

Building Resilient Workplaces -

Managing the Risks of Psychosocial Harm at Work Code of Practice (2022) with Clarity, Connection and Sustainability in Specialist Gendered Violence and Women's Health Services (the Sector).

Compliance and Capability Evidence-Informed Psychosocial Risk Management in the Sector. Prepared for WorkUP Queensland 10 February 2025

A comprehensive program to resource leaders and managers with practical tools and frameworks for reducing psychosocial risks, fostering a culture of shared responsibility and care, and ensuring long-term workforce wellbeing and sustainability.

This paper explores the intersection of legislative and compliance obligations with the evidence base for managing psychosocial risks in the Sector. It highlights the role of regulatory frameworks, such as the [Managing the Risks of Psychosocial Hazards at Work Code of Practice 2022 \(the Code\)](#), and the WorkUp Workforce Capability Framework in shaping organisational responsibilities. The discussion also integrates insights from research, to emphasise the importance of evidence-informed practices for fostering worker safety, wellbeing, and sustainability. By aligning legislative requirements with practical strategies and sector-specific challenges, this section aims to provide a **comprehensive understanding** of how organisations can address psychosocial risks while promoting ethical, safe, and effective workforce practices.

Compliance and Capability

Sector organisations have direct and indirect responsibilities relating to worker wellbeing and psychosocial safety under various legislative frameworks, including:

- [Work Health and Safety Act 2011 \(WHS Act\)](#), [Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011](#), (both QLD), and relevant codes of practice, such as the ***Managing the Risks of Psychosocial Hazards at Work Code of Practice 2022***. These frameworks emphasise identifying and managing psychosocial risks to foster safer workplaces.
- [Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation Act 2003 \(QLD\)](#), outlines worker entitlements and employer responsibilities for worker recovery and support in cases of workplace injury, including those arising from psychosocial hazards.
- *Industrial instruments*, including the [Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award \(SCHADS Award\)](#), the [Fair Work Act 2009 \(Cth\)](#), and relevant enterprise bargaining agreements. These instruments govern workplace conditions such as pay equity, workload management, and leave entitlements, all critical for supporting workforce equity and sustainability.

- *Human rights legislation*, particularly the [Human Rights Act 2019 \(Qld\)](#), which mandates freedom from discrimination in the workplace.

The [WorkUp Workforce Capability Framework](#) is an essential tool for Sector organisations and provides aspirational and practical strategies to enhance workforce capabilities across all levels, supporting compliance, risk management, and long-term workforce wellbeing.

The Building Resilient Workplaces Program

The program provides a practical approach to understanding and meeting management responsibilities under the *Managing the Risks of Psychosocial Hazards at Work Code of Practice 2022* (the Code) while aligning with:

- **Goal 3 of the [WorkUp Grow the Workforce Strategy \(2024–2026\)](#)**: Our workforce is more connected, healthy, safe and thriving, moving to a shared understanding and engagement with factors supporting retention.
- The *WorkUp Workforce Capability Framework*.

Key objectives

- Equip sector leaders and managers with a clear understanding of their responsibilities under the Code while providing practical, contextualised tools to manage risks effectively.
- Deliver activities through a trauma-informed approach that enhances compliance by building skills and practical knowledge, promoting workforce wellbeing, upholding ethical practice, and supporting sustainable service delivery.
- Explore the theory and practice of collective care as a psychological safety-enhancing organisational strategy for the sector.

Overview of the Code

The Code serves as a comprehensive framework for managing workplace harm by addressing the risks associated with psychosocial hazards. By aligning with the Work Health and Safety Act 2011, the Code emphasises that Queensland employers have a legal obligation to ensure both the physical and psychological health of workers, as far as is reasonably practicable.

The Code outlines a comprehensive and integrated risk management strategy to address workplace psychosocial hazards. Key steps include:

- **Identifying Hazards**: Recognise potential psychosocial risks, such as workload, inadequate support, or trauma exposure
- **Consulting with Workers**: Engage employees in discussions about hazards, ensuring their insights inform risk assessments and solutions.

