



The psychosocial work environment: what is it, why is it important, how is it measured?

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Mayday Mayday

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Institute
for Work &
Health

Research Excellence
Safe Work
Healthy Workers

Five take home messages for today

1. The psychosocial environment refers to many different dimensions of work.
2. The psychosocial environment can have immediate, short-term and long-term impacts on health. Impacts can be both positive and negative.
3. Modifying the work environment will be more effective than modifying individuals, or treating health conditions when they arise.
4. Key components of successful interventions are management commitment and worker participation.
5. Brief and more in-depth evidence-based instruments are available to measure, and improve the psychosocial environment.

Outline

- Selected models of the psychosocial work environment
- Options to intervene on the psychosocial work environment
- A suggested plan-do-act-check approach
- Recommended measures to assess the psychosocial environment

A few definitions

- **Exposure:** Conditions within the workplace that can impact workers' health and wellbeing. Exposures can be positive or negative and impacts can be immediate or many years into the future
- **Risk:** Something that is linked to the potential for harm (may also be referred to as a “hazard”)
- **Safety:** Visible and deliberate actions to control or mitigate the impact of risks on health

What is the psychosocial environment? What are psychosocial risks?

“the sociostructural range of opportunities given to an individual to meet his or her need of well being, productivity and positive self-experience”

(Siegrist and Marmot, 2004)

“Psychosocial hazards relate to how work is organized, social factors at work and aspects of the work environment, equipment and hazardous tasks. Psychosocial hazards can be present in all organizations and sectors, and from all kinds of work tasks, equipment and employment arrangements”

(International Standards Association, ISO 45003:2021)

Selected models of the psychosocial work environment

The Demand-Control (Job Strain) model

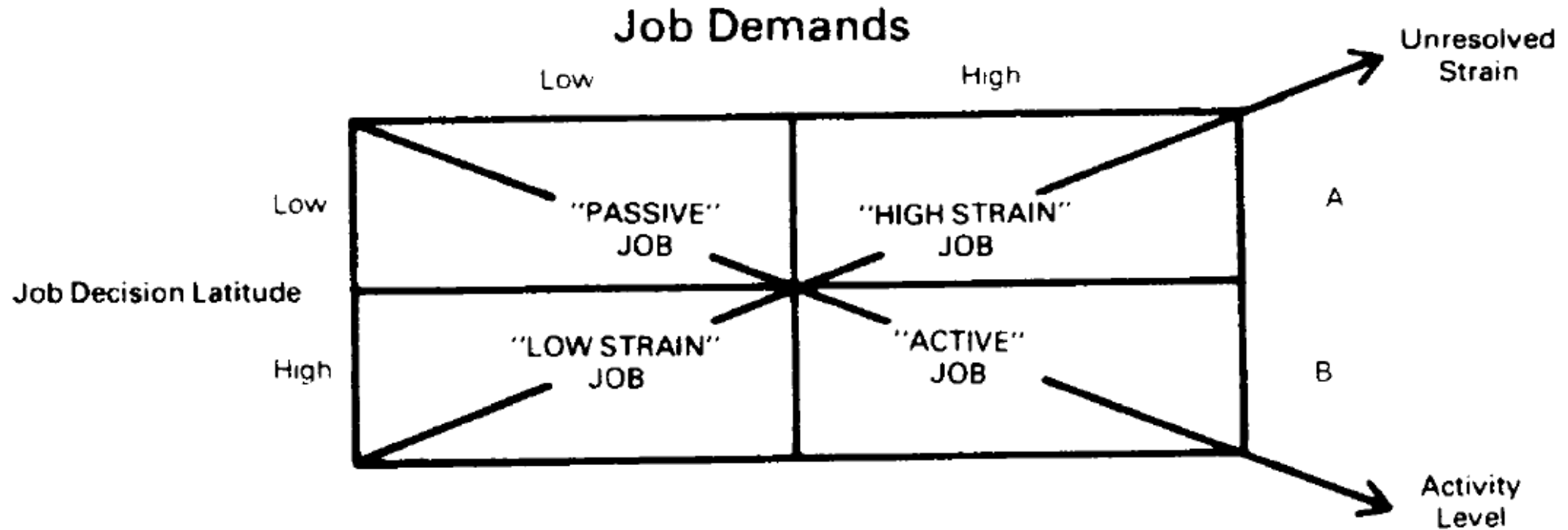


Figure 1. Job strain model.

