

DRAFT 20261006

Mentally Healthy Workplaces framework

The South Australian public sector is committed to creating mentally healthy workplaces where people feel supported, can be fully engaged in their work and are able to seek help early when needed. The Mentally Healthy Workplaces framework provides practical guidance for agencies to promote psychological health, reduce psychosocial risks, support recovery and build a culture of care

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About mentally healthy workplaces

A mentally healthy workplace treats psychological and physical health and safety as equally important.

A mentally healthy workplace:

- promotes workplace practices that support positive psychological health

- eliminates and minimises psychosocial health and safety risks by identifying, assessing and responding to psychosocial hazards
- builds employees' knowledge, skills and capability to be resilient and thrive at work by enabling the [5 ways to wellbeing](#) of connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give in the work context as well as supporting work – life balance.
- is free of stigma and discrimination
- supports employees who are dealing with physical and/or psychological illness or injury.

A word about terminology

When we introduced this framework in 2020, we deliberately used the term mental health to help destigmatise mental ill-health and illness.

This framework has been updated, changing the word 'mental' for 'psychological'. For example, we now refer to psychological injury.

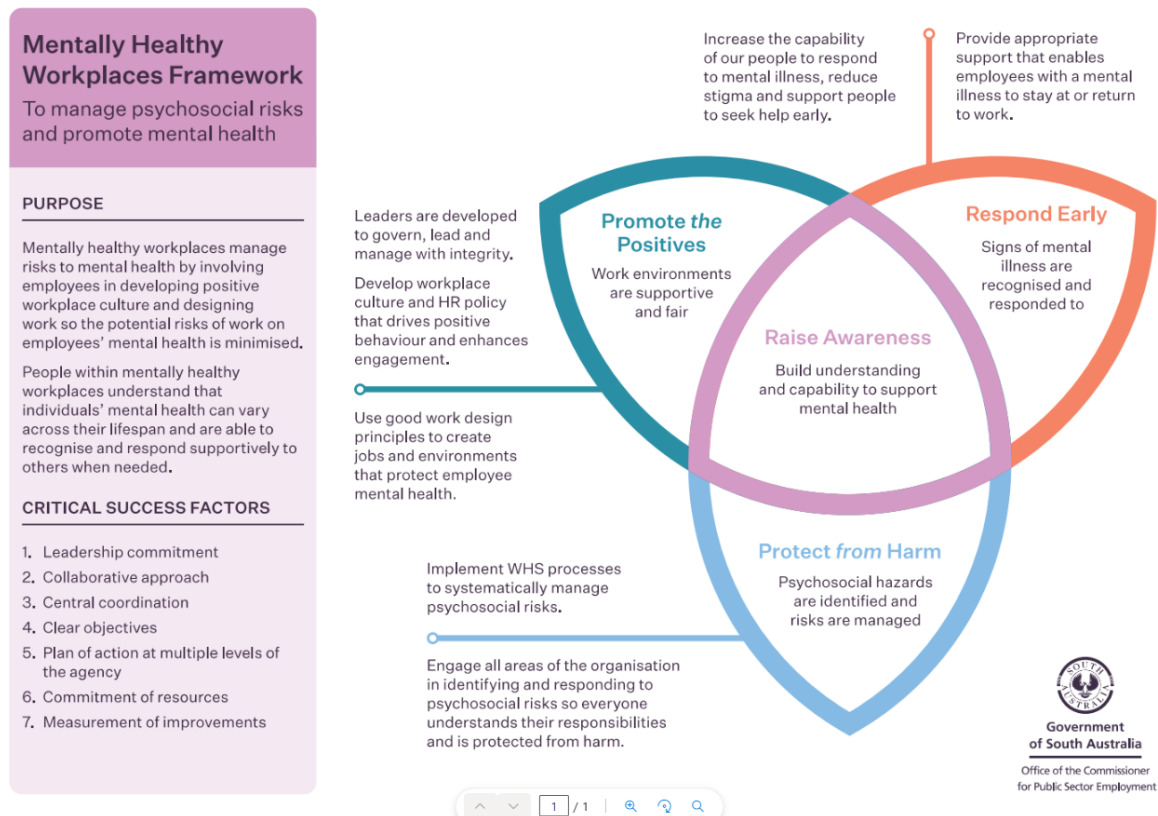
We use the concept of psychosocial risk management under the protect domain to help agencies understand how their actions address requirements to under the [Work Health Safety Act 2012](#) (SA).

