



Prioritizing Mental Health
in First Responders

A Guide for Managers and Supervisors

FIRST RESPONDERS TOOLKIT RESOURCES

Psychological health in high-risk occupations

First responders are at a higher risk of psychological injuries like depression, anxiety, and PTSD than the general population. And it's no wonder. They are repeatedly exposed to distressing situations, violence, trauma, and death—along with normal workplace stressors like heavy workloads and rotating shifts. Symptoms of mental health injuries may be felt instantly or build over time. Whether these injuries are temporary or ongoing, they cannot be ignored.

What is a workplace psychological injury?

Generally, a workplace psychological injury results from exposure to a traumatic incident or incidents, or may result from long-term exposure to significant stressors—primarily workplace harassment or bullying.



Recognizing the signs and symptoms

The signs and symptoms of workplace psychological injuries exist on a spectrum—with a wide range of symptoms and levels of severity. Some signs are much more apparent and severe than others. However, they are all worthy of attention, as some less severe signs can lead to early intervention and better outcomes for first responders.

The Canadian Government’s [Mental Health Continuum Model](#) shows the range of these signs and symptoms, which can be both physical and psychological. If identified early, mental health concerns are more treatable and reversible.

	Healthy	Reacting	Injured	Ill
MOOD	Normal mood fluctuations Calm & takes things in stride	Irritable/Impatient Nervous Sadness/Overwhelmed	Anger Anxiety Pervasively sad/Hopeless	Angry outbursts/ Aggression Excessive anxiety/Panic Depressed/Suicidal thoughts
ATTITUDE & PERFORMANCE	Good sense of humour Performing well In control mentally	Displaced sarcasm Procrastination Forgetfulness	Negative attitude Poor performance/ Workaholic Poor concentration Poor decision-making	Overt insubordination Can't perform duties, control behaviour or concentrate
SLEEP	Normal sleep patterns Few sleep difficulties	Trouble sleeping Intrusive thoughts Nightmares	Restless disturbed sleep Recurrent images Recurrent nightmares	Can't fall asleep or stay asleep Sleeping too much or too little
PHYSICAL HEALTH	Physically well Good energy level	Muscle tension Headaches Low energy	Increased aches and pains Increased fatigue	Physical illnesses Constant fatigue
SOCIAL WELL-BEING	Physically and socially active	Decreased activity Reduced socializing	Avoidance Withdrawal	Not going out or answering phone
SUBSTANCE USE & GAMING	No or low risk use of alcohol/ cannabis/gambling/ gaming	Alcohol/ cannabis/ gambling/gaming increasingly used to relieve tension/cope with stress	Difficulties limiting use of alcohol/cannabis/ gambling/ gaming	Unable to control use of alcohol/ cannabis/ gambling/gaming

Being aware of the signs and symptoms is the beginning of your role as supervisor or manager in helping prevent and address workplace psychological injuries.

Your role as a supervisor or manager

As a supervisor or manager, you're in a unique position to recognize and respond to the early signs of someone experiencing a mental health challenge. One of your most important responsibilities is to foster a workplace that promotes and protects the psychological health of your team.

Prioritizing the mental health of your workers in the field is crucial for their well-being, the quality and safety of their work, the overall health of the entire team, and the safety of the communities they serve each day.

Strategies for supervisors and managers

You can do many things to prevent and address workplace psychological injuries. Some you can initiate on your own, while others require partners and other resources.

Create a supportive work environment

Open dialogue is the key to a supportive work environment. Take the time to get to know everyone on your team and build relationships through regular and ongoing check-ins. When you're approachable and open, it shows you genuinely care about their well-being. It also helps you get to know their normal behaviour. That way, if you notice someone isn't acting like their regular self, you can respond quickly.

By creating a safe and open environment, your employees will feel comfortable discussing their experiences and concerns with you. Create regular opportunities for dialogue and know what mental health resources are available outside and inside the workplace. In high-risk occupations, it is essential that the workplace itself prioritizes an employee's mental health.

This First Responders Tool Kit includes a section called Getting the Conversation Started about mental health in the workplace—which is an excellent guide for opening lines of communication.

The Tool Kit also includes a section on how to initiate a Peer-to-Peer Support program in your workplace. Peer support in the first responder field has proven to be an effective tool for decreasing the onset of psychological injuries and helping to heal them.

Know how to listen

When an employee is struggling with their mental health, how you respond can often influence whether the situation improves or not.

1. Listen actively

- Stop what you are doing and give your full attention.
- Show empathy by listening without interrupting while they talk.
- Acknowledge their feelings with statements like, “I can understand how that could be very difficult for you.”

2. Be supportive and non-judgmental

- Do not make assumptions about their feelings or experiences.
- Let them know you are there to help and support them.

3. Encourage trust

- Try to have the conversation in a place that allows for privacy.
- Let them know the conversation will remain confidential if they wish, but explain the limits of that confidentiality—such as if there are signs they might harm themselves.

Offer support

Like a physical injury, a psychological injury requires support once it is reported. A supervisor’s response to an injury report depends on the seriousness of the issue.

Ask if the worker feels comfortable remaining at work. If they respond yes, this is a good time to discuss the possibility of transitional work or modified duties that the worker can undertake while recovering.

If the worker does not feel they can remain at work, this is the time to fill out a WCB Injury Report and open a WCB claim. This can be done online through MyAccount. You can learn more about reporting and injury here. Once a claim is initiated, a WCB case worker will help connect the worker with the professional care they need.

If the worker is exhibiting acute signs of psychological trauma, it is essential to connect them with help immediately. Some resources for trauma intervention include:

Provincial Mental Health Crisis Line: 1-888-429-8167 [toll-free] | Crisis.

Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team: 1-902-429-8167 | Crisis.

Suicide Crisis Helpline: 988

Help plan a safe, healthy, and timely return to work

If a worker is unable to stay at work, getting back to work following an injury helps an individual's social, mental, physical, and financial well-being. The sooner they can get back to work, the faster they can get better. This can be especially true for first responders, who, like many in the health care sector, feel a special connection to their job and the essential work they do.

Here's how you can get involved:

1. Participate in all return-to-work discussions

You, your worker's treatment provider, and the WCB should work together to support your worker in making a plan for a safe, healthy, and timely return to work.

2. Offer flexible hours and transitional duties

Modified hours allow workers to get the treatment they need while remaining connected to the workplace and all its benefits. You can also suggest alternative work locations and transitional duties, as some employees may not be able to be in the same environment or perform the same work associated with their injury.

3. Prepare your team for their coworker's return

It's not always easy knowing what to say to someone with a psychological injury. Create a safe and supportive workplace by providing resources for your team on how to speak with your returning team member appropriately.

4. Support them when they return

When your employee is back at work, watch out for signs like absenteeism, avoiding people, or sleep deprivation. Any of these signs may mean they might be struggling with their injury.

5. Create a contingency plan together

Trauma triggers in the workplace may bring back feelings of when the incident first happened. A contingency plan can help your employee manage these incidents.

6. Get support

If you need support navigating an employee's psychological injury, do not hesitate to contact their WCB case worker.

For more information on helping promote a safe and timely return to work, visit [Working to Well](#) on the [WCB NS website](#).