should your union delegate who can help stop the bullying. Workers being bullied may be able to lodge a workers' compensation claim to cover time away from work and lost wages. Additionally, a worker, working for certain businesses, who reasonably believes that he or she has been bullied at work, can apply to the Fair Work Commission for an order to stop the bullying. For more information speak to your union.



# Resources

## Union resources

Union Assist working with your union, provides expert advisers to help you with your WorkCover disputes at the conciliation stage.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) representing Australian workers and their families.

## Statutory bodies

Fair Work Australia Information and advice about Australia's workplace rights and rules.

Safe Work Australia work health and safety guidance for workplaces.

Workwell tool kit WorkSafe's WorkWell Program supporting workplace leaders to prevent mental injury and promote safe and mentally healthy workplaces in Victoria.

## Legislation and Regulations in your State or Territory

### New South Wales

[Work Health and Safety Act 2011 \(NSW\)](#)

[NSW Workers Compensation Act 1987](#)

### Victoria

[Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 \(Vic\)](#)

[Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act and regulations \(Vic\)](#)

### Queensland

[Work Health and Safety Act 2011 \(Qld\)](#)

### Western Australia

[Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984 \(WA\)](#)

[Workers' Compensation and Injury Management Act 1981 \(WA\)](#)

### South Australia

[Work Health and Safety Act 2012 \(SA\)](#)

[Return to Work Act 2014 \(SA\)](#)

[Return to Work Regulations 2015 \(SA\)](#)

### Tasmania

[Work Health and Safety Act 2012 \(Tas\)](#)

[Workers Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 \(Tas\)](#)

[Workers Rehabilitation and Compensation Regulations 2021 \(Tas\)](#)

### Australian Capital Territory

[Work Health and Safety Act 2011 \(ACT\)](#)

[Workers Compensation Act 1951 \(ACT\)](#)

### Northern Territory

[Work Health and Safety \(National Uniform Legislation\) 2011 \(NT\)](#)

[Return to Work Act 1986 \(NT\)](#)

[Return to Work Regulations 1986 \(NT\)](#)

### Commonwealth of Australia

[Work Health and Safety Act 2011 \(Cth\)](#)

[Work Health and Safety Regulations 2011 \(Cth\)](#)

[Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988 \(Cth\)](#)

### Workers' Compensation Regulator in your State or Territory

[Australian Capital Territory: WorkSafe ACT](#)

[New South Wales: State Insurance Regulatory Authority](#)

[Northern Territory: NT WorkSafe](#)

[Norfolk Island: Norfolk Island Workers Compensation Agency](#)

[Queensland: WorkCover Queensland](#)

[South Australia: ReturnToWork SA](#)

[Tasmania: WorkCover Tasmania](#)

[Victoria: WorkSafe Victoria](#)

[Western Australia: WorkCover](#)

[Comcare: Claims and Rehabilitation](#)

### Sign up to Mind Your Head

If your workplace is having trouble addressing workplace mental health hazards, Mind Your Head can help.

Having a mentally healthy workplace means having the right tools and resources to identify and address workplace mental health risks before they become a hazard.

By signing up to Mind Your Head, you will get exclusive access to tried and tested tools and resources to help improve your workplace's mental health systems and practices.

[CLICK HERE](#)







**We're taking action to protect  
workplace mental health**

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