The following definitions provide a common understanding of key terms used throughout this framework.

Mentally healthy	used to describe the organisational outcome of effective action under the 4 domains
Physical health	the overall condition of the organs and body systems and their ability to perform daily activities without undue fatigue or physical stress
Psychological health	the overall condition of emotional, cognitive and behavioural wellbeing where a person can cope with stress, relate well to others and function productively in daily life
Psychological safety	when a person feels safe to speak up, contribute ideas, ask questions, raise concerns, admit mistakes, and challenge existing practices without fear of blame, embarrassment, or negative consequences
Psychosocial hazard	the potential for psychological or physical harm to occur
Psychosocial risk management	process consisting of identifying hazards, assessing risk, implementing and monitoring actions, reviewing outcomes and improving controls.
Wellbeing	a positive state of being happy, healthy, and satisfied with your life, rather than just the absence of illness. In a work context, it is the outcome for an individual of a mentally healthy environment.

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The framework on a page



The framework identifies four domains to consider when creating a mentally healthy workplace.

An important feature is that all of the domains overlap. This means that actions undertaken in one domain will have impact on the others. For example activities taken to create workplaces that are supportive and fair can also be understood as actions to manage psychosocial risk. Equally, building capability to support mental health feeds directly into responding early to signs of psychological illness.

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Who the framework is for

The framework is designed for South Australian public sector leaders and practitioners working in:

- work health and safety
- injury management
- human resources
- learning and development
- leadership and people management
- change management

- organisational development.

Additional practical advice for managers and employees seeking to improve their own or their team's psychological health in the workplace is available as a module in the HR essentials resource published by OCPSE.

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How to use the framework

The framework can be used to develop new strategies or build on existing approaches that support employee psychological health and wellbeing.

It is designed to be used flexibly. It does not need to be read from start to finish. Readers can go directly to the sections most relevant to their needs and priorities.

The framework includes a checklist to help identify what already is in place, where there may be gaps and which actions may be most useful.

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Critical success factors

These factors provide the foundation for successful implementation of the framework.

1. Leadership commitment

Visible leadership commitment to mentally healthy workplaces can be demonstrated through written communication and direct employee engagement.

2. Collaborative approach

Actively consult and collaborate with employees at all levels throughout the development, implementation and evaluation of strategies and plans.

3. Central coordination

Confirm that responsibilities for developing, implementing and monitoring the strategy and plan are clearly documented. This can include sponsorship from the leadership team and appropriate expertise from HR, OD, WHS teams within the agency.

4. Clear objectives

Relate objectives to the four domains of the framework to realise the benefits of healthier and safer workplaces.

5. Plan of action

Identify priorities, timeframes and responsibilities at agency, team and individual levels.

6. Commitment of resources

Commit resources to improve psychological health at work in line with the risk profile. Investment in creating mentally healthy workplaces can deliver organisational benefits, including improved productivity and reduced absenteeism, presenteeism and compensation claims.

7. Measurement of improvement

Select measures to regularly track and report progress to leadership including from employee surveys, wellbeing measures, incident data, workers compensation data, sick leave trends and policy audits.

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Framework domains

The framework is organised around four mutually reinforcing domains, supported by the critical success factors.

Read more about each domain of the framework by choosing one of the sections below:

Domain 1: Raise awareness Build understanding, reduce stigma and increase capability to recognise and respond to psychological illness.	Domain 2: Promote the positives Develop positive workplace cultures, supportive leadership, good work design and wellbeing practices.	Domain 3: Protect from harm Identify psychosocial hazards, assess risks, consult employees and implement controls.	Domain 4: Respond early Support disclosure, early help-seeking, reasonable adjustments, Employee Assistance Program (EAP) use, peer support and recovery at work.
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Raise awareness

The Raise awareness domain is a vital step in reducing stigma and improving capacity to recognise and respond to psychosocial risk and psychological illness by providing evidence-based awareness and capability building initiatives that:

- embed psychosocial risk management within agencies' work health and safety systems
- develop psychologically safe workplaces where employees feel safe to speak up, contribute ideas, raise concerns and seek support without fear of negative consequences
- increase awareness of suicide prevention, including warning signs, pathways for support and postvention responses and

- strengthen understanding of cultural safety, anti-racism and inclusive workplace behaviours for work cultures in which all workers can thrive.

