

Psychosocial Risks: A wicked challenge

By Dr Hillary Bennett, Director at Leading Safety

In this article Dr Bennett outlines the thinking behind the Mental Wellbeing by Design framework and process that she created for the Forum. See more about the framework and process in the Forum guide, [Protecting Mental Wellbeing at Work](#)

All work is not equal.

There is 'good work', which is well designed, organised, and managed and protective of mental wellbeing. On the other hand, there is work that is toxic, containing one or more factors that significantly harm wellbeing.

Wellbeing is a person's ongoing state that allows them to thrive or not. It is just like physical health – we all have it. It is on a continuum, ranging from people thriving and going ok, to people struggling and being unwell.

The mental wellbeing continuum

Unwell | Struggling | Going OK | Thriving

Thriving is related to a person feeling and functioning well across multiple areas of their life. Thriving is associated with 'good work' and mental harm with 'toxic work'.

Aspects of work that harm or impair mental wellbeing are commonly referred to as psychosocial risks. As the term psychosocial risk can create some confusion and is not always understood in the same way, it may be more helpful to refer to psychosocial risks simply as risks to mental wellbeing.

These risks can cause mental harm which is costly to both individuals and organisations. The harm can be acute or chronic, result from a single or repeated exposure to risk(s) factors and range from mild psychological difficulties to severe psychological disorders e.g., depression, anxiety.

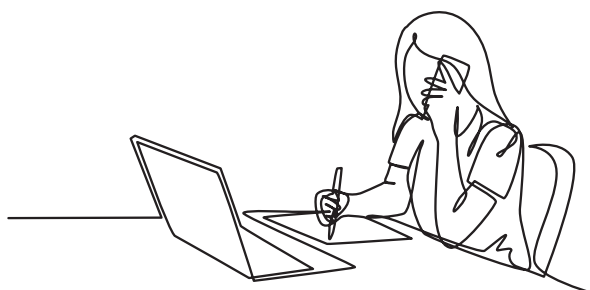
It is estimated that mental health problems cost New Zealand business at least \$1.65bn per annum. The WorkSafe Segmentation and Insights Programme Research (2019) found that in the last 12 months, 20% of respondents experienced depression, 31% anxiety, and 60% stress. The New Zealand Workplace Barometer (2020) reported that 70% of respondents reported an absence from work during the last 12 months due to 'physical or mental health'.



Although there are a wide range of risks that can impact on mental wellbeing at work, unlike physical risks, they are often referred to as a single risk. This is different to how risks to physical safety are viewed. In the physical safety arena, we identify risks associated with hazards e.g., confined spaces, working at heights. Yet when assessing risks to mental wellbeing, the risk is referred to as 'psychosocial risk', with no or little attempt to identify the wide range of known factors that have a harmful impact on mental wellbeing e.g., excessive workload, lack of control, inflexible work schedules, unsupportive managers, bullying and discrimination. These are distinctly different and should not be treated as a single risk. We need to stop listing psychosocial risks or wellbeing risks on critical risk registers as if they were a single entity. If we are going to protect the wellbeing of workers, the risks to wellbeing need to be identified as thoroughly as are risks to physical safety.

The underlying assumption of most physical safety and health risk assessments is that risks are measurable, observable and can be objectively managed. Risks to mental wellbeing are different. They are subjective, seldom directly observable, and have unclear definitive solutions. As a result, they are sometimes referred to as 'wicked challenges'.

Preventing harm – physical and mental – is our obligation; designing work so people thrive is the opportunity. Let's start by treating risks to wellbeing as we do risks to physical safety – not as a single risk but as a wide range of factors related to the way work is designed, organised and managed.



Some of the key challenges to managing risks to wellbeing include:

A lack of understanding of, and risks to, mental wellbeing.

Managers and workers view the risks to mental wellbeing at work differently.

People identifying the risks are not involved in developing the solutions or do not have the authority to implement the changes.

Workers are fearful that their confidentiality will be compromised and that any subsequent changes to the work may result in redundancies.

Senior leaders' reluctance to engage in meaningful work design due to concerns that interventions will be expensive.

Questions to reflect on:

Are the risks to wellbeing in your organisation referred to as a risk or a set of risks?

Have the risks that will significantly harm wellbeing been identified? How and who was involved?

Have the different risks to wellbeing across different parts of the organisation been identified?

What are the challenges to assessing mental wellbeing risks in your organisation?