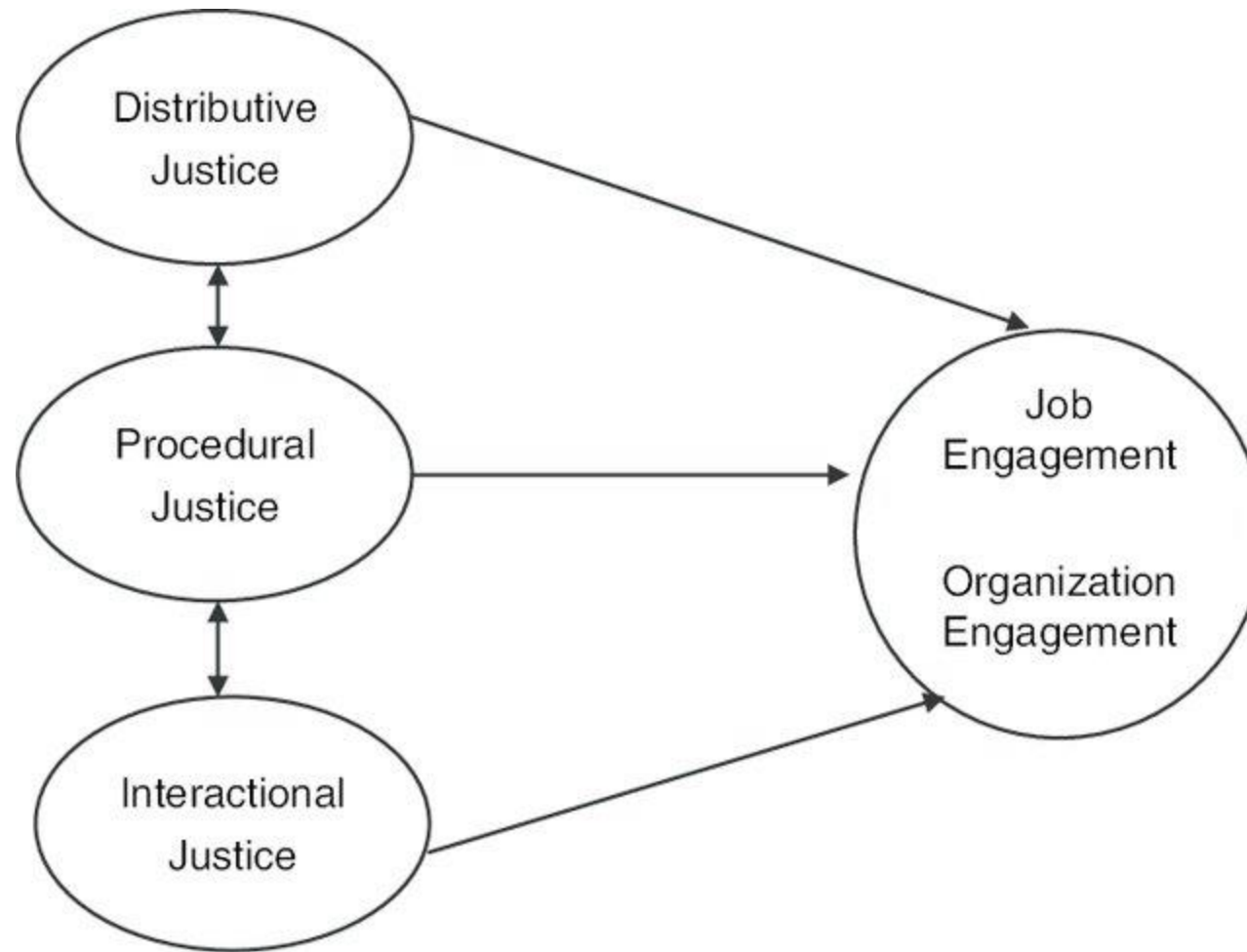
Karasek, 1979

The Effort-Reward Imbalance Model

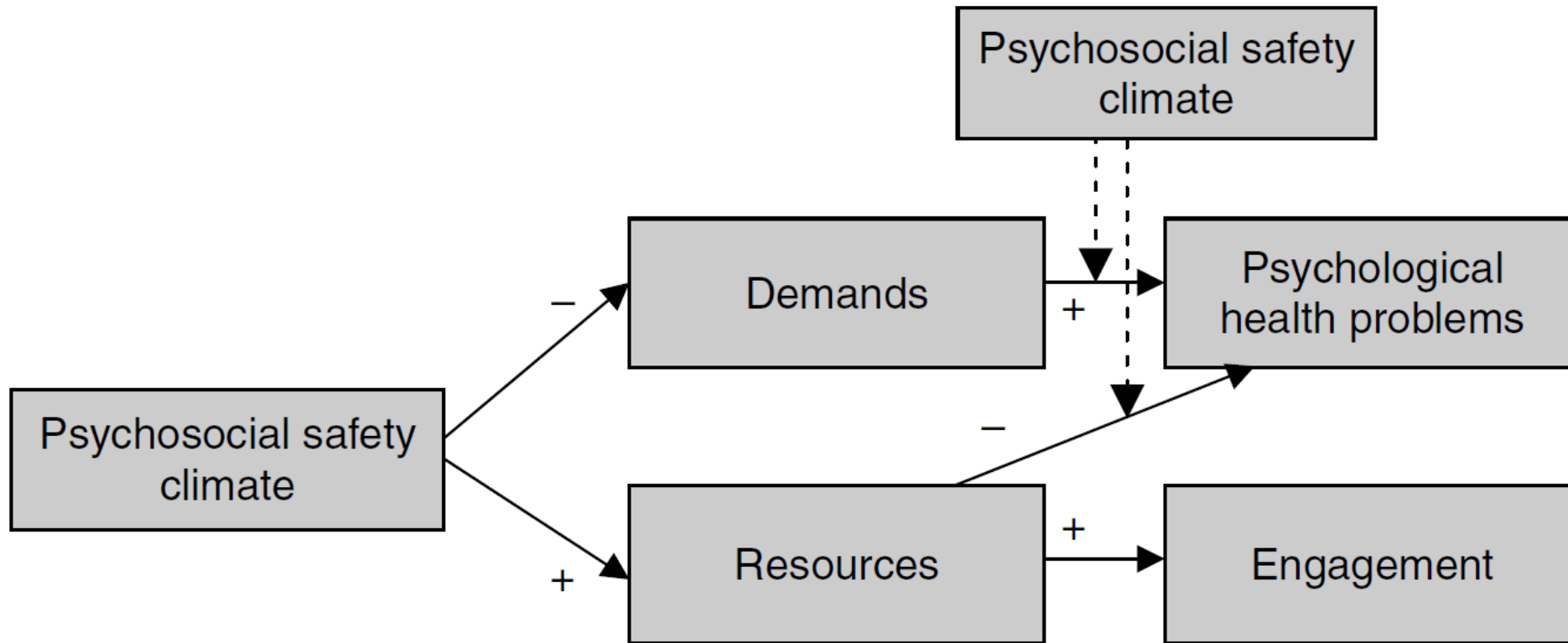


Seigrist, 1996

Organizational Justice



Psychosocial Safety Climate



Dollard and Bakker, 2010

Section Summary

- Validated models of the psychosocial work environment include psychosocial exposures such as
 - Job demands
 - Job control
 - Social support
 - Job (in)security
 - Balance between efforts and rewards
 - Organizational justice (distributive, procedural, interactional)
- **Psychosocial safety** refers to visible and deliberate actions to address psychosocial exposures in the work environment.

The psychosocial work environment and health. Options for intervention

How does the psychosocial work environment impact health?

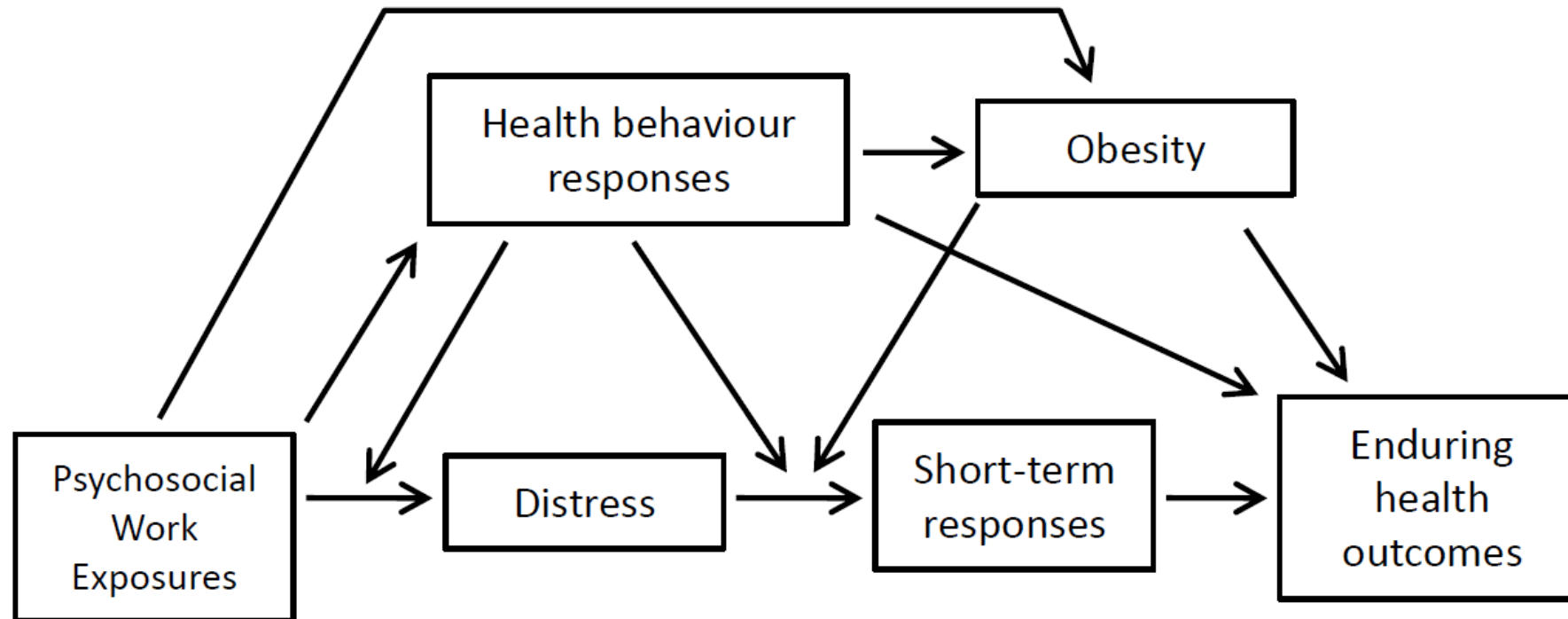


Figure 1. The complex relationships between psychosocial work exposures, health behaviors, obesity, and enduring health outcomes. Adapted from (11, 12).

