Action on Workplace Stress:

**Mental Injury Prevention Tools
for Ontario Workers**

Introduction: Worker Call to Action

Action on Workplace Stress

A Worker's Guide to Addressing Workplace Causes of Mental Distress

This guide and resource kit will provide workers a basic understanding and a place to start to learn about workplace stress and what to do about it. The guide gives definitions, common causes of mental distress, legal frameworks (focusing on Ontario), possible actions to take, and resources available. It is an introduction and action guide created by workers for workers.

These tools are not clinical diagnostic tools. They are not meant to diagnose medical or psychological conditions or to be used by a physician to these ends. These tools are designed to identify problems that may exist within the workplace and provide possible avenues to address them.

This resource kit and tools are provided with a focus on the Ontario jurisdiction – workers in other provinces or in federally regulated workplaces should refer to their own legal framework.

Introduction: Worker Call to Action

Every day workers experience mental and physical effects from factors at work such as:

- excessive demands at work,
- workplace bullying/harassment,
- threats of violence,
- lack of control over work processes,
- insecure job arrangements,
- technological changes that interfere with tasks,
- lack of recognition and rewards,
- inadequate resources and support

All these pressures are taking their toll on workers' health, but are difficult to address because they do not fit into traditional health and safety categories such as chemical hazards, slips, trips and falls, or broken bones.

In 2009, a group of unions joined with the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW), University of Waterloo researchers, and representatives from the Office of the Worker Adviser (OWA), and the Workers Health and Safety Centre (WHSC) to fill this gap. The goal of the "Mental Injury Tool" (MIT) Group was to develop tools and resources to help workers deal with these "non-traditional" occupational hazards that are increasingly plaguing workers. We developed this resource kit for workers because there are no pieces of legislation or manuals that focus on preventing the health effects caused by workplace stressors. While the cost and illness burden of mental health at the workplace is gaining attention in Canada, the pace of change seems to be extremely slow — workers need tools now.

So for today's workers we have created this resource kit as a place to start. This kit is created FOR workers BY workers. We hope it provides some insight, perspective, and a basic understanding about some of the causes of workplace stress. We hope that by using it workers will find the support and gather the information they need to act in their own workplaces — big or small — to improve their work environment and protect their physical and mental health.

We are not the first group to understand the importance of psychosocial hazards on workers' health or to say that something should be done. According to a Canadian Mental Health Commission's report written by Dr. Martin Shain (2010), *Tracking the Perfect Legal Storm,* developments in seven areas of law are making it clear that employers have some responsibilities for creating and maintaining a psychologically safe workplace for employees (Shain, 2010). Also, Canada is poised to launch a new voluntary standard for employers, "Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (Z1003)" in an effort to focus workplace attention on preventing the negative health effects associated with psychosocial hazards.

Yes, work factors may cause, contribute to, or aggravate the mental health problems workers experience, whether they suffer from a diagnosed condition that has a clinical name or suffer undiagnosed, negative effects on health and well-being. The aim of this kit is NOT to diagnose the worker, the aim is to "diagnose the workplace"– to organize together in whatever way we can and urge employers to make the changes necessary to prevent negative impacts on the physical or mental health of workers.

We believe that threats to a worker's mental health (also sometimes called a worker's psychological health and safety) should be prevented like any other hazard. Worker movements ARE NOT stopped by any lack of formal recognition or legislation on any given issue. It took years for asbestos to be recognized as a carcinogen and labeled as a designated substance — long after it killed thousands of workers. The time to take action on the causes of workplace stress is now. For it is only through action from us — the workers of today — that we can hope to improve the system for our children — the workers of the future.

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