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Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace

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ACT Law Society Intensive Conference 2024:
Bringing the Balance

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Psychosocial risk in the workplace

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Agree/disagree?

- Workplace stress is inevitable
- Psychological health and safety is a one-size-fits-all
- It's enough to have policies in place
- Addressing psychological health and safety is expensive

Overview

1. Understand of the concept of mentally healthy workplaces
2. Knowledge of psychosocial hazards
3. Identifying psychosocial hazards
4. Work design processes, tools and methods
5. Identifying work design tools appropriate to psychosocial hazards
6. Planning the re-design of work

Part 1: The integrated model of workplace mental health and your obligations

Relationship between mental health and work?

- Work can be beneficial for an individual's overall wellbeing if good quality supervision is present and there are favourable work conditions.

- Work is considered a **protective** factor against mental illness as it provides a person with a sense of purpose, acceptance within society and opportunities for development.

- Poorly designed work can exacerbate mental ill-health symptoms

What is a mentally healthy workplace?

- *A mentally healthy workplace is one in which psychosocial risks are recognised and suitable action is taken to prevent or minimise their potential negative impact on the mental health of workers. At the same time, protective or resilience factors are encouraged and promoted.* – *Black dog Institute*

- Whilst providing a mentally healthy workplace is important - it is only one component underpinning the mental health of an individual.

- The specific workplace related risks or stressors are part of a much larger group of risk factors to mental health that are outside the workplace.

Workplace mental health is a shared responsibility between employer and employee

Employers' role: manage risk

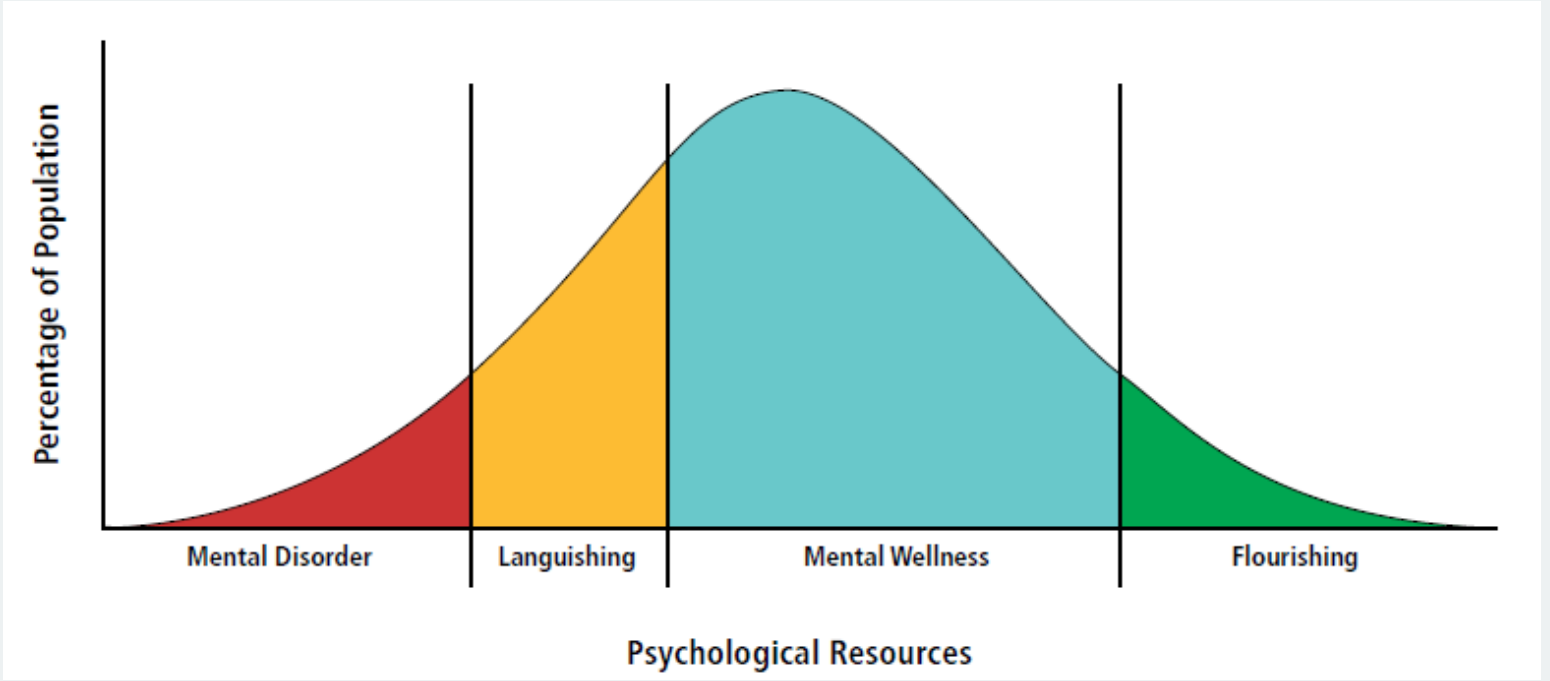
Employers should endeavour to understand and eliminate or reduce risks, provide support to employees who need it, and provide positive aspects of work that enable employees to flourish.