How does the psychosocial work environment impact health?

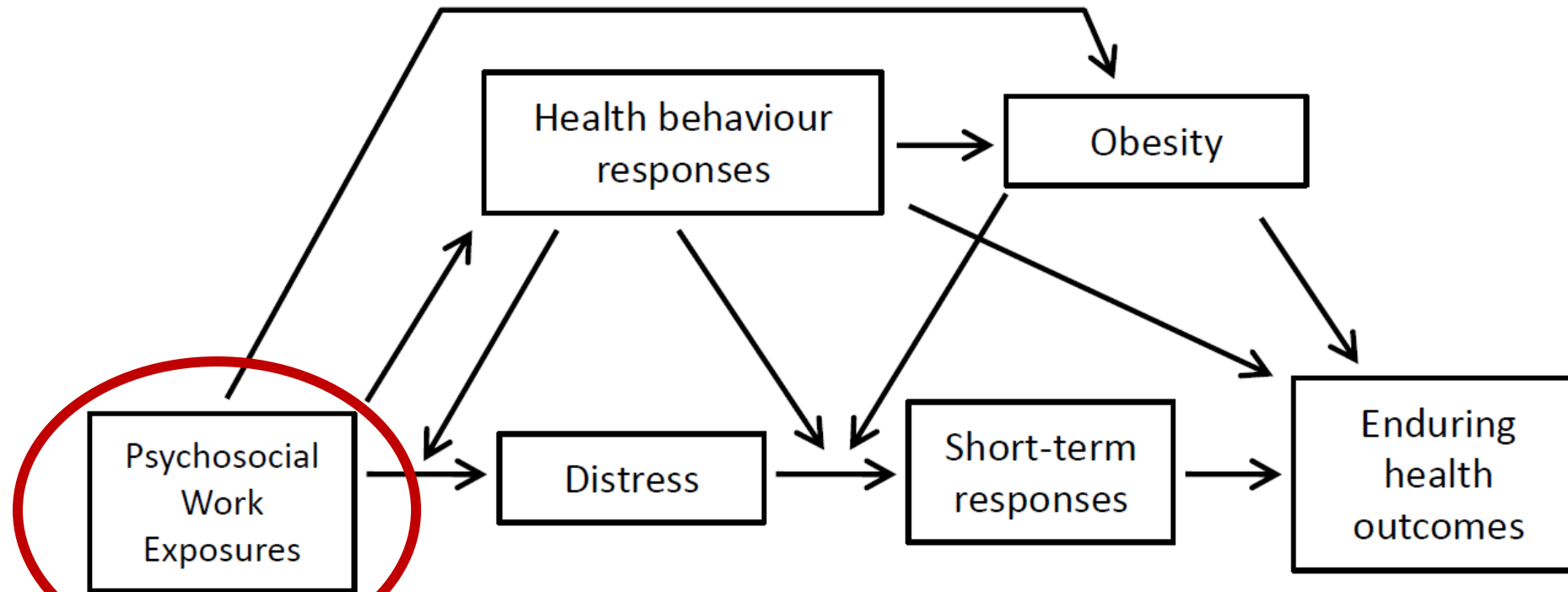


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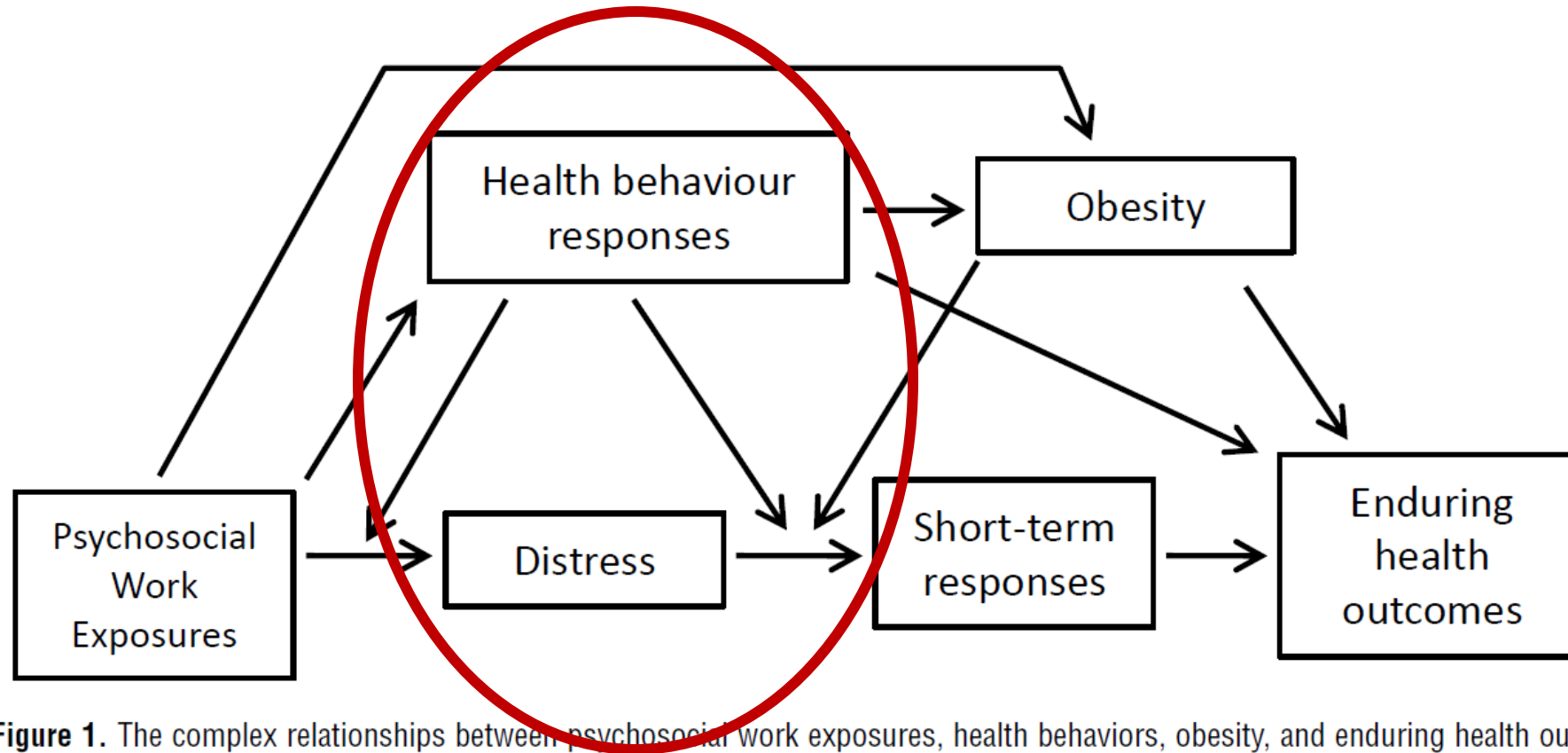


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How does the psychosocial work environment impact health?

