



Health and Safety

for congregations

Psychosocial safety

How this guide can help you

This guide provides information to leaders to help identify hazards and risks associated with the work staff, volunteers and contractors perform for our congregations that could cause psychological harm. This guide has also been developed to help members of the congregation understand more about mental health, mental illness and how to access help when it is needed.

Background

Our congregations should be a safe place where people with mental health vulnerability are supported, and where situations that could cause mental distress are identified and mitigated. Where those around us have mental illnesses, our congregations should provide a welcoming place for the healing or wounded. In fact, having faith and being part of church communities have been shown make a positive difference to those living with mental illness and the families and friends who support them.

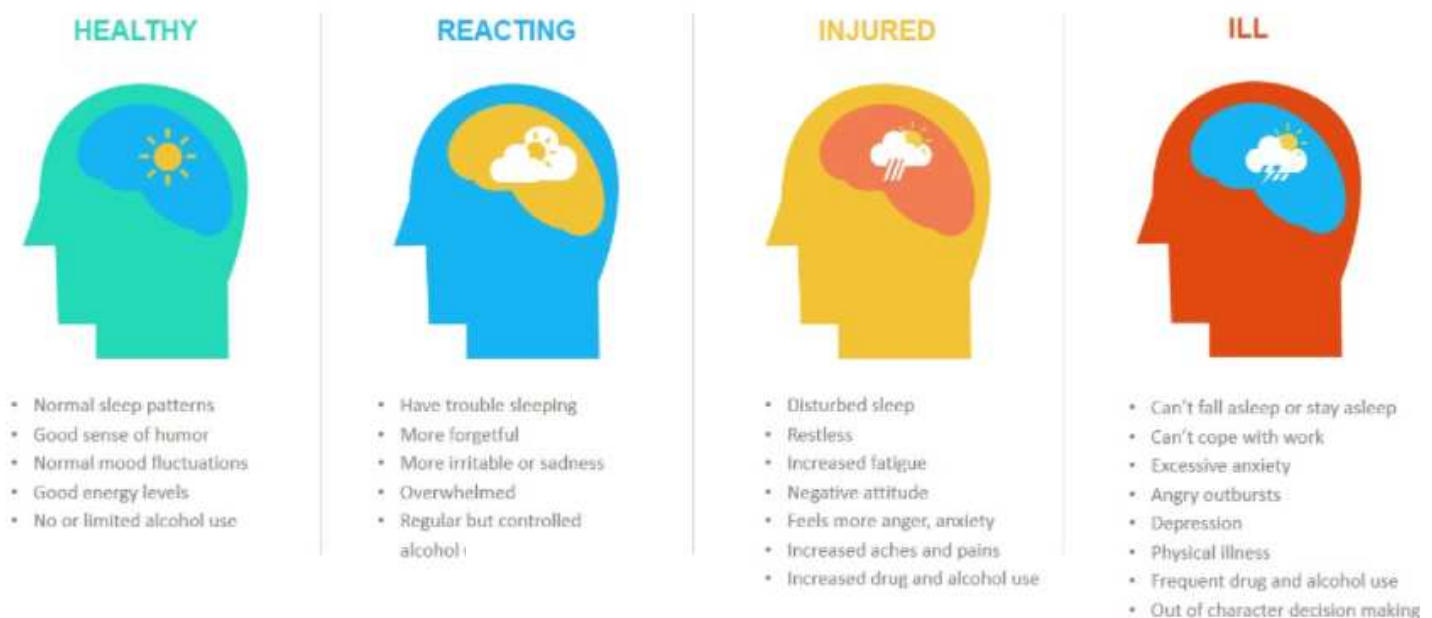
Psychosocial health encompasses the mental, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of what it means to be healthy. Psychosocial health is the result of complex interaction between a person's history and his or her thoughts and how they interpret the past. While supporting those experiencing mental illness is vital, there is an opportunity to do more to provide a safe environment and protect against harm. Our congregations provide an opportunity for meaning, faith, learning and growth, which in turn can support those around us. It is important we foster positive and psychologically safe environments, mutual care, respect and openness. It is also important we treat children with gentleness, ensure they are heard and respond if they are in danger.

Mental health

Mental health is the "thinking" or "rational" part of psychosocial health. Mental health is not just the absence of a mental health condition. It is a state of wellbeing in which an individual can realise their own abilities, cope with normal stresses of life, work productively and contribute to work, family and community. It also supports our spiritual wellbeing.

