Coronavirus (COVID-19):
Psychological Health and Safety at work

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19): PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK

COVID–19 presents a wide range of risks to workers' psychological health and safety, as well as their physical health and safety.

Many workers are experiencing reduced hours, stand downs or job losses.[1] Increased job and economic insecurity arising from the COVID-19 pandemic is putting enormous pressure on workers, their families and communities. The ACTU is calling on the Morrison government to commit to an 80% wage subsidy to ease the burden on workers, keep people connected with work for as long as possible and support businesses and industries to recover post-crisis. For those continuing in work, many have had significant changes to work arrangements to ensure social distancing, such as a requirement to work from home. Some workers who can work from home have not yet been permitted to do so. Workers in frontline care and service industries such as healthcare, education, retail, transport, cleaning and community services are facing extraordinary health and safety challenges during this crisis. All of these factors are causing very significant anxiety, stress and uncertainty for workers.

Employers must take a systematic, consultative approach to managing the work-related psychological health and safety risks related to COVID-19. Early intervention is crucial. Failure to effectively manage work-related psychological health and safety can lead to both psychological and physical injuries.

WHAT ARE MY EMPLOYER'S OBLIGATIONS?

Work health and safety laws require employers to do all that they reasonably can to eliminate or minimise risks to the psychological as well as physical health and safety of workers. This may require employers to change working arrangements or conditions, adopt safer systems of work, take steps to promote more supportive and respectful work relationships, and/or adapt the design, organisation or management of work in order to reduce risks to psychological health and safety.

In consultation with workers, their unions and health and safety representatives (HSRs), employers must develop a plan to eliminate or minimise risks to the psychological health and safety of workers arising from COVID-19. This plan must:

1. **Identify** what risks to the psychological health and safety of workers exist and which workers are affected;

2. **Assess** those risks, including their likelihood and potential to harm workers' psychological health and safety;

3. Implement **controls** that eliminate or minimise the risks;

4. **Monitor and review** the implemented controls.

If an employer fails or refuses to consult or to make changes to ensure work is healthy and safe, workers and HSRs should take action (see the 'What action can I take?' section below).

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

In every workplace, there are **hazards** that present risks to the psychological health and safety of workers and others. Work health and safety laws require employers to manage the risks arising from these hazards, so far as reasonably practicable.

Hazards that present particular risks to psychological health and safety during COVID-19 may include increased workload and work demands, isolated work, role ambiguity, long working hours, fatigue, increased work related stress, inadequate staffing, increased emotional effort in responding to distressing situations, frequent work in unpleasant or hazardous conditions, lack of adequate tools, personal protective equipment or resources, and increased exposure to violence and harassment.

In consultation with workers, unions and HSRs, employers must assess each job to determine what risks are present and what **controls** can reasonably be implemented to eliminate or minimise those risks. Workers working from home will be facing very different risks to those continuing to attend workplaces, and those working on the frontline face different challenges again. In all cases, job assessments should consider risks arising from:

- Work design;

- Work organisation;

- Work management, including staffing levels and workload;

- Work relationships and interactions; and

- The work environment.

CASE STUDIES

Nursing

Nurses, midwives and carers are on the frontline in fighting COVID-19. They are confronting a range of serious and complex health and safety challenges in delivering care and managing their own psychological health and physical safety. A high rate of exposure to infected patients coupled with inadequate access to appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) will be causing extreme anxiety, uncertainty and work stress, as will increased and changed work demands, workloads and working hours. School closures will exacerbate this by increasing the unpaid care responsibilities on these workers and their families.

Employers must consult workers, unions and HSRs on urgent control measures to eliminate or mitigate these risks, including adequate access to appropriate PPE, testing, sufficient breaks, safe staffing ratios, appropriate training and information, and paid leave and flexible working arrangements to support care for children and for self-isolation.

Education

Schools across the country are transitioning to an emergency mode of operation during COVID-19. While the Government has directed the community to avoid gatherings of 100 people or more and to implement social distancing, schools remain open. Some states have moved to pupil-free modes already, and the vast majority will be pupil-free prior to the Easter school holiday break. Social distancing presents serious challenges in a school environment, as does the need for adequate hygiene measures. Anxiety, stress and uncertainty about these matters present a significant risk to the psychological health and safety of staff.