The [Safety, Wellbeing and Injury Management \(SWIM\) Strategy](#) for the South Australian public sector 2023-32, demonstrates commitment and leadership to safety, as its first enabler. The SWIM Strategy calls for strong leadership and a sector-wide commitment to embedding safety, wellbeing and injury management into decision-making, workforce planning and organisational culture. By investing in capability, promoting healthy workplaces and supporting recovery at work, the public sector can improve wellbeing, strengthen performance and deliver sustainable outcomes for the community.

[Compassionate Foundations](#) is an evidence-based suicide prevention and psychological health capability program developed by the Australian Public Service Academy and sub-licensed by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment (OCPSE) for the South Australian public sector. The program builds practical skills to support positive human-to-human interactions through compassion, connection and understanding. It helps participants recognise psychological distress, have supportive conversations, and connects people with appropriate support. The program also promotes self-care, psychological safety and a proactive approach to psychological health and suicide prevention in the workplace.

Please contact the OCPSE Healthy and Safe Workplaces team if you are interested in a sub-license to offer this resource in your agency: ocpse@whsim.com.au

The [State Disability Inclusion Plan 2025–2029](#) outlines the South Australian Government's commitment to creating a more accessible and inclusive state by removing barriers to participation for people with disability. Guided by lived experience, it focuses on improving outcomes across community inclusion, employment, support, health, and justice through coordinated action and accountability across government.

The South Australian public sector [Anti-Racism Strategy 2023-2028](#) aims to proactively eliminate racism and racial barriers within the workforce and the services it delivers. The strategy focuses on building awareness and capability, embedding anti-racism in leadership and decision-making, creating culturally safe and inclusive workplaces, encouraging employees to speak up, and strengthening accountability across the sector.

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Promote the positives

The Promote the positives domain focuses on creating a culture of care where people feel supported, are consistently respectful towards each other and are positively engaged in their work can enhance psychological health.

Positive workplace practices that help employees perform their work effectively, manage demands, and maintain their wellbeing include:

- Develop a positive organisational culture based on respect, trust and inclusion.
- Apply good work design principles to roles and work systems.
- Build leadership capability and supportive management practices.

- Ensure employees receive regular feedback, recognition and performance conversations.
- Develop strong, collaborative and supportive teams.
- Manage organisational change effectively, with consultation and support for affected employees.
- Support physical health and wellbeing

Psychological safety is a key attribute of a culture of care. It exists when employees feel safe to speak up, contribute ideas, ask questions, raise concerns, admit mistakes, and challenge existing practices without fear of blame, embarrassment, or negative consequences.

Employees are more likely to experience positive wellbeing outcomes when they feel valued, supported and connected to their work, colleagues and organisation. Positive workplace experiences contribute to higher levels of engagement, job satisfaction, purpose and motivation, while also supporting stronger workplace relationships and organisational performance.

OCPSE's **South Australian Leadership Academy** provides a range of programs for all leadership levels to build the capacity of leaders and managers to use positive and proactive workplace practices.

The Promote domain recognises that the way work is designed is a critical driver of both wellbeing and performance. Safe Work Australia's information about **Good work design** can help ensure that roles have clear responsibilities, realistic expectations, and an appropriate balance between job demands and resources (including support and capability required to meet them).

An evidence-based enabler of this approach is **SMART Work Design**, created by Professor Sharon Parker, which focuses on creating work that includes the following elements:

- Stimulating: Uses our skills, provides challenge and variety, and keeps us engaged.
- Mastery: Feeling capable, confident, and skilled in our role through clear expectations and feedback.
- Agency: Having autonomy and control over how we do our work and make decisions.
- Relational: Positive connections and support from managers and colleagues.
- Tolerable demands: Workloads and expectations that are realistic, manageable, and sustainable, allowing us to meet demands without feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, or underutilised.

An adjunct to SMART work design is **job crafting**, a strengths-based bottom-up approach that empowers employees to make small, intentional, changes how they undertake their work, aligning it with their strengths, values and interest.

The Promote domain recognises that physical and psychological health are closely interconnected. Preventive Health SA's **Healthy Workplaces toolkit** provides action plan templates to address common health and wellbeing issues at work such as alcohol, smoking and vaping, physical activity and sedentary work, nutrition, preventive health care, muscle and joint problems, sleep and fatigue, and mental health.