Employee's role: build PERMAH

Employees can reduce their likelihood of developing a mental illness and optimise their wellbeing by building PERMAH, plus looking after their physical health. Out of all physical health pillars, sleep is the one most closely related to mood and mental health.

Source: Flourish Dx

The integrated model



SUPPORT	PREVENT	PROTECT/PROMOTE
EAP	Risk Management	Work Design
Return to Work	Stress Management	Health Promotion
Mental Health First Aid	Education	Strengths Focus

Source: Flourish Dx

Changes to work health & safety regulation

The amended *Work Health and Safety (National Uniform) Legislation Amendment Regulations 2023* includes specific duties prescribing how you must **identify and manage hazards and risks to worker's psychological health and safety**.

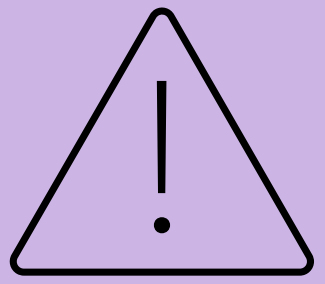
The changes to the model WHS Regulations include:

- identifying psychosocial hazards as hazards that may cause psychological harm and that arise from the design or management of work, the work environment, machinery/appliances, or interactions or behaviours at the workplace
- creating a separate process to control the risks posed by psychosocial hazards distinct from the hierarchy of controls (except in the case of hazards that are both psychosocial and physical) such as modifying the design, layout and environmental conditions of the workplace, and reviewing how work is managed, organised and supported

What does it mean?

- Enshrining psychological health in Regulation will help evolve our approach towards **prevention**, rather than just response.
- Activities aimed at raising mental health awareness, while positive, are not enough to meet your duties.
- Safety regulators will shift their attention to **how** work is organised so that it does not present sources of harm, rather than on individual level interventions.
- These are the icing on the cake - and *"no amount of icing fixes a bad cake"*.

Prof. Carlo Caponecchia, UNSW



Part 2: How to identify psychosocial hazards

What are psychosocial hazards at work?

Psychosocial hazard is a collective term for those hazards that primarily impact one's psychological system, affecting thoughts, perceptions, emotions, expectations and behaviours.

More formally, they are defined as:

"aspects of **job content**, **work organisation** and **management**, and **environmental** and **organisational conditions** that have the potential for psychological and physical harm"

(Cox, 1993; see also McKay et al, 2004)

These core elements of the definition are important as they tell us where we need to focus actions that control psychosocial risks.

The core elements

- **Job content** is about what work is actually done – the tasks that people are doing.
- **Work organisations** is about how work is distributed between people or teams, when work is meant to be performed.
- **Work management** includes how work is supervised, supported and facilitated.
- **Environmental conditions** in this context refer to the physical environment.
- **Organisational conditions** refer to issues such as hierarchy, structure, organisational culture and values and career opportunities.

Source, UNSW, Managing Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace

Activity:
Describing Key Elements
Individual reflection (3 mins)

1. Describe your own job in terms of the key elements:

- What are your main tasks?
- How is your work organised and managed?
- What physical conditions do you work in?
- What is your organisation like ?

2. How might this differ from the team you lead, if so?

Psychosocial hazards

Job demands

Job demands are one of the most common sources of workplace stress and psychological harm.

Low job control

Low job control is when workers have little control over how or when their job is done, or if their work is tightly managed.

Remote or isolated work

Working alone or remotely increases the risks to physical and psychological health in any job.

Poor physical environment

Exposure to unpleasant, poor quality or hazardous working environments or conditions can have a negative impact on workers physical and mental health.

Poor support

Poor support includes not providing workers with adequate support including practical assistance and emotional support from managers and colleagues to complete a task or job.

