

# Employer return to work guide for psychological injuries

A toolkit to help you  
support your worker's  
return to work following  
a psychological injury

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## Introduction

*Modified work allows injured workers to return to work at the earliest opportunity, can aid in overall recovery and reduce the cost of injury or illness.*

Employers' make the difference! After a psychological injury, some employees have less stamina to cope with their job on a full-time basis. By offering modified hours, you help your employee have time to seek medical support for their symptoms, which may help decrease the probability of a recurrence.

Some employees may not be able to work in the same environment or perform the same duties. Modified duties can assist your employee to stay at work or return to work and slowly increase their psychological stamina. Consider alternate work locations, duties, departments, hours or shifts to accommodate a safe, supportive and successful return to work.

This handbook contains resources and tools to help you support your worker during their psychological injury and prepare you to participate in collaborative return-to-work conversations with your worker and their WCB case manager.

You can find information about psychological injuries [here](#).

Information about modified work is found [here](#).

## We're here to help!

Your WCB adjudicator or case manager is a great resource for helping you navigate a psychological injury claim and coordinating a safe return to work for your employee.

We care about your employee's wellbeing and will work with them, the treatment provider and you throughout the recovery process.

## Psychological injury modified duty considerations

Psychological trauma affects everyone differently. Due to their nature, work-related psychological injuries require unique treatment methods and approaches. Awareness of and sensitivity to your employee's condition throughout the recovery process will enhance their likelihood of safely recovering and returning to work, while minimizing risks for regression or delayed recovery.

Our disability management program is designed to support an injured worker's recovery following a psychological injury. As an employer, you are not alone in developing appropriate modified duties for your employee. The treatment provider working with your employee will provide you with suggestions and support as you develop an appropriate return-to-work plan together. Every case will need to be customized.

Here are some suggestions of possible work modified duties you can discuss with the treatment provider and your employee:

### Change in work tasks

- Modify the duties required to complete the job (e.g., avoid working around the forklift, no occupational driving, avoid customer interactions).
- Remove tasks to lighten the workload.
- Provide further training, education and support to assist with the completion of the work tasks (e.g., computer training, interpersonal conflict management, safety specific training).
- Cross training in another department.
- Consider project work.
- Exchange of tasks with peers.
- Assign a supervisor/mentor to provide day-to-day guidance and feedback focused on tasks.
- Provide the opportunity to interact frequently with other team members via online technology.
- Attend regular meetings and/or team building activities through online webinars or in- person meetings.
- Modify the triggers in the physical environment such as lighting, noise, clutter or scents.
- Provide a quiet workspace with fewer distractions.
- Modify workplace processes to focus on one task at a time.

### Change to work location

- Work in a different geographical region, office, building, job site, etc.
- Cross train in another department.
- Consider requests for work to be done at home.
- Avoid working with specific peers that were involved in work injury event.
- Assign a supervisor/mentor to provide day-to-day guidance and feedback focused on tasks.
- Provide the opportunity to interact frequently with other team members via online technology.
- Attend regular meetings and/or team building activities through online webinars or in- person meetings.
- Modify the triggers in the physical environment such as lighting, noise, clutter or scents.
- Provide a quiet workspace with fewer distractions.
- Modify workplace processes to focus on one task at a time.

### **Change to supervisor/manager and/or co-workers**

- Consider requests for any/ all work to be done at home
- Avoid working with specific peers that were involved in work injury event.
- Assign a supervisor/ mentor to provide day to day guidance and feedback focused on tasks.
- Provide the opportunity to interact frequently with other team members via online technology
- Attend regular meetings and/or team building activities through online webinars or in- person meetings.
- Consider project work.
- Work in a different geological region, office, building, job site, etc.

### **Change to hours of work and/or days of work**

- Graduated return to work.
- Split shifts.
- Day shifts or night shifts.
- Consider requests for work to be done at home.
- Provide the opportunity to interact frequently with other team members via online technology.
- Attend regular meetings and/or team building activities through online webinars or in- person meetings.
- Allow for frequent breaks.

### **Remove specific items/objects/equipment**

- Modify the duties required to complete the job (e.g., avoid work around the forklift, no occupational driving, avoid customer interactions).
- Cross train in another department.
- Modify the triggers in the physical environment such as lighting, noise, clutter or scents.
- Provide a quiet workspace with fewer distractions.
- Modify workplace processes to focus on one task at a time.