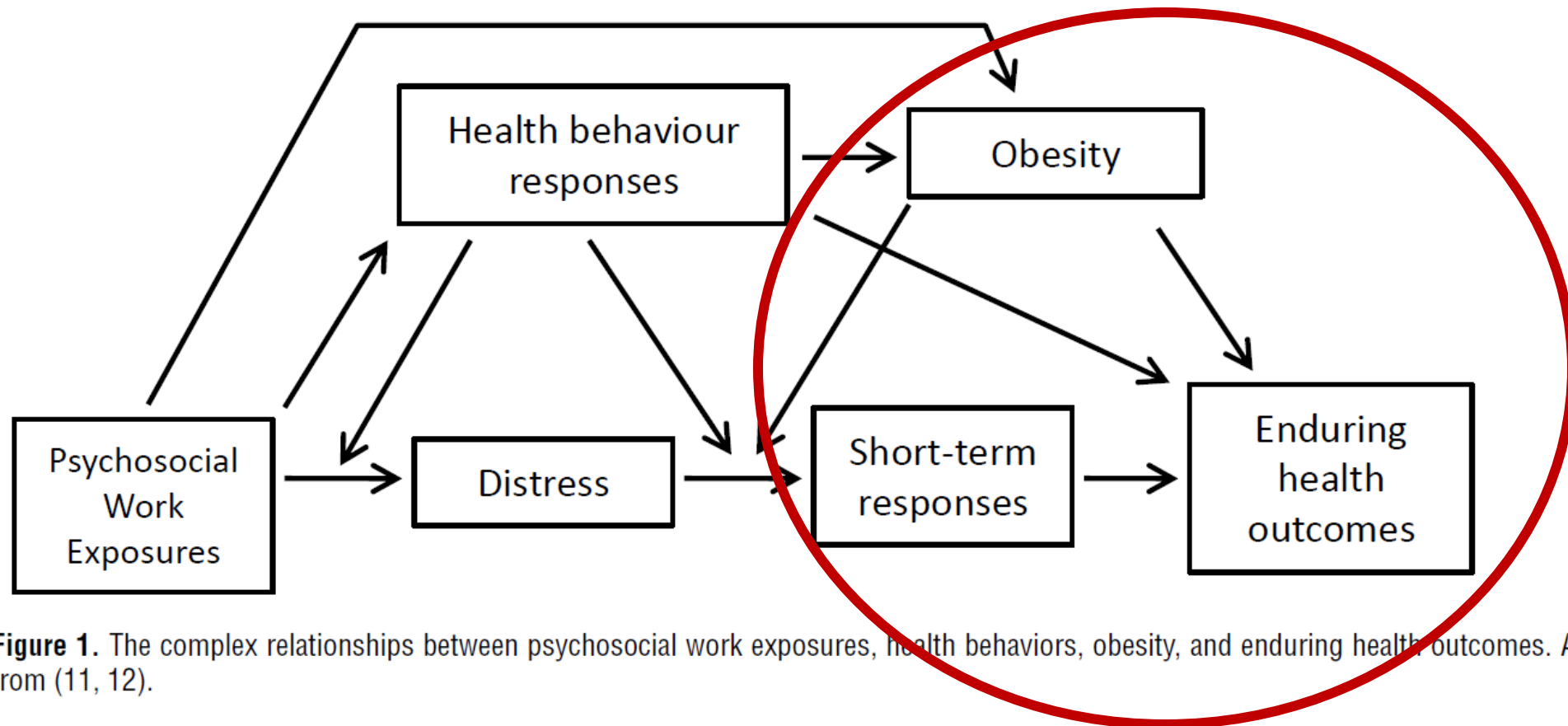
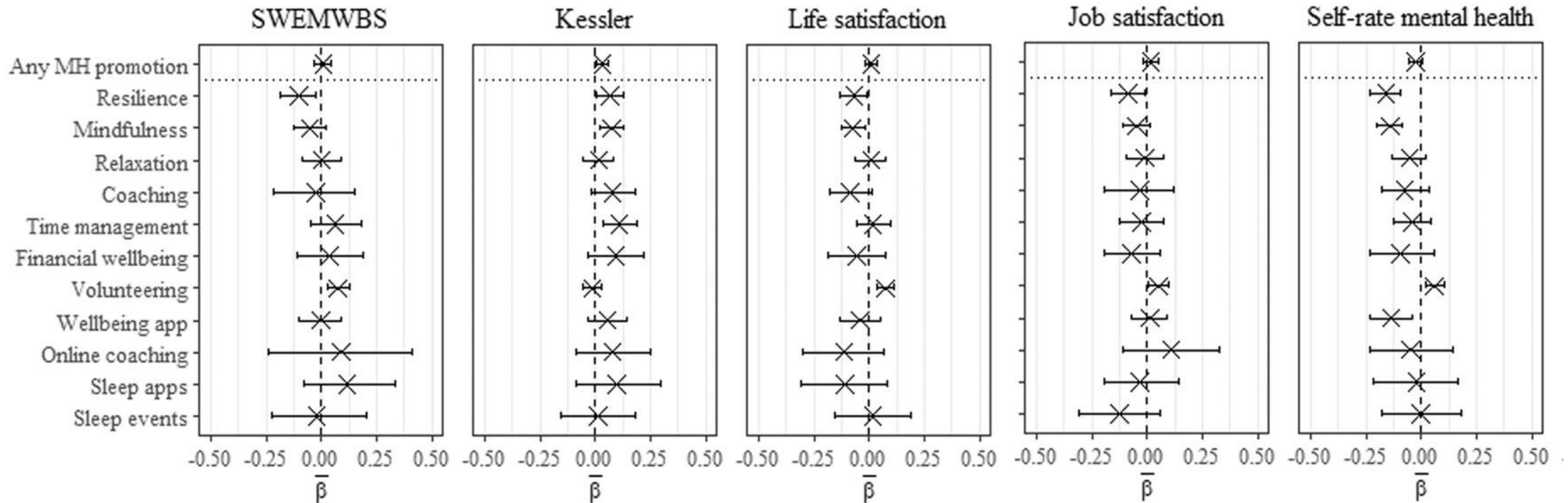


Figure 1. The complex relationships between psychosocial work exposures, health behaviors, obesity, and enduring health outcomes. Adapted from (11, 12).

Employee well-being outcomes from individual-level mental health interventions (Flemming, 2024)



SWEMWBS = Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale

Pooled sample, N = 46,336 individuals; 233 organisations

Employee well-being outcomes from individual-level mental health interventions (Flemming, 2024)

“Results show that those who participate in individual-level interventions have the same levels of mental well-being as those who do not. The large multi-organisational sample reveals that this is consistent across multiple organisational contexts”

Which organisational interventions related to the psychosocial environment have an evidence base?

Review



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Scand J Work Environ Health. 2023;49(5):315–329. doi:10.5271/sjweh.4097

How effective are organizational-level interventions in improving the psychosocial work environment, health, and retention of workers? A systematic overview of systematic reviews

by Birgit Aust, PhD,¹ Jeppe Lykke Møller, PhD,¹ Mads Nordentoft, PhD,¹ Karen Bo Frydendall, PhD,¹ Elizabeth Bengtson,^{1,2} Andreas Brøgger Jensen, MSc,^{3,4} Anne Helene Garde, PhD,^{1,8} Michiel Kompier, PhD,⁵ Norbert Semmer, PhD,^{6,7} Reiner Rugulies, PhD,^{1,8} Sofie Østergaard Jaspers, PhD¹

20 strong and 32 moderate quality reviews (957 primary studies)
30 reviews focused on specific interventions (e.g., increasing job control)
22 reviews focused on specific outcomes (e.g., interventions to reduce burnout)

Which organisational interventions on the psychosocial environment have an evidence base?

Strong quality evidence

- Changes in working time arrangements, specifically those that give employees influence over work arrangements, improve work environment outcomes in particular work-life balance (1 strong, 3 moderate)
- Organizational level interventions focused on reducing burnout (e.g. job training, teamwork, workflow changes) lead to small reductions in burnout (3 strong, 5 moderate)

Which organisational interventions on the psychosocial environment have an evidence base?

Moderate quality evidence

- Interventions to increase control at work have positive impacts on employee well-being (1 strong, 3 moderate)
- Approaches to improve dementia care approaches decrease burnout and stress, and increases job satisfaction (1 strong, 2 moderate)
- Organizational-level interventions to improve communication, support, or more participatory approaches to work processes lead to improvements in the psychosocial environment and employee well-being (1 strong, 2 moderate)

Which organisational interventions on the psychosocial environment have an evidence base?