Lack of role clarity

Lack of role clarity, which can include unclear, inconsistent or frequently changing roles, responsibilities or expectations and a lack of important job-related information can be a mental health risk for workers.

Violence and aggression

Workplace violence can be any incident where a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances arising out of, or in the course of their work.

Bullying

Bullying is repeated, unreasonable behaviour towards a worker or workers, creating a risk to health and safety.

Poor organisational change management

Change is constant in working life and if managed well, can bring positive results for organisations and workers.

Inadequate reward and recognition

Jobs where there is an imbalance between workers' effort and recognition or rewards, both formal and informal can create a psychosocial risk.

Harassment including sexual harassment

Harassment is a harmful behaviour that creates a risk to health or safety.

Conflict or poor workplace relationships or interactions

Conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions can refer to a breakdown of individual and team relationships, conflict arising from tasks or relationships, violence and incivility.

Poor organisational justice

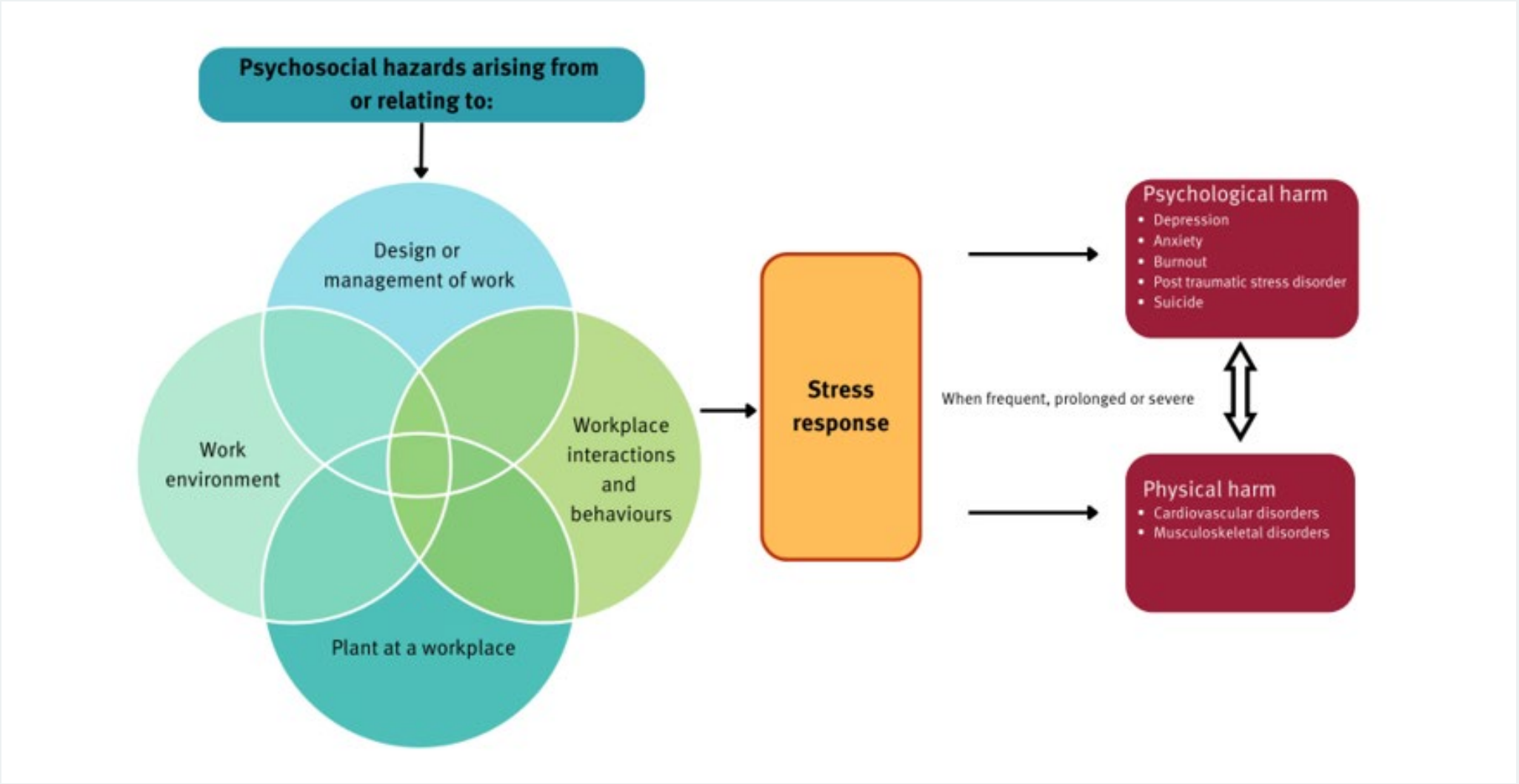
Poor organisational justice which can involves a lack of procedural justice, informational fairness, or interpersonal fairness can create a psychosocial workplace hazard.

