PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY DEFINITIONS

Why Language Matters

Having a shared understanding of psychological health and safety starts with using clear and consistent language. When everyone is using the same terms, it's easier to talk about important issues. It also avoids confusion and allows you to stay focused on what matters most, improving psychological health and safety at work. Using common language also helps connect committee work to broader health and safety efforts across the workplace.

Many of the terms and definitions below come from the current edition of the National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (CAN/CSA-Z1003). We have also included a section for plain language to make psychological health and safety easier for everyone.

Psychological Health

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

Psychological health, also known as mental health, is a state of wellbeing 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.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Psychological health, also known as mental health, is a state of wellbeing where a person can handle everyday stress. They can also work effectively and take part in their community.

Psychological Safety

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

The absence of harm and/or threat of harm to mental wellbeing that a worker might experience.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

A worker feels safe with no harm, or threat of harm, at work.

SWITCH BC

Psychological Health and Safety

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

The health, safety, and wellbeing of workers in the workplace, aiming to prevent incidents, injuries, and illnesses by identifying and controlling psychosocial hazards.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Psychological health and safety is creating a workplace that supports worker wellbeing. This means recognizing hazards and reducing risks that could cause stress, illness, or harm. Workers should feel safe, respected, and supported.

Psychologically Healthy and Safe Workplace

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

A workplace that actively works to prevent harm to worker psychological health, including in negligent, reckless, or intentional ways, and promotes workers' psychological wellbeing.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

A workplace that cares for the mental health of their workers and enhances their wellbeing. A workplace that takes action to keep their workers safe from stress, harm, or unfair treatment.

Psychological Health and Safety Management System (PHSMS)

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

An organizational management system designed to support planning, implementing, evaluating, management review, and continual improvement of policies, procedures, and practices that support psychological health and safety.

The strategic pillars of a psychological health and safety management system are prevention of harm, promotion of health, and resolution of incidents or concerns.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

A system with policies and programs that helps create a healthy and safe workplace. It focuses on prevention, support, and solving issues that may impact worker mental health.

Along with psychological health and safety-specific definitions, here are some other terms we will be using throughout the PHS Toolkit for JOHSCs.

Psychosocial

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

Involves both psychological and social conditions related to mental health. This includes emotional wellbeing, cultural and spiritual factors, social functioning, and coping mechanisms.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

The interaction of mental and social aspects of health that determines behaviour. This can influence how people think, feel, and interact with others at work.

Psychosocial Factors

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

Organizational factors (work environment, management, social conditions) that can impact worker's psychological response to work and work conditions. They can have both protective and hazardous aspects to them depending how they are experienced in the workplace.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Workplace conditions, that affect workers mental wellbeing. This can include how people are treated or how work is managed.
These conditions can help or harm mental health, depending on how they are experienced.

Psychosocial Hazard

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

Elements of the work environment, workplace social interactions, management practices, employment conditions, or the organization of work that have the potential to cause harm to a worker. Note: Examples of psychosocial hazards can include, but are not limited to, high job demands, low control, inadequate support, workplace bullying, harassment, and violence.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Parts of the work environment, such as how people interact or how work is managed, that could harm a worker.

Examples of psychosocial hazards include high workload, low control over your work, not enough support, and experiences like bullying, harassment, or violence.

Psychosocial Risk

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

The combination of both the likelihood of the occurrence of harm happening and the severity of its impact arising from exposure to psychosocial hazards.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

The chance that a psychosocial hazard will cause harm, combined with how serious that harm could be.

Employee and Family Assistance Plan (EFAP)

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

A confidential service that some employers offer to employees and their families as part of their benefits package. It provides short-term support, coaching, and counselling for personal, family, or work-related concerns, such as stress, relationships, grief, or substance use. EFAPs are usually available 24/7, provide free counselling, and can make connections to longer-term or specialized services if needed.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

A free and confidential service some employers offer to support the mental health of workers and their families. It provides short-term counselling and coaching to help with personal, family, or work-related issues, such as stress, grief, relationships, or substance use. EFAPs are usually available 24/7. EFAPS can connect people to longer-term or specialized support if needed.

Harm

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

An injury or damage to health.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

When a worker gets hurt or their health is negatively affected. An injury or damage to health. Health includes physical and/or mental.

Hazard

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

A potential source of harm.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Something at work that could cause a worker to get hurt or sick.