Low quality or inconclusive or inconsistent evidence

- Mentoring programs do not always improve turnover and job-satisfaction among newly educated nurses (2 strong, 4 moderate)
- Staff training on preventing workplace violence improves knowledge and confidence, although effects on rates of violence are less clear (1 strong, 3 moderate)
- The effects of leadership training on psychological symptoms among employees is inconsistent (3 strong, 3 moderate quality)
- Organizational level interventions to reduce stress produce mixed results (3 strong, 3 moderate)

Which organisational interventions on the psychosocial environment have an evidence base?

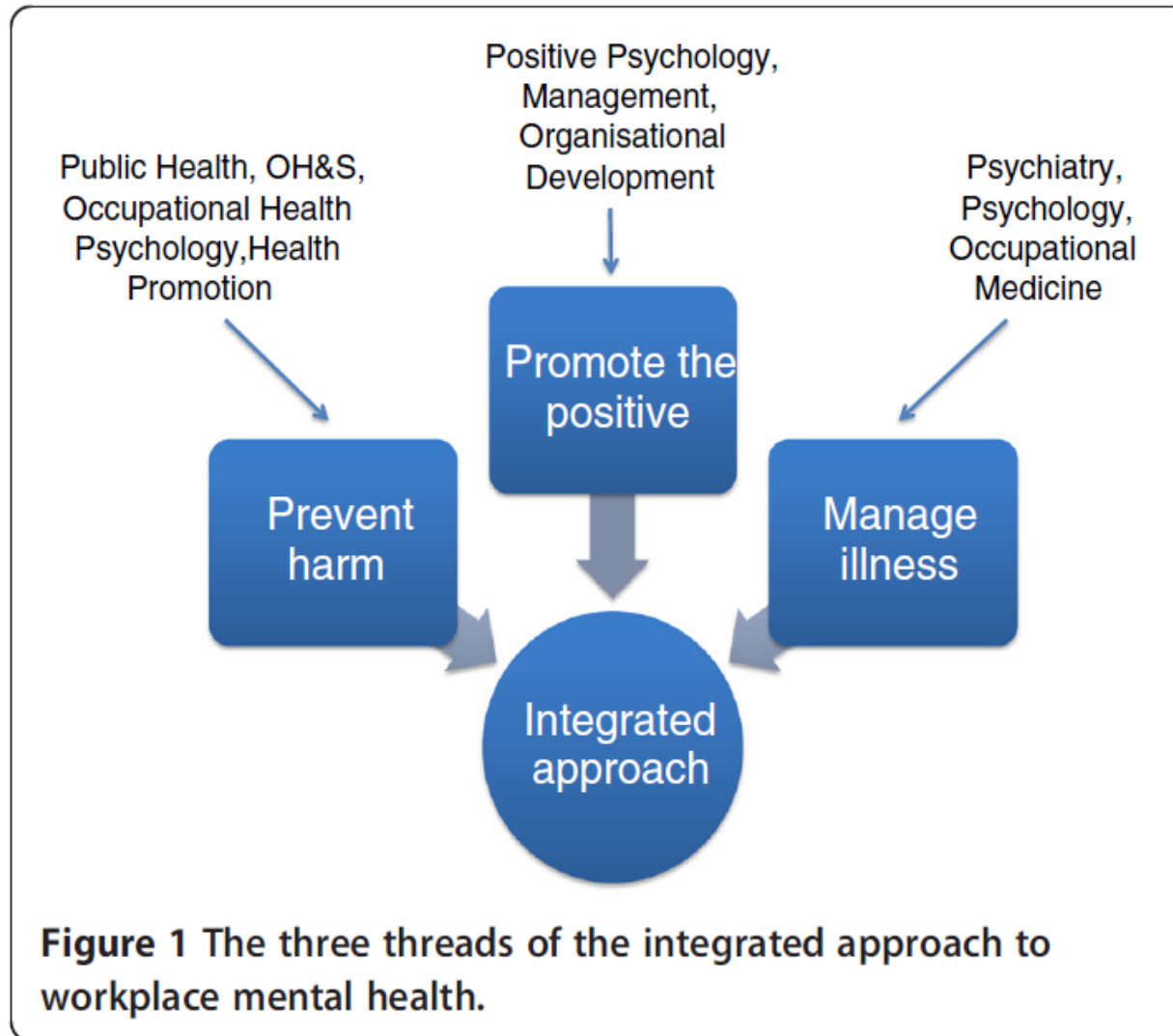
“Adverse psychosocial work conditions and adverse health outcomes are potentially, at least partly, preventable through appropriate changes in the work environment”

“The success of organizational-level intervention may depend on certain conditions like sufficient and continuous management support, appropriate problem assessment, so the intervention fits to the problems to be solved, and the active involvement of employees”

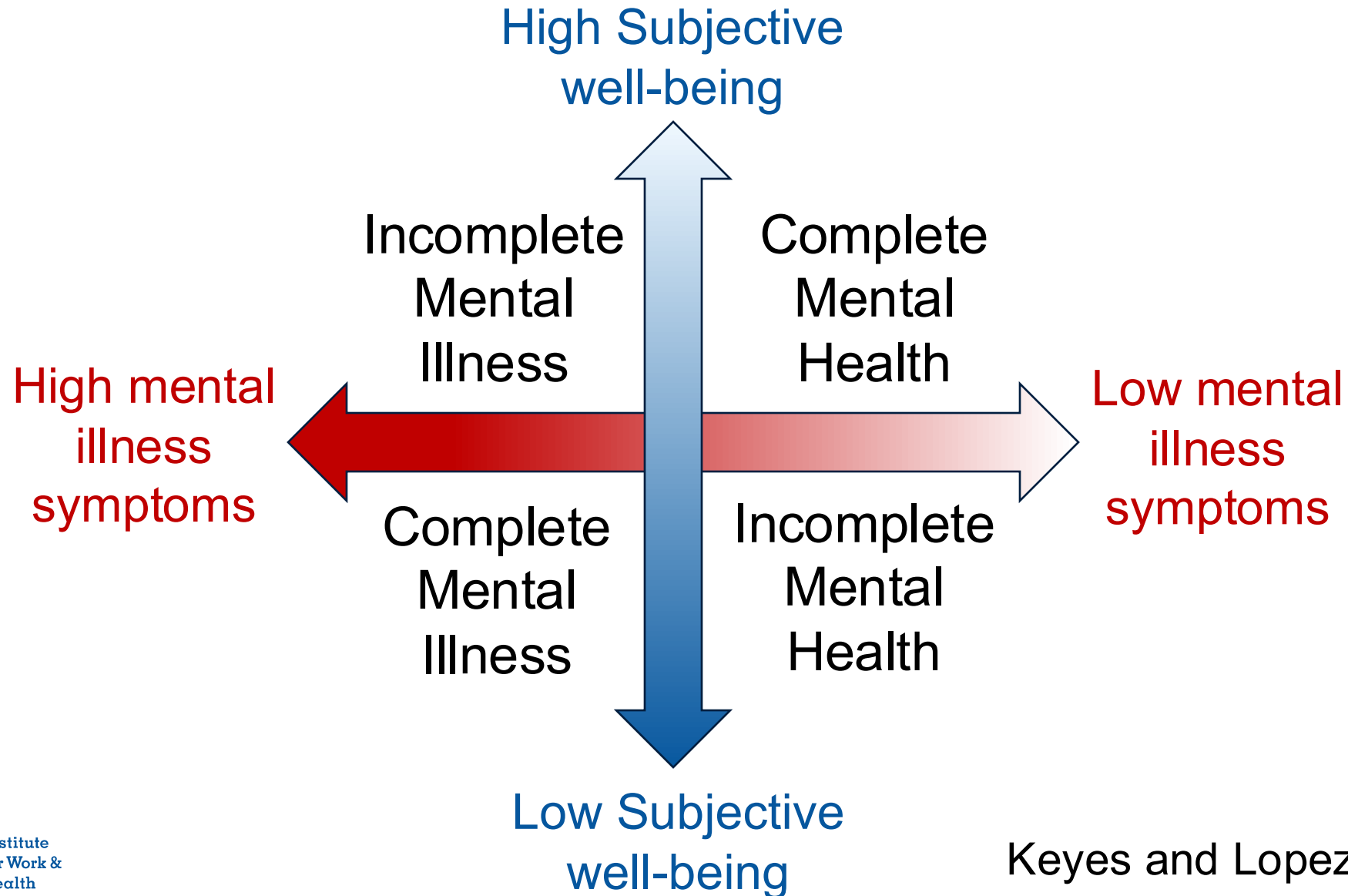
“More research is needed to better understand why certain organizational-level interventions lead to desired changes while others do not”
[implementation research]