Traumatic events or materials

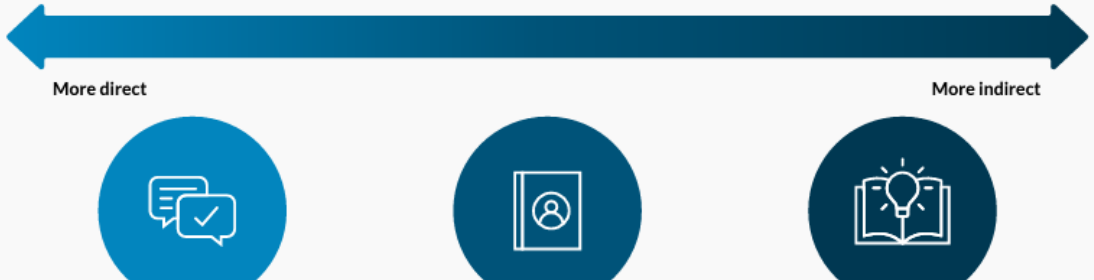
Witnessing, investigating or being exposed to traumatic events or material is considered a workplace psychosocial hazard.

Source: Comcare: Psychosocial Hazards at Work

Relationship between psychosocial hazards and injury



Identifying psychosocial hazards

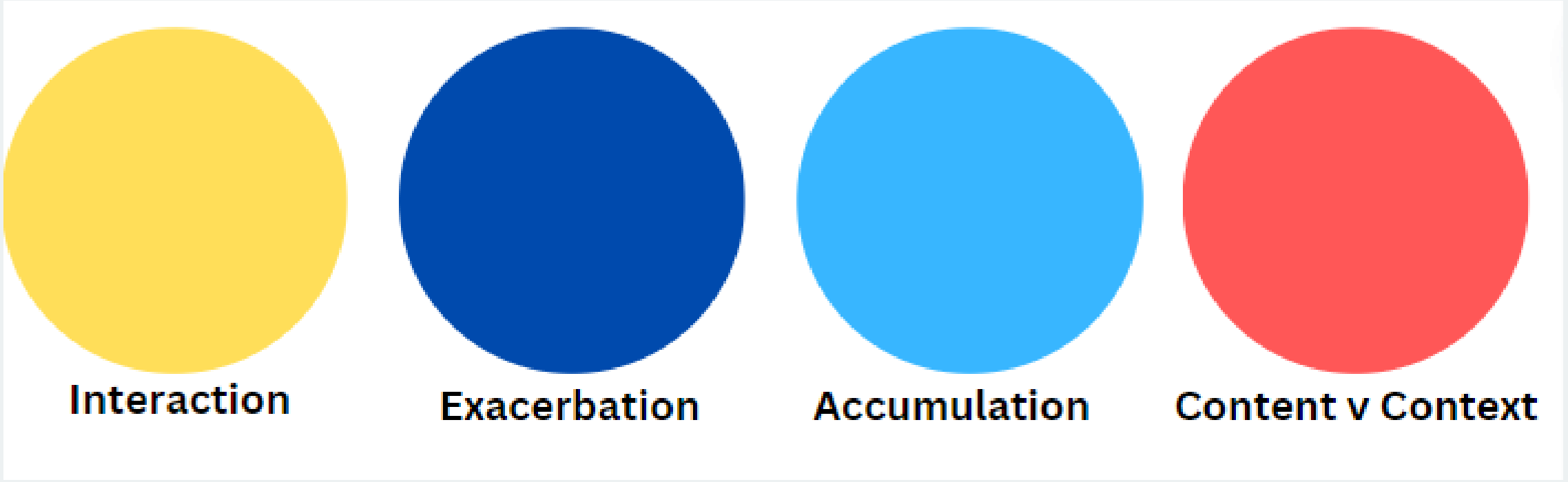


Talking and listening to staff	Sick leave and turnover data	Advice provided by the WHS regulator
Feedback during meetings, training, inductions and reviews	Workers' compensation claims	Industry guidance and resources
Reports of psychosocial hazards, and related investigation processes	Staff skills and experience profiles	Prosecution summaries
Surveys (on engagement, satisfaction, culture or psychosocial hazards)	Consultation with supply chains and networks when arranging safe systems of work	Public inquiries
WHS consultative committee discussions, and issues raised	WHS key performance indicators	Feedback from customers or partners
Hazard and incident reports	Analysis of work tasks, schedules and locations, including patterns of overtime	Talking to suppliers, partners, contractors, peers
	Observing work activities, outcomes and trends	Research reports and briefings
	Outsourcing, contracting, partner and procurement arrangements	Media coverage
	Performance review and mentoring activities	Conferences, seminars and networking events
	Exit interview information	
	Duty statements and performance agreements	
	Project risk management and procurement documents	