Health

(TECHNICAL DEFINITION)

A state of complete physical, social, and mental wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or sickness.

(PLAIN LANGUAGE)

Being well in body, mind, and social life, not just free from illness.

Health and Safety Management System (HSMS)

(TECHNICAL DEFINITION)

A formal, structured approach used by an organization to identify hazards, assess and control risks, and continuously improve health and safety performance through policies, roles, procedures, and monitoring processes.

(PLAIN LANGUAGE)

A system that helps create a health and safety workplace. It focuses on how hazards are identified, risks are reduced, and responsibilities are shared.

Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC)

(TECHNICAL DEFINITION)

A Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC) is a team of worker and employer representatives who come together to keep the workplace safe. The committee's main role is to identify workplace hazards, assess risks, and make recommendations for improvements. JOHSCs play an important role in fostering a strong safety culture within the organization. By involving workers in decision-making, and ensuring compliance with health and safety regulations, JOHSCs help create a healthier, safer work environment for everyone.

(PLAIN LANGUAGE)

A Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC) is a group of worker and employer representatives. This group works together to ensure workplace health and safety.
They find hazards, check risks, and suggest improvements. JOHSCs are key to building a strong health and safety culture.
By including workers in decisions and following health and safety rules, JOHSCs help create a safer and healthier environment for everyone.

Mental Health

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

Mental health, also known as psychological health, is a state of wellbeing 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.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Mental health, also known as psychological health, is a state of wellbeing where a person can handle everyday stress. They can also work effectively and take part in their community.

Organization

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

A company, employer, operation, undertaking, establishment, enterprise, institution, or association, or a part or combination thereof, that has its own management.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

A group of people who work together for a shared purpose.

Risk

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

The combination of the likelihood of the occurrence of harm and the severity of that harm.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

The chance that mental and/or physical harm will happen, and how serious that harm could be.

Risk Assessment

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

The systematic use of information to identify hazards and to estimate the risk.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

An organized way of using information to find hazards and assess how risky they are.

Stress

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

Stress is a normal psychological and physical response that occurs when a person perceives that the demands of a situation exceed their available resources or ability to cope. Stress can be positive and motivating, but it becomes harmful when demands are intense, prolonged, or cumulative and exceed a person's capacity to manage them. Harmful stress increases the risk of psychological or physical harm.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Stress is the body and mind's normal response to challenges or demands. Some stress can be helpful. However, stress becomes harmful when pressure builds up or lasts too long. It can be more than a person can handle with the supports and resources they have.

The Standard

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (CAN/CSA-Z1003-13) is often referred to as "the Standard."

While many factors outside of work can affect psychological health, the Standard focuses on aspects within the control, responsibility, or influence of the workplace that can impact workers. It provides a framework and specifies requirements for building and sustaining g a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. It gives organizations a structured way to manage risks, put supportive practices in place, and foster a culture that values psychological health and safety.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (CAN/CSA/BNQ Z1003-13), or "the Standard," gives guidelines to help organizations protect mental health at work.

The Standard outlines steps to:
- Identify and eliminate hazards that can cause psychological harm, such as heavy workloads.
- Assess and manage risks that can't be fully removed, like stress.
- Promote wellbeing through effective workplace practices.
- Foster a respectful and supportive work culture

Terms of Reference (ToR)

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

A Terms of Reference (ToR) is a formal document that outlines the purpose, scope, and structure of a project or committee. This document defines the objectives, roles, responsibilities, and authority of the group, to help ensure clarity and alignment among all interest holders.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

A document that explains the goals, roles, and rules for a committee or project. It helps everyone understand what the group is doing and how decisions will be made.

Worker

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

In BC, a worker is a person employed by an organization or a person under the day-to-day control of the organization, whether paid or unpaid, which includes employees, supervisors, managers, leaders, contractors, service providers, volunteers, students, or other partners actively engaged in undertaking activities for benefit to the organization.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

In BC, anyone who does work for an organization staff, leaders, students, and contractors. Or unpaid positions such as volunteers.

Workplace

TECHNICAL DEFINITION

An area or location where a worker works for an organization or is required or permitted to be present while engaging in service (including social events) on behalf of an organization.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Any place a worker is assigned or allowed to work for an organization. This includes regular work sites, remote workspaces, and work-related events or gatherings.