It can be helpful to think of mental health on a continuum from positive, healthy functioning at one end through to severe symptoms of mental illness at the other. Our mental health moves up and down the continuum depending on the different situations we find ourselves in or for those experiencing mental illness, in response to the illness itself. Church Council and other leaders should be aware of the mental health of workers and consider stressors connected to the church, but also how the person is overall. It is important to look out for signs of distress and burnout.

The mental health continuum



Psychological stressors and protective factors

All jobs involve challenges, and some stress is necessary and even rewarding. However if the challenge is too high or sustained it can overwhelm a person's resources to cope, and can lead to harm. Spiritual connection, leadership support and supportive relationships are examples of protective factors (also known as 'job resources') and can help us stay or become well. Risk factors (also known as 'job demands') such as long work hours, aggression and isolation however have the potential to increase strain on our mental health. A positive and supportive environment can therefore be the difference between someone experiencing high levels of mental health and functioning versus low function and mental illness despite similar other demands.

When our mental health and overall wellbeing decreases, our mental distress increases. This starts to affect our ability to function normally. It influences how we think, feel, and act, and how we behave. Mental distress affects our attitude and moods, and our physical health, sleep, and appetite. Everyday tasks can become difficult when symptoms begin to appear.





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Within our congregations, it is also important to create an environment of psychological safety as this will affect the safety of our workers. A psychologically safe environment is one where people feel free to be themselves, where they don't have to protect themselves by disengaging or holding back, where they don't fear negative consequences if they say what they think, make mistakes, ask questions. It is important we create environments where people can operate without feeling shame.

Psychological safety is necessary to encourage innovation, learning and to help create safe environments. Leaders have a role to play in creating a psychologically safe congregation, but the research shows that the members also have to contribute. Leaders can help by modelling how to value and appreciate diverse opinions and show vulnerability. They can admit their own mistakes and doubts, and importantly they can model that the status quo can be challenged, and ask for input and feedback safely.

Identifying psychosocial hazards

Some psychosocial hazards will be quite apparent, and others will require a more comprehensive review to identify them and their underlying causes. To identify psychosocial hazards which may affect your workers, start by consulting with staff, volunteers and contractors. In safety it is important to learn from the past. Members of the congregation therefore need to feel safe to report hazards and safety incidents and these reports can help identify risks.

Psychosocial hazards can exist in the design or management work we perform for the congregation. Psychosocial hazards increase the risk of stress. Some examples relevant to congregations may include distressed people, human behaviour, caring fatigue, jobs where it is hard to quantify success, conflict, loose boundaries and expected hours of work.

Assessing the risk

Following the identification of psychosocial hazards and risk factors at the workplace, the next step in the risk management process is assessing the risks of harm. This follows the same principles as the risk assessment undertaken for other hazards. When assessing the risk we must seek to understand the nature of harm that could be caused by the hazard, how serious the harm could be and the likelihood of it happening. You will need to rate the risk high, medium or low. Refer to our risk management guide found [here](#).

It is important those undertaking the risk assessment have access to information about the environment and work processes, and knowledge and understanding of potential psychosocial hazards and risk factors. Assessments should be done in consultation with workers. It can also be helpful to collect data (where it exists) such as incident reports, complaints, situations where conflict has arisen. It can also be important to look at tasks members of the congregation perform.

Controlling the risk

After assessing the risk and determining which hazards have the greatest contribution to that risk, it is important to establish, implement and maintain the most appropriate control measures. Also increasing support and or job control can minimise the impact of other psychosocial hazards and bolster people's capacity to cope (i.e. protective factors). When selecting a control, it is important to consult the people who perform the associated task. Some controls relevant to work the congregation performs have been provided in the following links:

- **Customer violence and aggression**
- **Isolated and remote work**
- **Conflict**
- **Burnout**
- **Compassion fatigue**
- **Bullying and harassment**

Monitoring the controls

Control measures that have been implemented should be monitored and reviewed. If necessary, these should be revised to ensure they work as planned. You should review control measures:

- When the control measure is no longer effective
- Before a change is made that might create a new psychosocial hazard, for example increasing lone or remote working or before a significant change is made to a person's role or reporting structure
- If consultation indicates a review is necessary
- When you review your risk register
- If an incident, injury or illness occurs arising from the psychosocial risk

Training and instruction

The congregation must provide suitable information, training, instruction or supervision to staff, volunteers and contractors. This should include information about the nature of the work and tasks to be carried out, the psychosocial hazards and risks associated with the work they will perform, applicable control measures and how they should report and respond if a problem or risk arises. This includes how to access the Synod's EAP (free counselling) service.