Source, UNSW, Managing Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace

Source: Safe Work Australia, Model Code of Practice, Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work

Identifying psychosocial hazards



Activity:
Identifying psychosocial hazards
Discussion(5 mins)

What psychosocial hazards can you identify in this scenario?

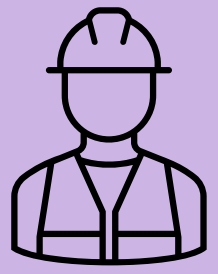
Identifying Psychosocial Hazards

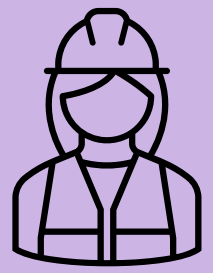
Scenario :

Sara, a junior lawyer at a well-known criminal defence law firm, deals with cases involving sexual offenses, regularly engaging with graphic and sensitive materials. The nature of her work exposes her to distressing and deeply disturbing details, necessitating her immersion in graphic evidence, testimonies, and witness accounts.
During one routine preparation for a court appearance, Sara encounters an emotionally challenging testimony, prompting an emotional outburst with tears. Recent observations note her struggles with concentration and an increasing level of anxiety.

Despite team lunches being a regular occurrence, Sara has become more isolated, frequently opting to stay in her office. Late nights at the office have become part of her routine, justified by her claim of being excessively busy.

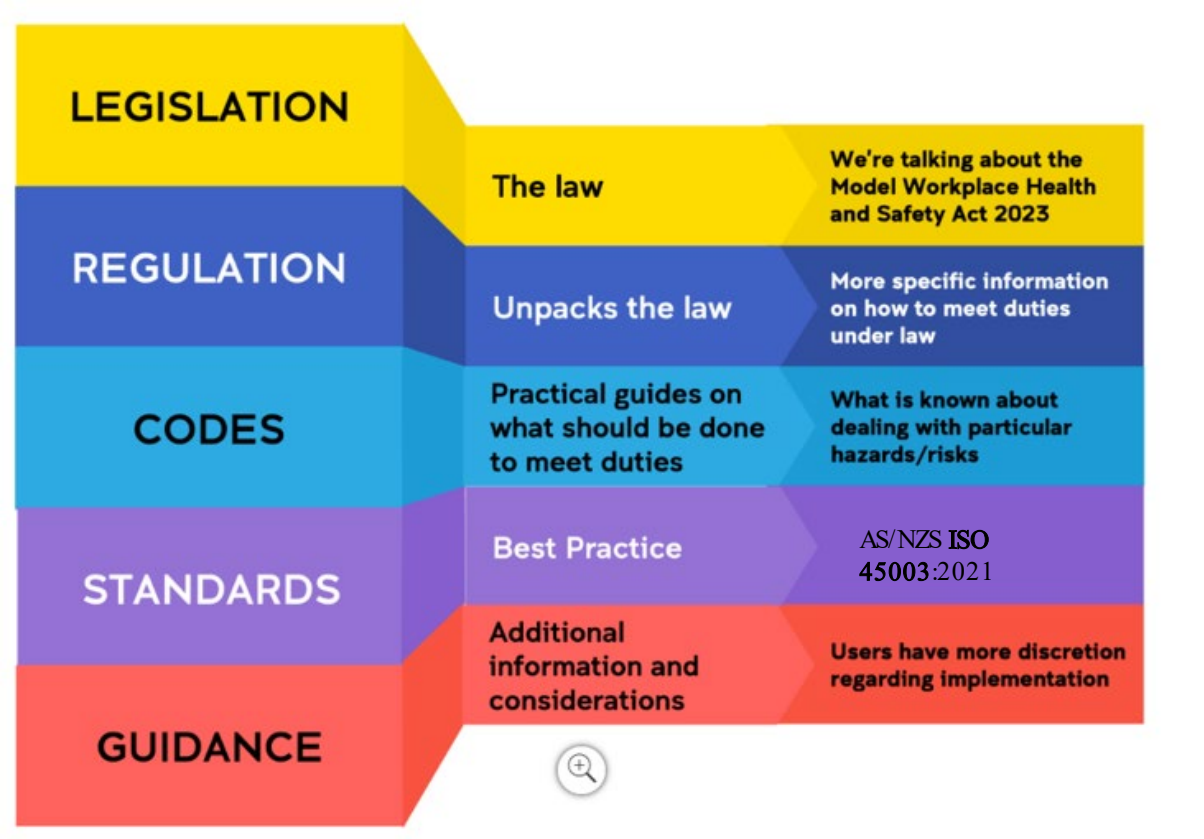
You overhear her private phone conversation in the corridor one day. She blurts out loudly "I don't want Ollie sleeping over at his friend's house anymore, don't you understand! ". She then bursts into tears.