The overlap between physical and psychological health highlights the importance of a holistic approach to workplace wellbeing. Healthy lifestyle behaviours such as regular physical activity,

nutritious eating, adequate rest and reducing harmful health risks can strengthen both physical and psychological wellbeing, supporting the prevention of harm and promoting positive mental health.

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Protect from harm

The Protect from harm domain is about preventing psychological injury by identifying and managing psychosocial hazards before they cause harm. The following actions support a proactive and systematic approach to psychosocial risk management, helping organisations meet their Work Health and Safety (WHS) obligations and create safe, healthy workplaces.

- Embed psychosocial hazards within WHS systems and governance processes.
- Consult employees and teams throughout the psychosocial risk management process to identify hazards, assess risks and design effective control measures.
- Identify psychosocial hazards using multiple data sources such as surveys, incident reports and employee consultation.
- Assess psychosocial risks and prioritise those with the greatest impact.
- Implement controls using a risk management approach and hierarchy of controls.
- Monitor and review actions to ensure effectiveness.

Consider workforce demographics, cultural safety and environmental factors when managing risk.

The Protect domain focuses on proactively identifying psychosocial hazards and controlling the risks they pose. The [Work Health and Safety Regulations 2012 \(SA\)](#) define a psychosocial hazard as any workplace factor that may cause psychological harm (whether or not it also causes physical harm) related to

- design or management of work
- work environment
- plant at the workplace or workplace behaviours or interaction.

Psychosocial risks to the health or safety of a worker or other person arise from psychosocial hazards. Embedding psychosocial risk management into governance and everyday work practices helps prevent harm and supports a safe, healthy and productive workforce.

Psychosocial risk management is the application of the standard risk management approach to this group of hazards:

- identifying hazards
- assessing and prioritising risks
- creating an action plan
- implementing and monitoring actions
- reviewing outcomes and improving controls.

SafeWork SA's web page [Four steps to managing psychosocial hazards and risk](#) contains helpful information on each stage of the process as well as a guide and tool for self-assessment of system maturity.

The [Job Demands-Resources \(JD-R\)](#) model provides a useful framework for understanding psychosocial hazards by recognising that employee's mental health and wellbeing is influenced by the balance between work demands and the resources available to manage them.

Some hazards can be seen as demands (too much can cause harm) and others are seen as resources (too little causes harm). The important feature is balance as workplaces where high demands are balanced by high resources can see a lower level of risk than those where there is simply an imbalance between demands. Refer to Promote the positive domain for some ideas on how to increase job resources.

Features of **Common psychosocial hazards** experienced in the South Australian public sector

- Lack of purpose and meaning is included as a hazard to reflect the important connection to organisational objectives and a worker's values in their work.
- Poor workplace relationships including bullying and harassment are hazards in their own right but most often occur in workplaces where other psychosocial hazards are not well managed. Commissioner's Guidelines provide detailed advice on [Preventing and addressing bullying](#) and [Preventing and addressing harassment and discrimination](#).
- Organisational change is common in many public service agencies and when not well managed can form a psychosocial hazard that can influence employee psychological health as well as engagement, and performance. The [Change Management Toolkit](#) provides practical guidance, activities and tools to help agencies effectively plan, deliver and embed change, while supporting employees throughout the change process.

Multiple sources of information may be used to identify hazards, including climate surveys, psychosocial risk surveys, focus groups, team meetings, injury and incident data, workers compensation data and sick leave data. Consulting with employees is an important component of the approach as the people doing the work are well placed to understand which hazards are present and how they may interact.

Assessing the risk also requires an understanding of who is exposed and the frequency, duration and severity of the exposure. These factors can vary greatly between teams depending on the type of work being undertaken, what control measures are already in place and the skills and attributes of the workers. [SafeWork SA](#) has published a list of psychosocial hazard identification and risk assessment tools.

[Good work design](#) is a foundational principle that underpins the Promote, Protect and Respond domains of a mentally healthy workplace. Good work design is a key control within psychosocial risk management, helping to eliminate or minimise psychosocial hazards while enhancing employee wellbeing, performance and organisational outcome. This is particularly important as psychosocial hazards do not occur in isolation and can interact to increase overall risk.

Psychosocial risk management is a shared responsibility across HR, WHS and operational functions. Learn more about this from the [OPUS Centre for Psychosocial Risk website](#)

While WHS frameworks provide the overarching approach to identifying and managing psychosocial risks, many of the controls sit within operational practices and people management processes. As a result, effective management of psychosocial risks requires coordinated action across the organisation.