- **Assessing Risks:** Evaluate the likelihood and potential impact of identified hazards on workers' health and safety.
- **Implementing Control Measures:** Introduce targeted strategies to eliminate or minimise risks, including improving job design, fostering positive support and workplace relationships, and providing adequate and resources.
- **Risk Review and evaluation:** Regularly review the effectiveness of implemented measures and adjust strategies to address emerging risks or changing workplace conditions.
- **Support for recovery from harm.**

The Risk Management Strategy provided by the Code is relevant to high-intensity work environments (like the Sector), where exposure to trauma, high workloads, and emotional strain are recognised as common risks for workers.

Key focus for the Program

This analysis explores two key areas to provide context and upon which to build the Building Resilient Workplaces Program:

Area 1. Identifying Psychosocial Hazards– Identifying the key hazards relevant to the sector and understanding their potential impacts on individuals and organisations.

Area 2. Mitigation Strategies for Psychosocial Hazards – Identifying effective strategies to manage risk and enhance safety including the practical guidance provided by the WorkUp Capability Framework embedding compliance, risk management, and workforce sustainability into organisational operations.

1. Identification of Psychosocial Hazards

Identifying psychosocial hazards is a foundational obligation of the Code which states that high-risk environments such as Sector services expose workers to unique hazards, including secondary trauma, emotional fatigue, and role ambiguity.

Evidence Base of Psychosocial Hazards in Sector Service Sector

Practitioners in Sector services routinely face significant psychosocial hazards, with exposure to survivors' accounts of violence and abuse being among the most pervasive. This consistent interaction with trauma places practitioners at high risk of psychosocial harm including vicarious trauma, emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue and burnout.

The Code (Appendix 3) provides detailed examples of psychosocial hazards that may be relevant to frontline workers including:

- **Inadequate Systemic Support:** Inadequate supervision, training, or resources can lead to feelings of isolation and unpreparedness, especially in high-stress environments.
- **Violence and Aggression:** Direct exposure to aggressive or abusive behaviours from clients or others is a key risk in Sector services.
- **Traumatic Exposure** Witnessing or dealing with severe incidents, such as cases of abuse or fatalities.
- **Poor Organisational Justice:** Perceived inequities in decision-making processes or resource allocation can diminish trust and morale in workplaces such as frontline settings.
- **High Job Demands:** Where work environments include excessive workloads, unrealistic deadlines, high emotional content, or repetitive and monotonous tasks.
- **Low Job Control:** Where workers lack autonomy over their tasks, schedules, or decision-making.

Exposure to trauma, violence, and aggression

Studies suggest there are significant risks for workers in trauma-exposed roles, where ongoing exposure to distressing narratives is a fundamental part of their roles and they link indirect trauma exposure to broader psychosocial hazards, including emotional exhaustion and vicarious trauma.

The [National Survey of Workers in the Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence Sectors](#) (Cortis et al 2018) found that workers in the sector face significant risk of high emotional strain, with nearly half (48.2%) reporting feeling emotionally drained due to constant exposure to distressing narratives and trauma from clients. Additionally, a substantial proportion of workers (65.7%) who frequently interact with perpetrators are subjected to bullying, harassment, and threats, further compounding the mental and emotional impact of their work.

Pfzner (2020) highlighted the psychological toll that repeated exposure to trauma imposes on Sector workers, stressing the need for trauma-informed risk management practices. She explains that practitioners often carry the emotional weight of their clients' experiences, a burden that can accumulate over time and result in lasting psychological harm if not effectively managed. This is particularly relevant in the context of high workloads and limited systemic support, which exacerbate the challenges faced by Sector workers.