### **Providing worksite-based exposure therapy**

- Allow reasonable phone calls to access necessary emotional support during the workday.
- Provide a private space if needed during the work shift.
- Allow access to site after hours, remove any triggering items prior to re-integration into the workplace, consider inviting the worker for a coffee meeting (on or off site).
- Allow support animals on site.
- Allow use of headphones to listen to calming sounds or music.

**Sample offer of modified work letter**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You are a valuable employee, and we are committed to doing everything we can to support your recovery and return to work.

We will work with you and your treatment provider to support a safe and supportive return to work as soon as you are able. This could include a return to work using modified work alternatives including, but not limited to: providing alternate tasks, changing your work location, modifying your reporting supervisor and/or co-workers, adjusting your hours and removing items/objects/equipment that might increase any symptoms.

While you recover, we will provide you the support you need. Please let us know how you prefer we communicate with you (in person, telephone, email, etc.), how often, and any other factors we can accommodate. We can provide you with an outline of the topics we will discuss ahead of time if you wish.

Please contact (name) at (telephone number) if you have any questions or if there is anything we can do to assist you.

Yours truly,

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Company Designate*

**Sample Offer of modified work**

WCB claim number: \_\_\_\_\_

Company name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Employee name: \_\_\_\_\_

*(Print full name)*

To assist with your recovery, we are committed to doing everything we can to work with you and your treatment provider to support an early, safe and supportive return to work.

We have agreed that the modifications required to support your recovery include the following:

Change to your work tasks

*Specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

Change to your work location

*Specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

Change to your supervisor/manager and/or co-workers

*Specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

Change to your hours of work and/or days of work

*Specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

Removal of specific items/objects/equipment

*Specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

Providing exposure therapy with your therapist

*Specify:* \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any difficulties with the modifications outlined above, please let us know as soon as possible and we will adjust the return-to-work plan. We will review your progress on a bi-weekly basis with you and your treatment provider. If there is any decrease in earnings as a result of the above plan, WCB will provide the appropriate wage replacement benefit.

Offer Accepted

Offer Rejected

\_\_\_\_\_

*(Reason)*

Employee Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Company Representative: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Fax directly to WCB at (780) 427-5863.**



## Employer Fact Sheet

# Mental health at work

Mental health in the workplace is becoming an increasingly important consideration for employers. Mental health is closely tied to a worker's overall well-being. If a worker has poor mental health it not only hurts the individual, but it hurts a workplace as well. It can reduce productivity, negatively impact relationships, contribute to addictions and worker absenteeism. We all have a shared responsibility for health and safety and that includes mental health.

## What does mental health at work look like and what signs should you watch for?

Mental health concerns can affect employees in many different ways. Some signs to watch for are:

- Loss of interest at work.
- Change in physical appearance.
- Change in routine – coming in late, leaving early.
- Change in productivity or effectiveness.
- Difficulty concentrating, making decision or memory problems.
- Increase health complaints, including fatigue.
- Decreasing socialization.
- Avoiding situations.
- Lack of cooperation or decreased ability to work with coworkers.
- Anxiety or being overwhelmed by small tasks.

## Strategies that employers can use to encourage positive mental health

1. Encourage active employee participation and decision making when possible.
2. Clearly define employees' duties and responsibilities.
3. Promote work-life balance.
4. Encourage respectful and non-derogatory behaviours.
5. Manageable workloads.

6. Allow opportunities for continuous learning.
7. Have conflict resolution practices in place.
8. Recognize employees' contributions effectively.

## Balancing job demands with mental health

Job stress increases the risk for potential absences from work. This can be prevented by making sure the job demands are understood and matched well with the employees' capacity and resources available. When employees are allowed more control over their role it leads to positive energy and feeling of ownership over workload management. This can be achieved by:

- Allowing self-management of workload when appropriate – (for examples employees have a say in break times).
- Building a strong relationship with your employees so they feel comfortable giving feedback at work.
- Allowing employees a safe method to provide feedback and business recommendations.
- Providing employees with the opportunity to discuss aspects of their role that may cause conflict between personal beliefs and professional demands whenever possible.
- Messaging work/changes to the organization that affect staff as early as possible.
- Providing training for staff at times of change to work practices or when new policies or system changes are being introduced.
- Encouraging employees to set work-related goals and provide appropriate feedback along the way.

Together we can improve mental health in our workplaces and our communities.







