

Mental Health as an Occupational Health and Safety Issue in the Workplace

Occupational health and safety (OHS) is founded on the principle of preventing harm arising from work. While OHS has historically focused on physical hazards, there is growing recognition that mental health is an equally important component of worker safety and health. Psychological harm caused by work-related stressors is real, measurable, and preventable, and must be addressed as part of a comprehensive OHS approach.

Mental Health and the Duty of Care

In South Africa, the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA) place a duty on employers to provide and maintain, as far as reasonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of employees. Health, in this context, includes both physical and mental well-being.

This means that employers are required not only to prevent physical injuries, but also to identify and manage workplace factors that may cause psychological harm. Treating mental health as an OHS issue shifts the focus from individual coping to organisational responsibility and prevention.

Psychosocial Hazards at Work

Psychosocial hazards arise from how work is designed, organised, managed, and experienced. Common psychosocial hazards include excessive workloads, long working hours, unclear roles, lack of job control, job insecurity, poor management practices, bullying and harassment, workplace violence, and exposure to traumatic events.

When these hazards are not effectively managed, they can result in work-related stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, and other mental health conditions. These outcomes not only affect workers' well-being but also increase absenteeism, presenteeism, accidents, staff turnover, and compensation claims.

Managing Mental Health Through OHS Systems

A prevention focused OHS approach requires psychosocial risks to be managed in the same way as physical risks. This includes:

- Identifying psychosocial hazards through consultation and risk assessments
- Assessing the level of risk to workers' mental health
- Implementing control measures to eliminate or reduce risks
- Monitoring and reviewing workplace practices regularly

Control measures may include reasonable workloads, adequate staffing, clear job roles, supportive supervision, fair workplace policies, and access to support and accommodations where needed.

Worker Participation and Social Dialogue

Worker participation is central to effective OHS management. Health and safety committees, trade unions, and other representative structures play a critical role in identifying psychosocial hazards and developing practical solutions. Social dialogue fosters shared responsibility and strengthened a culture of prevention.

Reducing Stigma Through an OHS Lens

Recognising mental health as an OHS issue helps reduce stigma by affirming that psychological injuries are work-related and preventable. Workers should feel safe to report psychosocial risks just as they would report physical hazards, without fear of discrimination or victimisation.

Conclusion

Mental health is an integral part of occupational health and safety. Workplaces that fail to address psychosocial hazards expose workers to significant harm and undermine the principles of decent work. By integrating mental health into OHS systems and adopting a prevention-focused approach, employers and workers can create safer, healthier, and more productive workplaces for all.