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Respond early

The Respond early domain focuses on recognising concerns early, providing timely support, and creating pathways for help-seeking, recovery and return to work (RTW). It aims to minimise the impact of psychological injury and mental ill-health by ensuring employees receive appropriate support when they need it. Key activities include:

- equipping managers to promote psychological safety, recognise concerns, and respond appropriately
- ensuring access to employee assistance, wellbeing and mental health support services.
- providing clear, confidential and accessible reporting pathways, with timely processes for escalation, response and support.
- supporting recovery and RTW through tailored plans, reasonable adjustments and ongoing communication.
- monitoring outcomes and learn from employee experiences to continuously improve support systems.

Being alert to signs of psychological health concerns and responding early is essential in creating mentally healthy workplaces. [Psychological safety](#) which is embedded across the Raise awareness, Promote, Protect, and Respond domains is critical as employees are more likely to seek support, raise concerns and report psychosocial hazards early when they do not fear repercussion.

Managers are often the first point of support and play a key role in identifying concerns early, having supportive conversations and connecting employees with appropriate assistance. Effective responses are respectful, confidential and focused on understanding employee needs rather than diagnosis or making assumptions on personal circumstances.

Early intervention is most effective when concerns are identified and addressed promptly, with appropriate support provided before issues escalate and affect employee wellbeing, team functioning or organisational outcomes.

Employees should be aware of the support services available and how to access them, including Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) officers, peer support programs and other relevant sources of support.

Organisations should also build capability to recognise and respond to mental health concerns, including suicide risk, and provide timely and appropriate support following critical incidents, workplace trauma, violence, serious injury, death or suicide.

Clear, accessible and trusted reporting systems underpin the Promote, Protect and Respond domains of a mentally healthy workplace. They enable the early identification, management and prevention of psychosocial risks and support timely intervention when concerns arise. Formal grievance, complaint and misconduct processes should form part of a broader psychosocial risk management framework rather than be the sole mechanism for managing risk. Agencies should use their WHS reporting and management systems to monitor and address psychosocial hazards and risks.

Returning to work is an important part of recovery and should be supported through safe, meaningful and sustainable work. Agencies should also consider their obligations under [Section 18 of the Return to Work Act 2014 \(SA\)](#) to provide suitable employment for workers recovering from a work injury where reasonably practicable.

Workplace adjustments, such as changes to duties, hours, workload or work location, can support employee wellbeing, recovery and ongoing participation at work. Where an employee is absent, maintaining appropriate contact helps identify support needs and inform RTW planning. RTW arrangements should be tailored to the employee's capacity and circumstances, with consideration given to psychosocial risks, workplace relationships and whether alternative duties or work environments may be needed to support a safe and sustainable return.

[Conversations Matter](#) is a practical guide that supports RTW case managers to have effective, person-centred conversations with employees experiencing mental ill-health or psychological injury, helping to build trust, support recovery and improve return-to-work outcomes. The guide promotes a whole-person approach, recognising the biological, psychological, social and workplace factors that influence recovery and wellbeing. It also provides practical strategies for navigating challenging situations, understanding psychosocial hazards, and supporting workers through recovery and return to work.

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Checklist and resources

Agencies can use the Mentally Healthy Workplaces Checklist to identify what is already in place and where there may be opportunities to do more.

Managers can explore a new resource developed specifically for them that contains activities and actions at the team level.

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Contact details

For more information about the Mentally Healthy Workplaces framework, email ocpsewhsim@sa.gov.au

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Further reading and useful websites

The framework draws on work from Australian and international researchers and organisations. Suggested further reading and useful websites include:

- Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment
- Beyond Blue
- Black Dog Institute

- Heads Up
- Health and Safety Executive
- Mental Health First Aid Australia
- R U OK?
- SANE Australia
- Safe Work Australia
- StandBy Support
- SuperFriend

Video links

Whole of Government On the Couch Sessions with Commissioner for Public Sector Employment Erma Ranieri PSM, are available on the OCPSE YouTube channel.

- [SMART Work design](#) with Professor Sharon Parker, an internationally recognised expert in work design and the founder of the SMART Work Design model
- [Job Crafting](#) with Rob Baker, a leading expert on personalisation of work
- HR, OD, and WHS Leaders Forum on [Good Work Design](#) with Westpac Chief Mental Health Officer Dave Burroughs, and expert in psychosocial risk management
- **Health and Safety Representatives Forum** with HSRs from across the sector.

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