Crivatu, Horvath, and Massey (2023) conducted a comprehensive assessment of the cumulative psychological effects of working with victims of sexual violence, with a focus on indirect trauma exposure. Their findings highlight how repeated engagement with survivors' traumatic experiences can profoundly impact practitioners' emotional resilience and capacity for empathy. They state, *“The cumulative impact of indirect trauma exposure can reduce empathy and result in compassion fatigue.”*

Van Dernoot Lipsky's concept of "trauma stewardship" provides a relevant framework for mitigating these risks. She describes trauma stewardship as ***"the entire conversation about how we come to do this work, how we are impacted by it, and how we make sense of and learn from our experiences."*** Her work emphasises the cumulative impact of trauma exposure, highlighting the emotional exhaustion, reduced empathy, and psychological strain faced by professionals in high-stress environments.

Practitioners working in the sexual assault field, similarly, face emotional and psychological risks and challenges identified by Morrison (2007) due to frequent exposure to survivors' traumatic experiences. Workers in her study described this emotional burden as ***"feeling heavy,"*** as a cumulative toll of engaging deeply with survivors' distressing stories.

Practitioners often manage large caseloads and complex client needs, which are compounded by time pressures and insufficient organisational resources. This cumulative stress impacts not only psychological wellbeing but also professional efficacy. Gill et al. (2021) advocate for systemic interventions, including workload management, regular supervision, and team-based support, to mitigate these risks.

Morrison (2007) reinforces these insights, identifying insufficient supervision and debriefing opportunities as significant barriers to practitioners' ability to process emotional responses and cope with their work.

Without such support, workers face increased stress and isolation, which can exacerbate feelings of vulnerability. Pfitzner (2020) further says that ***vicarious trauma does not occur in isolation but is shaped by workplace conditions, such as inadequate debriefing processes, lack of supervision, and insufficient training.***

High Job Demand

Gill et al. (2021) examine the psychosocial risks associated with high job demands in high-stress professions, including healthcare, social work, and other human services sectors. These professions, particularly those involving trauma-exposed roles such as domestic, family, and sexual violence services, are marked by excessive workloads, emotional labour, and exposure to distressing events. The study suggests that these demands, when unaddressed, ***"significantly impair workers' ability to maintain resilience, leading to emotional exhaustion and reduced professional efficacy."***

Time pressures and limited organisational resources can compound risk. This cumulative stress impacts not only the psychological wellbeing of workers but also their capacity to deliver effective care and support.

Inadequate Systemic Support

Research points to the detrimental effects of inadequate systemic support on frontline family violence workers. Pfitzner (2020) identifies insufficient training, inadequate supervision, and lack of formal debriefing opportunities as significant contributors to the accumulation of psychological harm. Practitioners in this sector often work within systems that fail to provide the necessary resources and structures to address the emotional demands of their roles, leaving them vulnerable to burnout and secondary traumatic stress.

Morrison (2007) suggested that practitioners frequently report feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion due to limited organisational support. Workers describe the lack of supervision and reflective opportunities as barriers to effectively processing their emotional responses, with many feeling unsupported in their roles. Notwithstanding the age of this research, Morrison's findings align with the more recent evidence from Crivatu, Horvath, and Massey (2023), who state that ***“the cumulative impact of indirect trauma exposure is compounded by systemic factors such as inadequate resources and lack of institutional support”***.

The broader organisational landscape in high-stress fields is also a factor. Gill et al. (2021) highlight that *“prolonged exposure to high job demands, without sufficient systemic support, erodes workers’ resilience and increases their susceptibility to psychosocial harm”*. This finding is critical for Sector services, where caseloads are high, and complex client needs often exceed available resources. Inadequate staffing, unclear policies, and limited access to trauma-informed practices further exacerbate these challenges.

Van Dernoot Lipsky (2009) adds that systemic support must be proactive rather than reactive, noting that ***“organisations need to create a culture of support and open dialogue to address the emotional impact of trauma exposure”***. Her work highlights the importance of providing regular supervision, access to peer networks, and training to build resilience and foster recovery.

Additional Risk

Sector workers like those in varied service settings also may face psychosocial hazards such as poor organisational change management, inadequate reward and recognition, remote work challenges, and poor workplace relationships, including discrimination and bullying. These hazards significantly affect worker wellbeing, performance, and service quality. The Code emphasises that psychosocial risks can result from a single factor or a combination of multiple psychosocial hazards or intersecting with physical hazards.