Aust et al, 2023

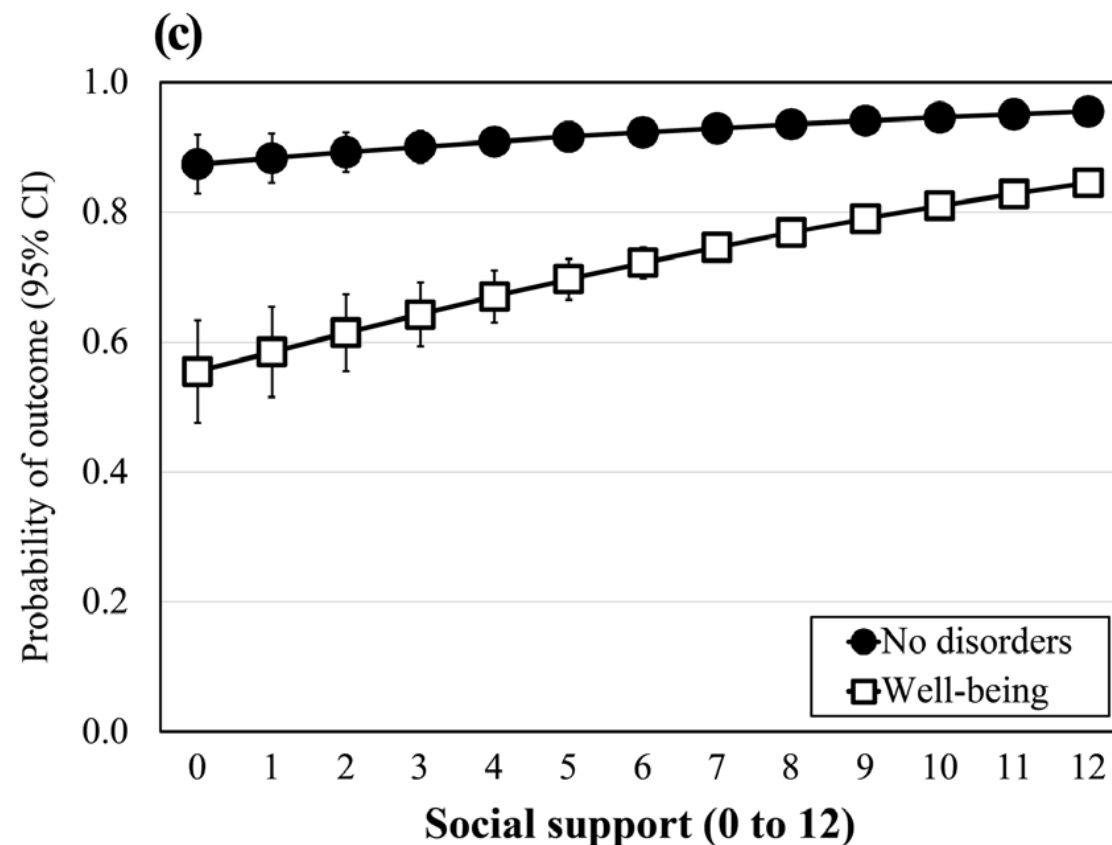
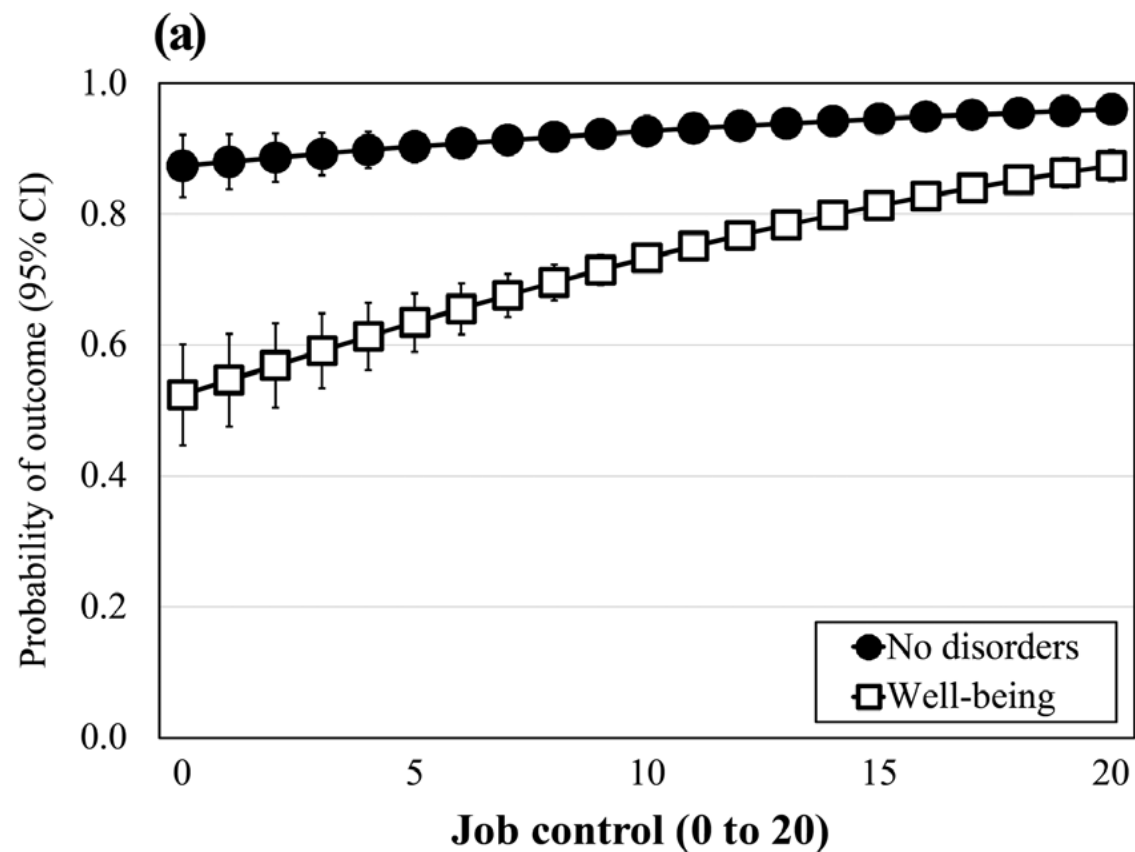
An integrated model to approach workplace mental health



Mental health & mental illness: The complete state model



Relationship between job control and social support with risk of mental illness symptoms and mental well being.