# Employer Fact Sheet

## Resources

[Achieve Center for Leadership – Managing Mental Health in the Work Place](#)

[Workplace Strategies for Mental Health – Canada Life](#)



[www.wcb.ab.ca](http://www.wcb.ab.ca)



• [contactcentre@wcb.ab.ca](mailto:contactcentre@wcb.ab.ca)



• 1-866-922-9221 (within AB)

1-800-661-9608 (outside AB)

## Communications and conversations tool kit

Effective communication requires clarity and collaboration when an employee is dealing with life or work stressors. It is important to use communication that promotes a safe psychological environment. The following strategies can help:

### How to effectively communicate with an emotional employee

- **Listen to understand** – understanding the employee's perspective and emotional state is key to starting the process.
- **Engage the employee to focus on solutions** – that support them in the work environment and in doing their job well. The role of a leader is to ensure job goals are met in a safe environment.
- **Choose the most effective communication style** – being adept in choosing a variety of styles can help you change if needed to get the most out of the conversation.
- **Prevent triggering when giving negative feedback** – learn to provide negative feedback constructively. This can help reduce the intensity of their reaction. Do not place blame; remain positive.
- **Use specific approaches** – such as resolving conflict, managing performance or responding to issues like burnout, biases and violence.

### Five steps in having a mental health conversation

#### 1. Prepare the conversation

- Plan on what you are going to say.
- Review the plan with someone else, HR for example.
- Choose a suitable time and location that will allow for privacy and confidentiality and be free from interruptions.
- Allow enough time so the conversation is not rushed.

#### 2. Initiate the conversation

- Start the conversation by acknowledging the worker's good qualities.
- Assure the worker's confidentiality will be respected.
- Begin from a place of concern.
- Be specific about behaviors that have been noticed.

#### 3. Explore and broaden the conversation

- Be curious, ask open ended questions.
- Use active listening skills.
- Define important issues and the impact on work and co-workers.

#### 4. Generate options and offer support

- Collaborate for the desired outcome and solution.
- Consider any adjustments that can be made for the employer and employee.
- Consider any accommodations that are needed.

#### 5. Create an action plan

- Define actions to be taken by both parties.
- Review the action plan together.
- Follow up at an agreed time.

### Resources

[Having a conversation: discussing mental health in the workplace -- Sarah's story \(YouTube link\)](#)

[How to Talk About Mental Health \(YouTube link\)](#)

[Workplace Strategies for Mental Health – Canada Life](#)

[Return to Work Workplace – University of Melbourne](#)



# Support your employee as they recover from a psychological injury

## 1. Find out what will help your employee feel supported.

Talk to your employee as soon as possible (in person, if appropriate) and let them know you are there for support. Listen openly to how they feel. Be reassuring and answer any questions they have. Direct them to your Human Resources department or WCB for questions about the claim process.

Establish a frequent and preferred method of contact that works for all of you. If you can, provide your employee choices that will help them take control over their environment (for example, when and where to meet, whether to fill out claim forms at the office or at home, who they choose to be their point of contact at work).

## 2. Secure resources and information to assist your employee.

Provide your employee with information about your organization's sick leave policy and/or position on paying medical costs, in order to help plan for the financial impact of the situation.

## 3. Avoid discussing your perspective of the claim with your employee or the employee's co-workers.

Psychological injuries carry a false stigma suggesting personal weakness. Discussing your opinion of the claim or promoting discussion among co-workers can perpetuate the stigma. Discussions such as these can also damage the employer/employee relationship, which is a significant factor in a successful recovery and return to work.

## 4. Support treatment programming that involves exposure therapy (sometimes referred to as desensitization).

Worksite-based exposure therapy involves the gradual re-introduction of the employee to the feared object or location in order to help work through the anxiety it causes. Supported by a qualified clinician, it is one of the most effective treatment methods in achieving recovery and successful return-to-work outcomes.

## 5. Contact the assigned WCB adjudicator or case manager to receive regular updates.

Stay connected with the case manager/adjudicator to ensure you understand how you can help and how you should prepare to return your employee to work.

### Return to work

Consider the following to support your employee to prepare to return to work:

## 1. Participate in all return-to-work planning discussions/meetings with WCB to focus on a return to modified employment.

An occupational therapist may arrange a meeting with you, and, if appropriate, your employee to discuss ideas for modified duties. They will document the return-to-work plan for all involved.

## 2. Offer work with modified hours and/or duties.

After a psychological injury, some employees have less stamina to cope with their job on a full-time basis. By offering modified hours, you help your employee have time to seek medical support for their symptoms, which may help decrease the probability of a recurrence.