Impact of Psychosocial Risk Events

Psychosocial risk events, for example, such as exposure to trauma, excessive workloads, and poor workplace relationships can significantly impact workers' mental and physical health. These events

are linked to increased stress, anxiety, depression, compassion fatigue and burnout as well as other adverse mental and physical and mental health outcomes.

The Code explains the impact of psychosocial hazards on worker well-being and organisational outcomes and the importance of identifying, assessing, and managing psychosocial hazards to reduce both economic and human costs (p10-13).

Unmanaged psychosocial risks in Australian workplaces have significant adverse effects on both employees and organisations, According to Safe Work Australia these include:

- exposure to psychosocial hazards can lead to psychological harm, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and sleep disorders. Physical health consequences may also arise, such as musculoskeletal injuries, chronic diseases, and fatigue-related injuries.
- The estimated to cost Australian workplaces is \$11 billion in annual costs related to work-related stress alone, underscoring the financial and human toll on workplaces.

Vicarious Trauma

Workers in the Sector share the occupational impact of vicarious trauma, being the cumulative negative effect and cost of working with traumatised people. The symptoms can appear much like those of post-traumatic stress disorder and impact identity, sense of safety and trust, self-esteem, intimacy, and a sense of control. Vicarious Trauma is ***the negative transformation in the helper that results (across time) from empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their traumatic material, combined with a commitment or responsibility to help them.*** The greater the exposure to traumatic material, the greater the risk of vicarious trauma (Blueknot).

Compassion fatigue and burnout

Compassion fatigue and burnout are significant risks for workers where emotional labour is intense, and workers are frequently exposed to distressing narratives.

Garnett et al. (2023) define compassion fatigue as ***“the emotional residue or strain of exposure to working with those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events”***. They highlight the role of systemic strategies in addressing this issue. Specifically, they emphasise the need for regular breaks, reflective supervision, and a supportive work environment to counteract the psychological toll of compassion fatigue.

Ye et al. (2024) also examine the role of compassion fatigue in nursing interns, where high emotional engagement without adequate support leads to decreased capacity for empathetic care. They connect compassion fatigue with burnout, noting that these factors must be addressed early in a worker’s career to reduce the risk of long-term psychological harm.

Infinite Potential (2024) suggests that Burnout, is a systemic issue rooted in organisational culture and practices, rather than merely an individual problem. It is characterised by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy, all of which are particularly relevant in high-demand, high-stress work environments like the Sector. The article highlights that addressing burnout requires organisations to prioritise sustainable work practices, foster open discussions about mental health, and create supportive workplace cultures.

Structural inequality and employment conditions as drivers

Because of the structural inequities that characterise women's employment, Infinite Potential (2024) suggests that women workers are at heightened risk of harm. The 2024 *State of Workplace Burnout* study highlights this disparity, with 42% of women reporting burnout compared to 30% of men. This gendered disparity includes:

- **Unfair work distribution:** Women often bear additional responsibilities unrelated to their roles, such as administrative tasks or providing emotional support. These tasks increase stress and detract from their ability to focus on core duties.
- **Unequal pay:** Persistent wage gaps and financial penalties tied to parenthood contribute to chronic stress and feelings of undervaluation.
- **Limited career advancement:** Women in the sector often face systemic barriers to leadership roles and career-advancing opportunities.

Cortis et al (2018) identified the prevalence of *Unpaid Work and Workload Pressure in the Sector and concerns about employment conditions with 2 in 5 workers reporting working unpaid hours at least once a week, while 44.5% felt pressured to work harder. Approximately 44.5% of Sector workers expressed concerns about job security, while 37.7% felt their pay was unfair. These challenges further exacerbate stress and hinder job satisfaction.*

The disproportionate representation of women in the Sector means addressing burnout as well as other issues that may stem from worker disadvantage or inequality is essential to workforce sustainability. Solutions must focus on creating equitable, trauma-informed workplaces with fair pay, career development opportunities, and inclusive environments. Recognising burnout as a psychosocial hazard ensures that organisations protect their workforce and maintain the quality of Sector services.