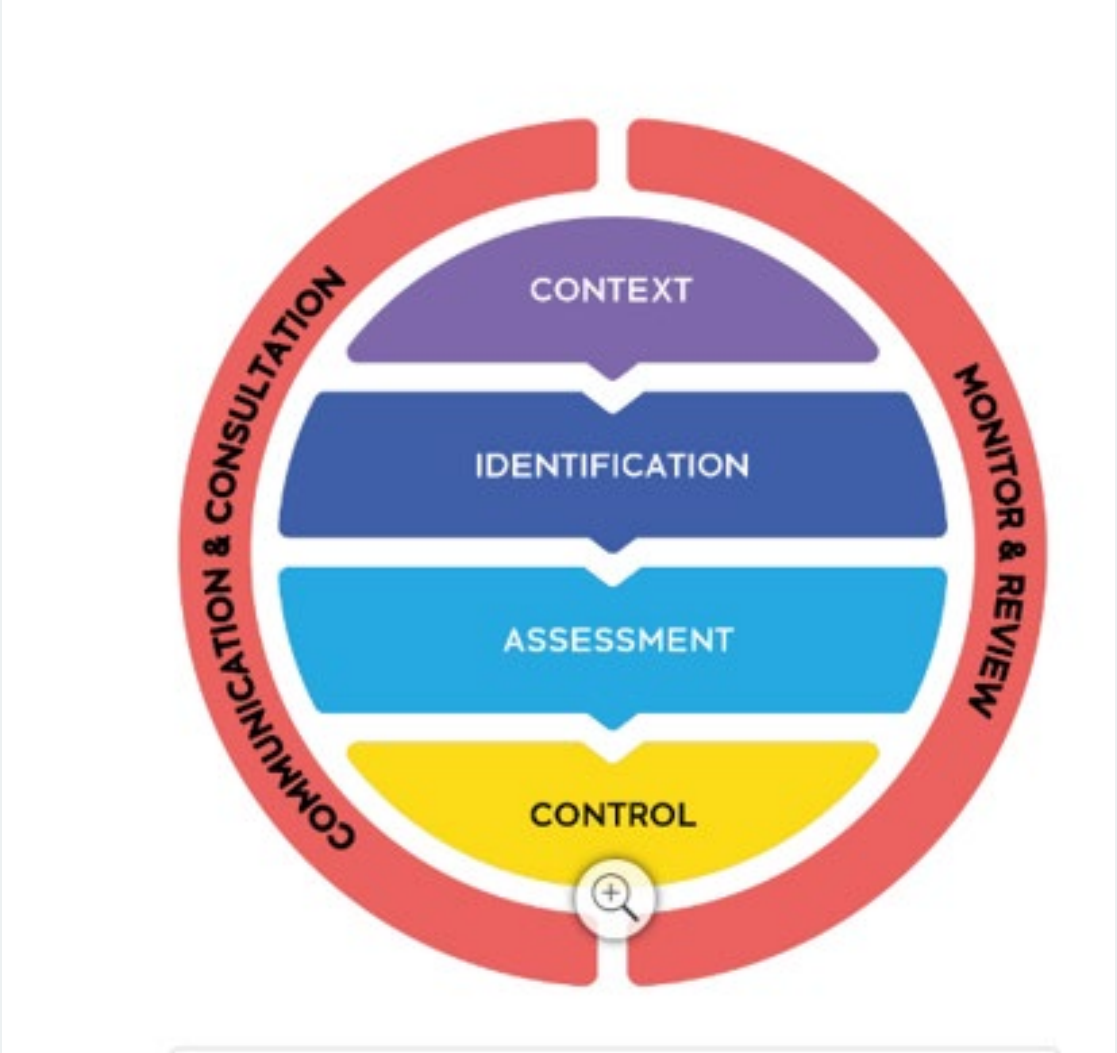
Part 3: Psychosocial risk management – context and assessment