Section Summary

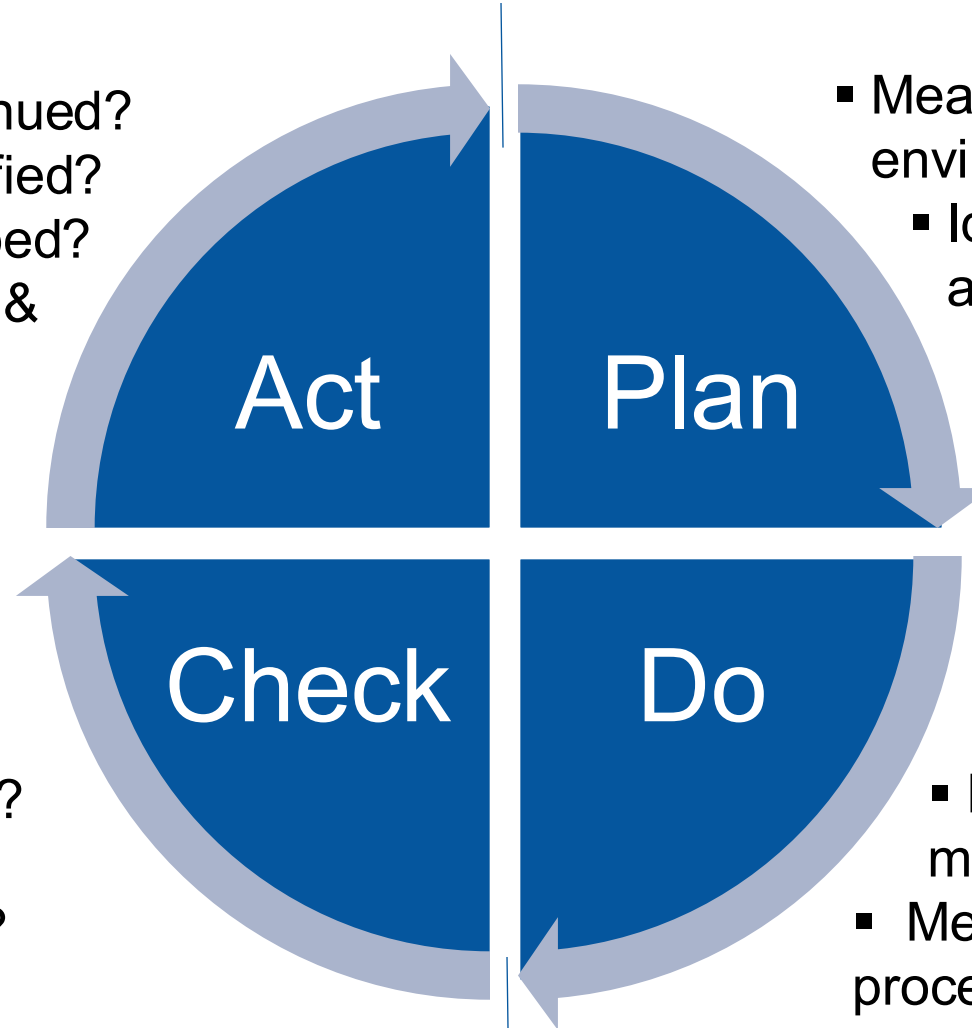
- The psychosocial work environment can impact physical and mental health in the immediate-, medium- and long-term.
- Organizational approaches that focus on individuals (e.g. resilience, relaxation) have limited impacts on employee well-being outcomes.
- Organizational approaches that focus on the structure of work and the work environment likely have greater impacts, but there is a lot of variation in success.
 - Management support, worker participation and accurate problem assessment appear to be key aspects.
- When focusing on the work environment and mental health, organizations should take an integrated approach.

A suggested plan-do-act-check approach

A suggested approach to assess and improve the psychosocial work environment

- What should be continued?
- What should be modified?
- What should be stopped?
- Communicate results & changes
- Include workers in process

- Re-measure the psychosocial environment
- What areas improved?
- What areas did not?
- Did everyone benefit?

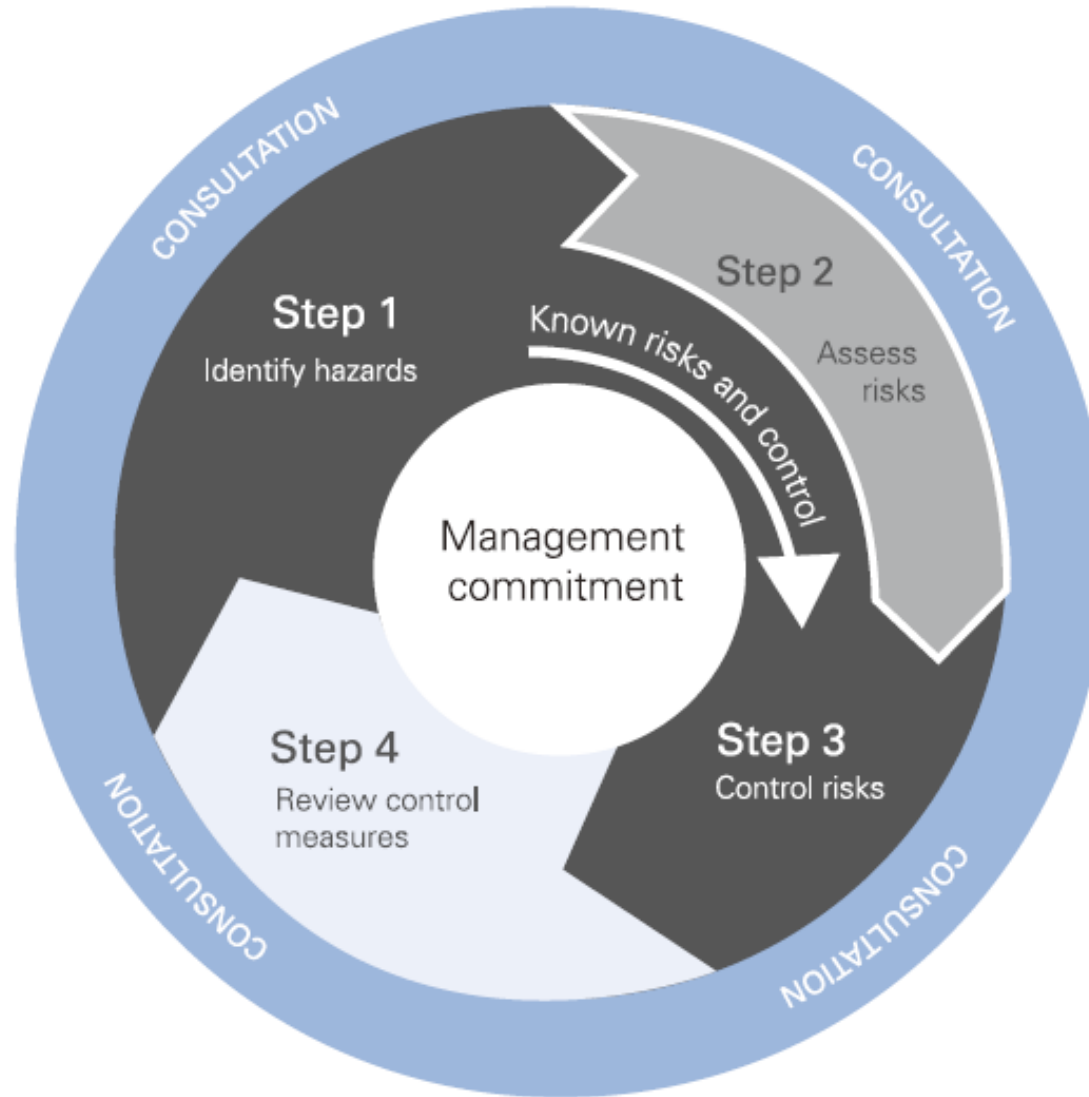


- Measure the psychosocial environment (language/literacy)
 - Identify areas that should be addressed (take an integrated approach)?
 - What is feasible and likely to be effective?
- Take action (communicate what is being done)
- Ensure high level management commitment
- Measure implementation process