2. Mitigation Strategies for Psychosocial Hazards Sector Services

Effectively addressing the psychosocial hazards that Sector workers may be exposed to including trauma exposure, high job demands, and inadequate systemic support as the evidence reveals is essential for the well-being of workers and the quality-of-service delivery in the Sector.

Recognising this, WorkUP Queensland's **Workforce Capability Framework** (CF) captures the aspirations of the Sector and provides an essential practical resource to guide and enhance efforts to grow, retain, support, and develop a specialist workforce, both for present needs and future demands. The CF is an essential resource for supporting Sector effectiveness. Its five domains, offer a comprehensive approach to workforce planning, building capacity and fostering resilience across all workforce levels.

Of particular relevance are Domains 4 and 5:

Domain 4: *Working as Part of an Integrated System; Supporting the team and organisation to thrive, is evidence-informed and outcomes focused, works collectively to build sector and system capability through advocacy and improvement.* Through encouraging shared accountability and systemic improvement psychosocial risks can be identified and managed.

Domain 5: Demonstrating a Reflective and Self-Aware Approach; *Worker manages self, shows up for others and is connected to purpose.* This domain encourages organisations to support staff in identifying and managing risk by fostering reflective practices, and team resilience which are key to maintaining psychosocial safety.

The Code (Appendix 4 – see link at the start of this review) provides examples of systemic actions and interventions that mitigate psychosocial hazards that may be relevant to frontline workers including:

- **Supportive Leadership:** Training supervisors and workers to recognise and respond to psychosocial risks effectively.
- **Work Design Adjustments:**
 - Allocating reasonable workloads and allowing breaks to manage high emotional or workload demands.
 - Establishing clear job roles and expectations to reduce confusion and stress.
- **Training and Resources:** Providing workers with adequate training, tools, and resources to manage the challenges of trauma-exposed work.
- **Positive Workplace Relationships:** Promoting respect, teamwork, and open communication to build a psychologically safe environment.
- **Incident Reporting and Response:**
 - Encouraging reporting of hazards or incidents without fear of reprisal.
 - Implementing trauma-informed approaches to investigate and resolve issues.
- **Access to Support Services:**
 - Offering Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or peer support networks.
 - Ensuring ongoing professional supervision and debriefing sessions.

The Code highlights the importance of systemic and organisational-level interventions to protect the psychological health of workers in high-stress environments such as Sector services. It recommends, ensuring that workers are aware and informed of the work environment conditions

in the pre-employment stage as well as monitoring worker psychological health through active supervision and training.

Trauma informed work practices and risk management

A core strategy for mitigating the psychosocial risks associated with trauma exposure is the implementation of trauma-informed practices. Van Dernoot Lipsky (2009) introduces the concept of **trauma stewardship**, which underscores the importance of understanding how workers are impacted by their exposure to trauma. She states that **“the entire conversation about how we come to do this work, how we are impacted by it, and how we make sense of and learn from our experiences”** is essential for creating a supportive environment. Trauma-informed care involves recognising and responding to trauma’s signs and symptoms, both in clients and workers, to ensure that workers feel supported and equipped to manage their emotional reactions to trauma. This reduces the risk of burnout and vicarious trauma.

Pfzner (2020) highlights the need for trauma-informed risk management, noting that workers often carry the emotional weight of their clients’ experiences. Effective trauma-informed practices, such as reflective supervision, are essential for addressing the psychological toll of repeated trauma exposure. She stresses that **“without these frameworks in place, workers may struggle to process the emotional impact of their work, leading to burnout and compassion fatigue.”**

Dana (2020), in her work on Polyvagal Theory, adds an important layer by highlighting the role of safety in trauma recovery. Dana explains that **“creating environments that promote neurobiological safety supports workers in regulating their nervous system responses and mitigates the impacts of chronic stress.”** By promoting environments where workers feel physically and emotionally safe, this can help regulate the nervous system and reduce trauma’s negative impact.