Regulation, Codes of Practice & Guidance



Source, UNSW, Managing Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace

Risk management



Source, UNSW, Managing Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace CIC Model Adapted from ISO31000:2018

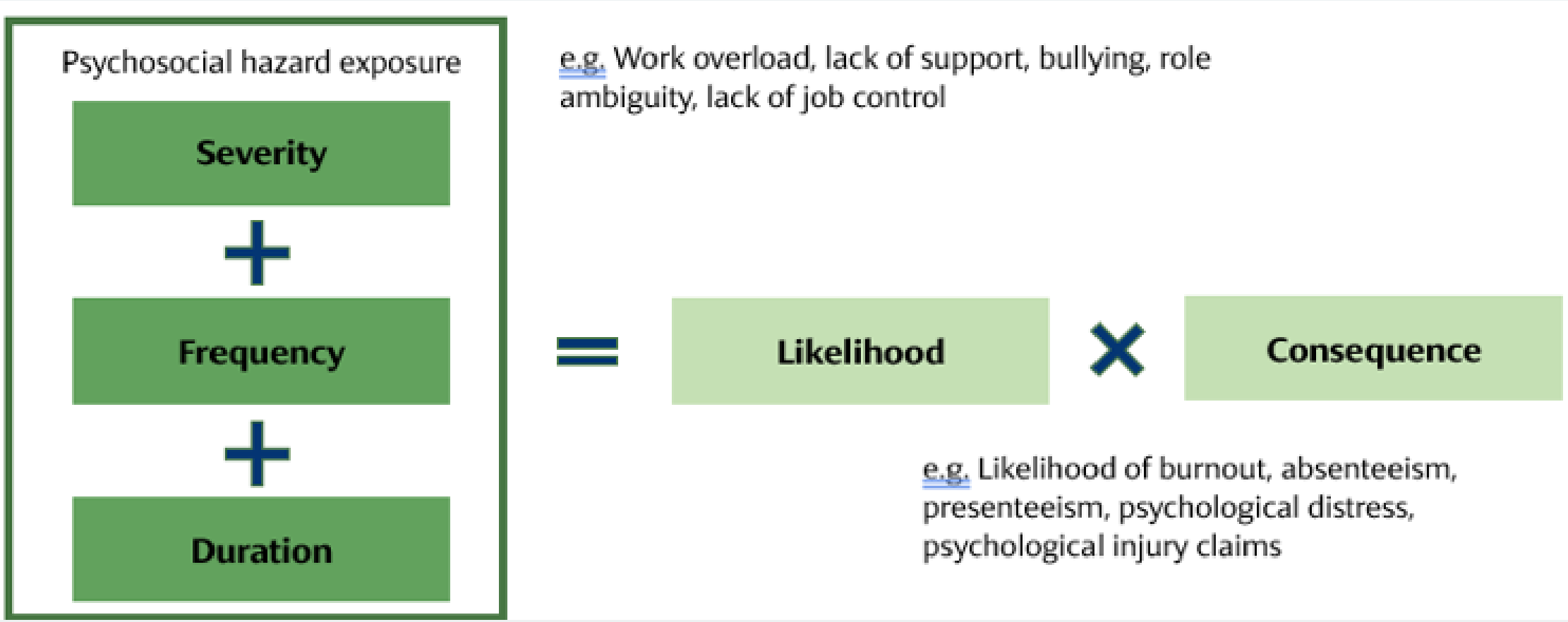
Establishing organisational context – an example

Adapted from: Wilson & Sharples (2015) and Ca ponecchia et al., 2022.