Three useful resources focused on addressing psychosocial hazards at work

- Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work
SafeWork NSW, 2021
- Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work
Safe Work Australia, 2022
- Designing Work to Manage Psychosocial Risks
SafeWork NSW, 2024

Underlying model/approach behind each document



Recommended measures to assess the psychosocial work environment

The Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ)

Safety and Health at Work 10 (2019) 482–503



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Safety and Health at Work

journal homepage: www.e-shaw.net

Original Article

The Third Version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire

Hermann Burr^{1,*}, Hanne Berthelsen², Salvador Moncada³, Matthias Nübling⁴, Emilie Dupret⁵, Yucel Demiral⁶, John Oudyk⁷, Tage S. Kristensen⁸, Clara Llorens^{3,9}, Albert Navarro^{9,10}, Hans-Joachim Lincke⁴, Christine Bocéréan^{5,11}, Ceyda Sahan⁶, Peter Smith^{12,13,14}, Anne Pohrt¹⁵, on behalf of the international COPSOQ Network

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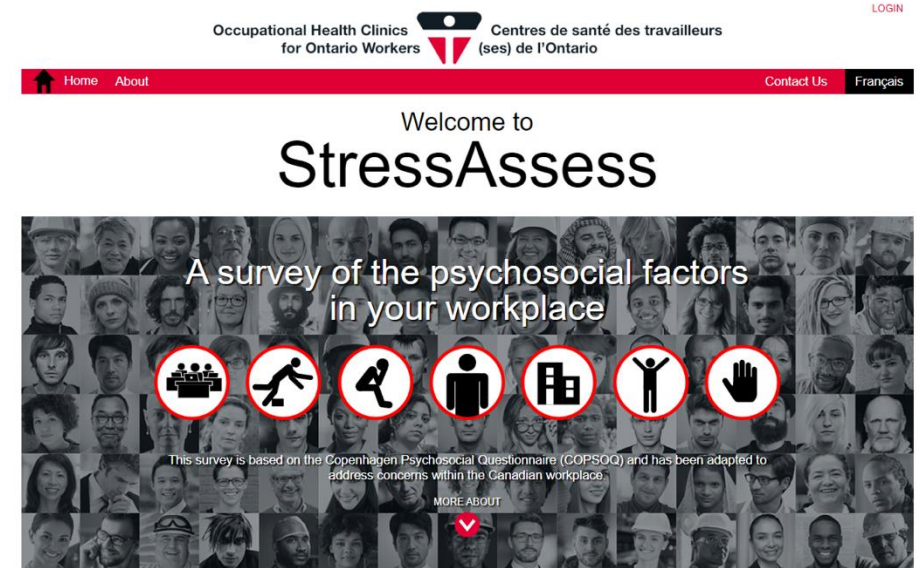
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Six domains covering 24 dimensions

Domain	Dimension	Domain	Dimension
Demands at work	Quantitative demands	Work-Individual interface	Job insecurity
	Work pace		Insecurity over work conditions
	Emotional demands		Job satisfaction
Work Organization & Job content	Influence at work		Work-life conflict
	Possibilities for development	Interpersonal Relations & Leadership	Predictability
	Meaning of work		Recognition
Social Capital	Vertical trust		Role Clarity
	Organizational Justice		Quality of leadership
Offensive Behaviours	Sexual harassment		Role conflicts & Illegitimate tasks
	Threats of violence		Social Support from colleagues
	Physical violence		Social Support from supervisors
	Bullying		Sense of community at work

StressAssess

- Online survey tool for workers and managers to assess psychosocial hazards in the workplace, to anonymously, collectively and confidently identify issues.
- Upon completion of the survey, resources are provided to give the workplace ideas on how to address identified concerns.
- Available in English and French; personal and workplace edition.
- Link: <https://stressassess.ca/>



Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC-12) scale

- A short 12-item instrument that assesses the psychological safety climate of an organization.
- Focuses on senior management values and attitudes toward care and practices in relation to employee psychosocial well being.
- Well-validated internationally in a number of different settings, including health care.
- Has suggested benchmarks to guide organizational responses and provides greater detail about what may need to be targeted in interventions.

The Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC-12) scale.

In my workplace ...

Senior management acts quickly to correct problems/issues that affect employees' psychological health	Information about workplace psychological well-being is always brought to my attention by my manager/supervisor
Senior management acts decisively when a concern of an employees' psychological status is raised	There is good communication here about psychological safety issues which affect me
Senior management show support for stress prevention through involvement and commitment	My contributions to resolving occupational health and safety concerns in the organization are listened to
Psychological well-being of staff is a priority for this organization	Employees are encouraged to become involved in psychological safety and health matters
Senior management clearly considers the psychological health of employees to be of great importance	Participation and consultation in psychological health and safety occurs with employees', unions and health and safety representatives in my workplace
Senior management considers employee psychological health to be as important as productivity	In my organization, the prevention of stress involves all levels of the organization

5-point response scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Total score range from 12 to 60

Benchmark values for the PSC-12 measure

PSC Standards	Range (12-60)	Prognosis
Low risk PSC (high PSC)	41 or higher	Performing well, improvements in PSC levels might be noted; increased leader performance in PSC
Medium risk PSC	38 – 40	Steady state; need more enacting of PSC principles
High risk PSC	27 – 37	Increasing PSC levels from low could reduce depression by 16% and job strain by 14%
Very high-risk PSC (very low PSC)	26 or lower	Urgent action required to prevent further dramatic increases in depressive periods, worsening conditions (e.g., increased bullying)

<https://stresssafe.net/psychosocial-safety-climate-psc/>

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3. Modifying the work environment will be more effective than modifying individuals, or treating health conditions when they arise.
4. Key components of successful interventions are management commitment and worker participation.
5. Brief and more in-depth evidence-based instruments are available to measure, and improve the psychosocial environment.

Thank you

Peter Smith

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Questions?

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Resources for workplaces looking to address the psychosocial environment

Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work

SafeWork NSW

- Provides practical guidance on identifying and managing psychosocial hazards at work.
- Applies to those who have functions or responsibilities that involve managing exposure to psychosocial hazards and risks to psychological and physical health and safety at work.
- Link: <https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/resource-library/list-of-all-codes-of-practice/codes-of-practice/managing-psychosocial-hazards-at-work>



Code of Practice: Managing psychosocial hazards at work

Safe Work Australia

- Provides practical guidance on how to comply with the Work Health and Safety (WHS) Act and Regulations.
- Encourages workplaces to adopt risk management processes that target the identification, management, and control of workplace psychosocial hazards.
- Link:
<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/doc/model-code-practice-managing-psychosocial-hazards-work>



Managing psychosocial
hazards at work

Code of Practice

JULY 2022

Designing Work to Manage Psychosocial Risks

SafeWork NSW

- Provides information on how to design work and systems to eliminate or minimize psychosocial hazards.
- Advocates 'systems thinking' in considering how different parts of a work system combine and interact to create health and safety risks.
- Designed for business owners, executive directors, senior managers and safety professionals

Designing Work to Manage Psychosocial Risks

SafeWork NSW

February 2024

Link: https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1283762/Designing-Work-to-Manage-Psychosocial-Risks.pdf