Supervision, Collective Care and Peer Support

Supervision plays a vital role in mitigating the psychological impact of trauma exposure. Regular supervision allows workers to process difficult emotions, seek guidance, and reflect on their practice in a supportive environment.

Morrison (2007) identifies insufficient supervision as a significant risk factor in the sexual assault sector, where workers report feeling isolated due to a lack of reflective opportunities. To address this, Morrison advocates for regular debriefing sessions and reflective supervision. Peer support is another essential strategy, as it provides emotional solidarity and reduces the feeling of isolation that can lead to emotional exhaustion. Crivatu, Horvath, and Massey (2023) also support this approach, advocating for structured interventions, such as peer support networks, to reduce the impact of indirect trauma exposure.

Reynolds (2019) asserts the role of collective care in trauma-informed workplaces. She argues that trauma recovery should not be an isolated effort but a shared responsibility within the workplace. As Reynolds (2019) puts it, ***“the responsibility for trauma healing must be shared within the community, with each person offering their unique capacity to contribute to the well-being of others”***. Reynolds further highlights that ***“healing from trauma requires the active participation of those around the individual, creating environments where mutual care and support are the foundational principles.”***

These strategies not only enhance individual well-being but also strengthen the collective resilience of the workplace, reducing the overall psychosocial risks workers face in high-stress environments.

Workload Management

Managing high job demands is critical in reducing the risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, and emotional exhaustion. Gill et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of addressing high job demands, particularly the pressure of large caseloads and complex client needs. They note that ***“prolonged exposure to high job demands, especially in the absence of adequate resources, increases susceptibility to psychosocial harm.”*** To mitigate this, Gill et al. (2021) advocate for workload management strategies, such as regular workload assessments and the redistribution of tasks. Additionally, they recommend implementing time management practices and ensuring that workers have adequate resources to meet the demands of their roles.

The **Code (Appendix 4)** supports these findings, emphasising the importance of workload management and allocating adequate resources to prevent workers from becoming overwhelmed. It states that ***adequate resources must be provided to workers to help manage job demands and prevent excessive stress.***

Enhancing Workforce Conditions and Support in the Sector

Role ambiguity and unclear job expectations can exacerbate stress and reduce job satisfaction. The **Code** emphasises that workers should be provided with clear, structured job descriptions and expectations is essential to reducing confusion and improving job satisfaction.

Pfzner (2020) further highlights the importance of role clarity in reducing psychological strain. She asserts that ***“role ambiguity, when left unaddressed, compounds stress and undermines the professional efficacy of workers in trauma-exposed roles.”*** To mitigate this, clear communication about job responsibilities, expectations, and organisational goals is necessary to create a supportive work environment.

Cortis et al (2018) highlighted the need for improved job security and equitable employment conditions within the Sector, noting the prevalence of insecure employment, part-time roles, and low wages as key contributors to stress and burnout. It emphasised the importance of fostering organisational support, such as flexible work arrangements, employee assistance programs, and supportive leadership, to enhance worker wellbeing and psychosocial safety. Additionally, the study advocated for systemic and policy-level changes, including stable funding, and addressing policy gaps, to empower organisations to create safer and more sustainable working environments for their staff. *Noted is the date of the Study and that some improvements to funding and work conditions have been achieved since that time.*

Conclusion

Both the Code and the broader evidence base highlight key psychosocial risks and hazards, alongside strategies for mitigating these challenges faced by workers in the Sector. The Capability Framework enhances these insights by offering a structured and aspirational guide to embedding safe, ethical, and accountable practices across all workforce levels. Establishing supportive and safe work environments through systematically embedded practices is recognised as paramount. Key mitigation strategies include **trauma-informed practices, regular supervision and peer support, effective workload management, clear role expectations, and robust organisational support systems**. The need for systemic intervention is critical to safeguarding the emotional wellbeing of workers while ensuring the long-term efficacy and sustainability of services within the Sector.

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