

# Guide for Employers on Psychological Safety Released



The national trend toward addressing workplace safety issues beyond just physical hazards is continuing. In Nov. 2011, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (Commission) released a draft standard on psychological health and safety in the workplace. The final standard is expected to be released later this year. Meanwhile, the Commission just released a new tool to help employers protect the mental health of their workers. Here's an overview of *Psychological Health and Safety: An Action Guide for Employers*.

## THE GUIDE

The guide is designed for use by all Canadian employers regardless of size, sector or location. Its "P6 Framework" includes six steps for protecting workers' psychological health and safety (PH&S) and three recommended actions for each step:

**Step #1: Policy:** Your company needs a policy on PH&S. That policy should include a clear commitment from senior management to enhance PH&S through workplace interventions. It's also a good idea to get the support of union and other workplace leaders. The policy should be communicated to all levels of the company. And you should create a team to implement PH&S actions under the policy.

**Step #2: Planning:** To determine the appropriate PH&S actions to take, you'll need to get a picture of the mental health issues in your workplace by gathering relevant data, including information on absenteeism, injury rates, disability rates and costs, benefits utilization and use of the employee assistance program. It's also important to ask workers directly about their PH&S issues such as by conducting a survey or holding a focus group. Lastly, you should determine how ready your company is to make the necessary changes to improve PH&S and identify any barriers to change.

**Step #3: Promotion:** To promote PH&S in your workplace:

- Provide "resilience" training, that is, training designed to teach workers how to cope effectively with stress; and
- Create a respectful workplace in which everyone treats each other with consideration and tolerance, and harassment and bullying aren't permitted; and

- Educate workers on PH&S issues to increase awareness and remove the stigma of mental illness.

**Step #4: Prevention:** There are things you can do to prevent PH&S problems from developing in the first place. For example, change workplace or individual conditions that can cause or contribute to mental health issues. Consider PH&S issues when designing jobs and hiring employees. And provide stress management training while supporting work-home balance.

If PH&S issues develop anyway, provide tools to help workers address these issues on their own or through an employee assistance program. You should also train managers and supervisors on recognizing the signs of mental health problems and being supportive of workers with such problems. Lastly, you may need to accommodate workers with PH&S issues and ensure that they have access to appropriate treatment.

**Step #6: Persistence:** The final step involves evaluating the actions you've implemented to address PH&S to determine whether they've been effective and how workers have perceived these measures. In conducting this evaluation, take into account that some measures may have an immediate impact on workers' mental health while the success of others may not be immediately apparent. It's also important to modify your initiatives as necessary to sustain any improvements they've achieved.

## ANALYSIS

Psychological health and safety is a critical aspect of occupational health and safety, explains the guide. Mental health problems are the leading cause of both short and long-term disabilities in Canada, costing workplaces almost \$20 billion. In fact, on May 8, the Commission launched a mental health strategy for the country, *Changing Directions, Changing Lives*, to promote better mental health, prevent mental illness and ensure that services and supports are there to foster recovery for people who need them.

And this trend isn't happening just at the federal level. For example, BC is currently making changes to its workers' comp law to address mental stress claims. So it's clear that all safety coordinators must ensure that their companies understand that protecting workers includes seeing to their mental health and safety in the workplace.