- **External:** labour shortages, contracting arrangements
- **Organisation**: medium sized business, regional city, maturity of safety management system and safety commitment
- **Workplaces**: restricted space, located close to schools
- **Tasks:** repetition, exposure to sensitive, sometimes traumatic material
- **Workplace:** gender balance, age, skill sets, diversity

Source, UNSW, Managing Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace

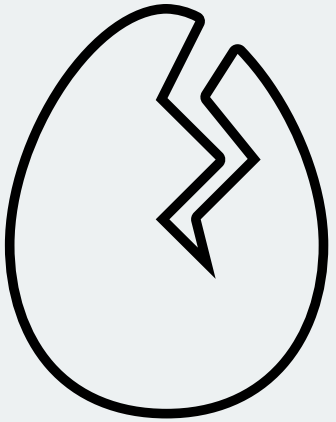
What is a psychosocial risk assessment



Source: Flourish Dx

The Eggshell Skull Principle

If a person has a skull made of eggshell and they are hit on the head, then the person who hit them on the head is still liable for the damage – the vulnerability of the victim doesn't mitigate the seriousness of the act.



This means - "take the worker as you find them" and the "but for" test – but for the hit on the head, the person would not have been harmed.

Identifying the best strategy: work re-design

Good work re-design should factor in:

1. The people, their capabilities and skills, demographics and their physical emotional and mental capacities and needs
2. The tasks that the workers perform including the physical and emotional demands of the task, and nature of the task (e.g., complexity, variety, frequency and repetition)
3. Processes and systems of the department/organisation including structure/hierarchy, communication and support, procedures and workflows, values and culture and professional development and career growth.
4. The physical work environment including vehicles, buildings, structures in the workplace and ergonomics (lighting noise and temp)
5. The equipment and resources including the, materials support and training used to conduct work.

Psychosocial Hazards Work Re-design Tool – PHReD-T

Source, UNSW, Managing Psychosocial Risk in the Workplace

Consultation for better outcomes

In determining strategy, it is imperative to consult with key stakeholders and those who will influence and be affected by any changes that will occur.

Implementation

It is imperative to consult with key stakeholders and those who will influence and be affected by any changes that will occur.

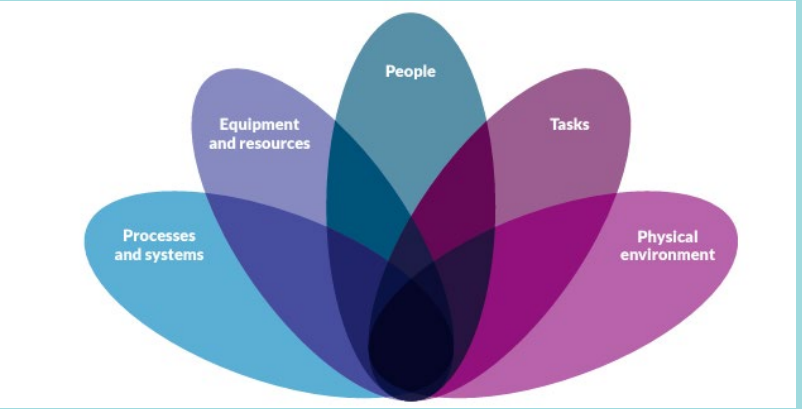
Evaluation

Once the intervention has been implemented, it is essential to evaluate whether the outcomes of the strategy did what was intended.

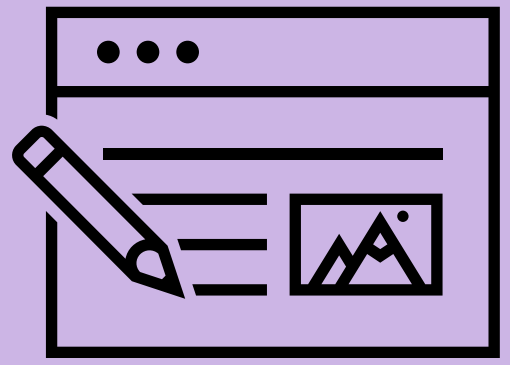
Monitoring/reviewing

Important to monitor and review strategy at regular intervals to ensure it aligns with needs to workplace. Reviewing should be proactive rather than reactive i.e. only reviewing when incident occurs

Activity:
Work re-design
Partnered Exercise (10 mins)



Work re-design for managing psychosocial risks in the workplace



Part 4: Next steps

How to act on the data?

1. Follow up results with focus group
2. Communicate results
3. Create an action plan
4. Ongoing monitoring and review

Antifragile lesson in managing risk

Questions?

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