



WORKPLACE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

PODCAST

FROM HARM TO REPAIR



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PEOPLE | PRACTICE | POLICY | PREVENTION | REPAIR | RECOVERY

*Real Conversations.
Meaningful Change.*

SAFER WORKPLACES. STRONGER PEOPLE. BRIGHTER TOMORROWS.

What Is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety means being able to participate in the workplace without reasonable fear of humiliation, intimidation, retaliation, exclusion, or punishment for speaking up, asking questions, making mistakes, raising concerns, or seeking help.

A psychologically safe workplace does not mean that everyone is always comfortable or that conflict never occurs. It means handling difficult conversations, disagreements, mistakes, complaints, and concerns with **respect, fairness, accountability, and care.**

Psychological safety is reflected in how coworkers, leaders, HR, unions, investigators, insurers, disability-management professionals, and other involved systems treat people when something goes wrong.

What Is Psychological Harm?

Psychological harm can occur when workplace behaviours, conditions, decisions, or processes negatively affect a person's psychological well-being, functioning, sense of safety, dignity, or trust.

Harm can result from a **single serious event**, but it can also develop through repeated or cumulative exposure over time.

Workplace psychological harm may occur through:

- Bullying or mobbing
- Harassment or violence
- Discrimination or racism
- Sexual harassment
- Retaliation or reprisal
- Abuse or misuse of authority
- Chronic humiliation, exclusion, or undermining

- Threats to employment, reputation, or professional standing
- Unreasonable workloads or unsafe organizational practices
- Repeated incivility or microaggressions
- Failure to respond appropriately when concerns are reported

The original workplace behaviour is not always the end of the harm. **What happens after someone reports can either support recovery or create further injury.**

What Is Institutional Betrayal?

Institutional betrayal occurs when an organization or system that a person reasonably depends upon for safety, fairness, protection, or support **fails to protect them or responds in a way that compounds the original harm.**

The institution may be an employer, HR department, union, regulatory body, insurer, professional association, investigation process, disability-management system, or another organization with responsibility for responding.

Examples can include:

- Ignoring or minimizing a complaint
- Reframing harassment or bullying as a simple interpersonal conflict
- Failing to investigate credible concerns
- Conducting a biased, poorly trained, or procedurally unfair investigation
- Allowing retaliation to continue
- Blaming or discrediting the person who reported
- Requiring the injured person to repeatedly retell traumatic events unnecessarily
- Delaying decisions or communication for unreasonable periods
- Withholding important information about process or next steps
- Failing to provide accommodation or support
- Prioritizing organizational reputation over employee safety
- Returning someone to an unsafe environment without addressing the conditions that caused the harm
- Treating psychological injury as a performance or behavioural problem

Institutional betrayal can be particularly damaging because the person may have turned to the institution **expecting protection and instead experienced another layer of harm.**

What Can Workplace Psychological Harm Look Like?

People respond differently. There is no single "correct" reaction.

Someone experiencing workplace psychological harm may notice:

At work

- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Fear of meetings, emails, certain people, or returning to the workplace
- Reduced confidence
- Withdrawal or silence
- Increased mistakes or difficulty completing usual tasks
- Absenteeism or extended leave
- Feeling constantly on guard
- Considering resignation or leaving a profession they once valued

Outside of work

- Difficulty sleeping
- Exhaustion
- Persistent worry or rumination
- Irritability or emotional overwhelm
- Loss of enjoyment or motivation
- Difficulty being present with family or friends
- Isolation
- Changes in appetite or routines
- Physical stress symptoms

These reactions should not automatically be interpreted as weakness, poor performance, or inability to cope. They may indicate that something in the workplace or in the response process needs attention.

The Most Important Steps When Harm Occurs

1. Attend to Immediate Safety

If you feel physically or psychologically unsafe, consider what you need to reduce immediate exposure to further harm. That may include contacting a trusted leader, union representative, physician, therapist, occupational-health professional, employee assistance program, or another appropriate support.

If there is an immediate risk of harm to yourself or another person, seek urgent professional assistance.

2. Document What Is Happening

Keep a factual record of significant events.

Include:

- Dates and times
- What happened
- Who was present
- What was said or done
- Witnesses
- Emails, messages, or other relevant records
- What you reported and to whom
- The response you received
- Any retaliation or changes that occurred afterward

Keep documentation factual, organized, and secure.

3. Seek Appropriate Professional Support Early

Do not wait until you are completely depleted. Depending on your circumstances, support may include:

- Family physician
- Mental-health professional (experienced/trained in this area)
- Workplace psychological safety specialist
- Union representative
- Employment or labour lawyer
- Human-rights advisor
- Occupational health and safety professional
- Disability-management professional
- Workers' compensation system
- Regulatory or professional body

Different professionals have different roles. One person may not be able to address every part of the problem.

4. Understand Your Workplace Processes

Find out:

- What policy applies?
- Where can a concern be reported?
- Who receives the complaint?
- Is there an independent reporting option?
- What protection exists against retaliation?
- What investigation process will be used?
- What information will you receive?
- What accommodation may be available?
- What review or appeal options exist?

Ask for important information in writing whenever possible.

5. Protect Your Health and Your Decision-Making Capacity

Psychological injury can affect concentration, memory, sleep, confidence, and decision-making. Before making major decisions such as resigning, signing a settlement, returning to an unsafe workplace, or abandoning a complaint, consider obtaining appropriate legal, clinical, or professional advice.

6. Watch for Secondary Harm and Retaliation

Harm can continue after a complaint is made. Pay attention to:

- Sudden negative performance concerns
- Exclusion from meetings or opportunities
- Changes in duties
- Isolation
- Threats
- Reputation damage
- Increased surveillance
- Hostile communication
- Unexplained discipline
- Pressure to resign
- Interference with accommodation or return to work

Document new concerns and seek advice promptly.

Repair Is More Than Closing a Complaint

An investigation or legal decision may determine what happened. It does not automatically repair the damage. Meaningful repair may require:

- Acknowledgment of harm
- Accountability
- Protection from further harm
- Appropriate accommodation
- Trauma-informed support
- Restoration of dignity and professional credibility
- Correction of misinformation or damaged records
- Changes to leadership, policy, practice, or workplace culture
- Safe return-to-work planning
- Monitoring for retaliation
- Rebuilding trust
- Support for teams and witnesses

- Learning from what happened so it is not repeated

Recovery Is Not Simply "Getting Back to Work"

Recovery may involve restoring:

Safety - Feeling protected from further harm.

Stability - Regaining sleep, routine, concentration, and a sense of predictability.

Voice - Being able to participate in decisions that affect you.

Dignity - Being treated as a person rather than a problem or a case file.

Trust - Determining who, and what systems, can be relied upon again.

Connection - Re-establishing relationships, community, and professional belonging.

Agency - Having meaningful choices about treatment, accommodation, work, and next steps.

Purpose - Reconnecting with identity, values, career, and life beyond what happened.

A Final Message

Psychological harm at work should never be viewed only as an individual problem.

When harm occurs, we need to ask not only:

"What happened to this person?" but also:

"What happened around this person?"

"How did the workplace respond?"

"Did the systems intended to help create additional harm?"

"What needs to be repaired?"

"What will prevent this from happening again?"

Psychological safety is not only about preventing harm. It is also about how we respond when harm occurs, how we support recovery, and whether people can trust the systems that are supposed to protect them.

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