Education employers must do everything reasonable to eliminate or mitigate the risks of harm to school staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers, their unions and HSRs must be consulted on an urgent plan to implement control measures to ensure a safe working environment, including consistent protocols and resourcing to ensure social distancing, testing and hygiene in schools. All education employees who identify as high risk and/or vulnerable, including carers and those cohabiting with vulnerable family members, workers who are immune-compromised, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, workers over 60 years old and pregnant workers should be permitted to work from home or access special paid leave.

Retail

Australia's retail workers already face extremely high levels of violence and harassment, including verbal and physical abuse and sexual harassment. The customer anxiety and panic buying caused by COVID-19 restrictions has only exacerbated these serious risks further.

Employers must consult workers, unions and HSRs on control measures to eliminate or mitigate these risks, including adequate security and social distancing measures and a zero-tolerance approach to customer violence and harassment.

Public service

Many employees in the private sector who can work from home have now been directed to do so. However, many employees who could reasonably work from home have not yet been permitted to do so, including many public service employees. This is causing significant anxiety, uncertainty and stress among workers. Work health and safety laws require employers to do all that is reasonably practicable to minimise the risk of work-related COVID-19 infections occurring. The most effective control of a viral pandemic is to implement social distancing. Employees who can work from home should be permitted to do so. Public sector employers must consult with workers, unions and HSRs
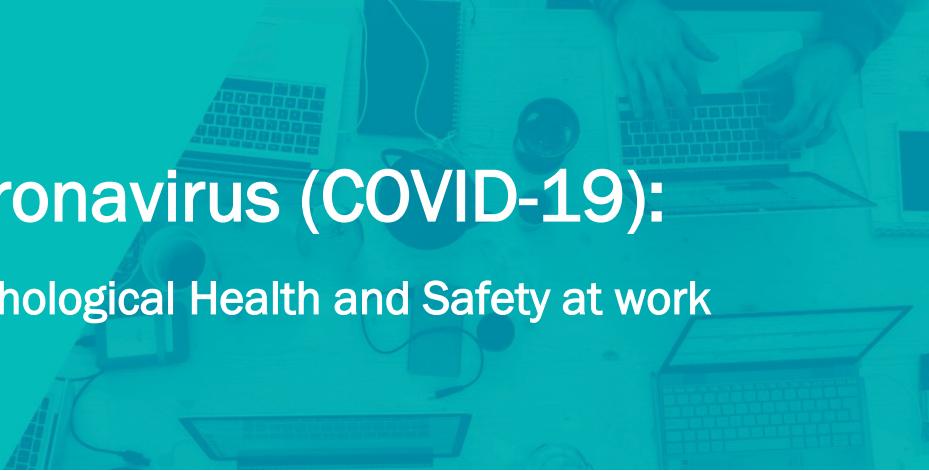
to issue immediate and clear directives that safe and appropriate working from home arrangements must be implemented for all staff where it is reasonably practicable to do so.

For more information on identifying, assessing and controlling risk factors at work, seek advice and support from your union. Employers should also consider relevant Safe Work Australia guidance.

WHAT ACTION CAN I TAKE?

Some simple, immediate things that workers and their HSRs can do to protect psychological health and safety in their workplaces include:

Identifying and reporting psychological health hazards

Whether it be an increase in incidents relating to aggressive patients or not being adequately supported to work from home, these hazards should be reported to management. Notifying management about psychological health hazards puts the employer on notice and provides them with an opportunity to respond and fix the issue.

Escalating reported psychological health hazards

When hazards are reported, employers have a duty to take action and prevent workers from becoming harmed. If the employer fails to act to eliminate or reduce the impact of the psychological health hazard within a reasonable time, the issue should be escalated with management.

Taking issues up with your union

If the employer fails to or refuses to make the situation healthy and safe, workers and their HSRs should contact their union to discuss their options. HSRs have powers which allow them to do things like issue provisional improvement notices (PINs) or get a union official or health and safety inspector involved. The HSR or union representative will be able to provide further guidance on the best course of action to take.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURY AND WORKERS' COMPENSATION

If a worker has been exposed to a mental health hazard in their workplace and subsequently becomes unwell, they should consider applying for workers' compensation.

The Coronavirus Workers' Resource Centre has released a guide to help workers' and workplace leaders navigate through the workers' compensation system, including:

- When workers have a right to claim workers' compensation for COVID-19 related mental health issues;

- The types of evidence that need to be provided, including medical evidence; and

- How to apply for workers' compensation.

[Click here](#) to access the Workers' Compensation and COVID-19 (Coronavirus) guide.

Remember to contact your union for help if you or your co-workers need to access workers' compensation.