## Employer Fact Sheet

### Support your employee as they recover from a psychological injury (continued)

Some employees may not be able to work in the same environment or perform the same duties. Modified duties can assist your employee to stay at work. Think about alternate work locations or duties to accommodate a safe and early return.

### 3. Prepare co-workers for the employee's return to work.

Many people don't know how to interact with a co-worker who is dealing with a psychological injury. Talk to the case manager or exposure occupational therapist about ways to help your employees manage this transition.

### 4. Follow-up with your employee after they return to work.

Pay attention to changes in work behavior. For instance, if your employee was never late prior to the accident, but is now frequently late, they could be struggling with their injury. Other signs can include avoiding contact with people, absenteeism, sleep deprivation or memory issues.

### 5. Know who to call in a crisis.

To manage psychological injuries effectively, your employee should be followed by a psychologist, a psychiatrist, and/or a family physician.

Available community resources, including family/friends, and your local community distress line numbers are all important numbers to have on hand. This is especially important once the employee is back at work.

### 6. Help the employee be prepared with a contingency plan.

The anniversary of an accident can bring on the same feelings that occurred when the accident first happened. There can also be "trauma triggers."

Triggers can be diverse, such as people, places, images, sensory perception, incidents or circumstances that remind your employee of their accident.

Understanding potential triggers can help you and your employee develop a contingency plan to help your employee deal with a difficult time.

### More information for you

You can find information about psychological injuries [here](#).

Information about modified work is found [here](#).

### When in doubt, please call us.

Your WCB adjudicator or case manager is a great resource for helping you navigate a psychological injury claim and coordinating a safe return to work for your employee.

We care about your employee's wellbeing and will work with them, the treatment provider and you throughout the recovery process.



## Additional resources

**WCB's psychological injuries webpage:** <https://www.wcb.ab.ca/treatment-and-recovery/specialized-injury-support/psychological-injuries/>

Our website contains further details about what makes psychological injuries unique and information on how to create a psychologically healthy and safe workplace. It also includes additional resources to use when supporting a worker with a psychological injury.

**Employer education courses:** <https://www.wcb.ab.ca/resources/for-employers/seminars-and-workshops/>

### **WCB's Psychological injuries in the workplace seminar**

This seminar will cover WCB policy and legislation related to psychological injuries, the claims decision making process, psychological injury treatment, and how to successfully support your workers through recovery. This seminar was created for small- to mid-size employers, or employers who are new to WCB although we welcome all employers to attend. Our aim is to increase understanding of mental health injuries in the workplace.

### **University of Fredericton's psychological health and safety in the workplace certificate programs**

Our partnership with the University of Fredericton offers Alberta employers exclusively reduced rates to online certificate programs in the following areas of study:

- Psychological health & safety in the workplace
- Enhancing workplace resiliency

### **External resources**

#### **[Guarding Minds at Work](#)**

A free and comprehensive set of resources for employers, designed to measure and address psychological health and safety in the workplace.

## Crisis support lines in Alberta

- Mental Health Helpline: 1-877-303-2642 (24 hours)
- Or visit: [suicideprevention.ca/Need-Help](https://suicideprevention.ca/Need-Help)

<b>Northern Alberta</b>	Fort McMurray and Northeastern Alberta	SOS Crisis Line: 780-743-HELP (4357) or 1-800-565-3801
	Edmonton and surrounding areas	The Support Network Distress Line: (780) 482-HELP (24 hours)
<b>Central Alberta</b>	Cold Lake	Dr. Margaret Savage Crisis Center: 1-866-594-0533 (24 hours)
	All Alberta and Northern Saskatchewan St. Paul District Crisis Center	1-800-263-3045 (24 hours)
<b>Southern Alberta</b>	Rural areas in the Capital Health Region	The Support Network Distress Line: 1-800-232-7288 (24 hours)
	Calgary	Distress Center: (403) 266-HELP
	Chinook Health Region and southern Calgary Distress Line	1-888-787-2880 or (403) 327-7905

## Additional resources

- 211: Information on community and social services (Not available in all communities).
- 811: Health Link
- 911: Emergency
- Income Support Contact Center: 1-866-644-5135 (24 hours)
- Addiction Services Help line: 1-866-332-2322 (24 hours)
- Poison & Drug Information Service: 1-800-332-1414 (24 hours)