How to support **health-care workers at work**

Workplace psychological health and safety are critical to our well-being and effectiveness. For health-care workers, the many challenges to being well at work have increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, with higher rates of burnout and more people than ever thinking of leaving the profession. To improve their well-being and the quality of care they provide, they need **support for psychological self-care** and **protection from moral distress**. At both team and organizational levels, several factors can help or hinder efforts to address these two important areas.

A workplace that **supports psychological self-care** encourages staff to take care of their own psychological health and safety.

A workplace that **protects workers from moral distress** supports staff to do their job with a sense of integrity and in a manner consistent with their values.

Teams

◑ Barriers

Increasing workload
Staffing shortages and rising demands on workers' time leave them vulnerable to burnout, make it harder to nurture supportive connections with peers, and increase the likelihood of moral distress.

Unhealthy work culture
Work cultures that normalize overwork and ignore the realities of workers' outside lives put workers at greater risk of psychological harm.

Emotional dumping
While sharing among colleagues can support psychological health, it can also lead to harm if there is insufficient space to process feelings or a limited capacity for meaningful support.

✦ Facilitators

Team resilience
A resilient team can deal with difficult situations. Its members collaborate, communicate, and trust each other's competence and expertise.

Supportive peer relationships
Being able to talk openly about mental health, personal challenges, and self-care helps protect health-care workers from moral distress and increases their likelihood of engaging in self-care.

Supportive leaders
Leaders can promote psychological self-care by acting with integrity, recognizing workers' need for personal autonomy, managing workloads appropriately, and prioritizing work-life balance.

Organizational

◑ Barriers

Toxic policies
Mandatory overtime and cancellations of vacation time increase the risk of burnout and damage morale.

Unhelpful resources
Resources to enhance personal resilience or self-care can be unhelpful if individuals are made responsible but are not given enough time or support to use them.

Insufficient staff
When workers have to do more because of understaffing, their stress levels increase and they have little time for self-care.

### ✦ Facilitators

Commitment from the top
Top-level leadership can show support for psychological health and safety by implementing policies that prioritize workers' well-being and include preventive strategies.

Clear policies and protocols
Clear direction in policies and protocols, especially those related to morally difficult decision making, can protect workers from moral distress by shifting responsibility away from the individual.

Protected time off
Workers need time for self-care, including organizational initiatives such as resilience training. They also need personal time and guaranteed time off.
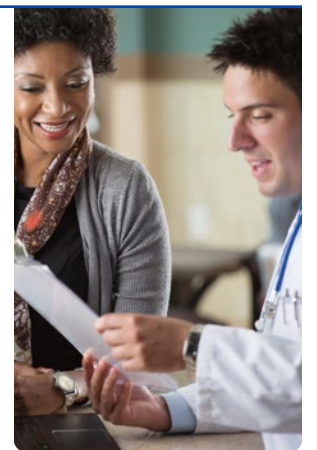
Our recommendations

Prioritize psychological health and safety in the workplace through advocacy, strategy, and action.

While the pandemic broke down some barriers to mental health discussions at work, overwork and mental toughness remain the norm in the health-care sector. Because many workers are still hesitant to acknowledge limitations or advocate for their own well-being, organizations must take deliberate actions to keep psychological health and safety a priority for all workers.

Protect sufficient time off for health-care workers.

A lack of time away from work makes it difficult for workers to engage in psychological self-care and affects crucial relationships between colleagues. Organizations must make every effort to protect time off for all workers.

Advocate for sustained resources.

Wellness champions, on-staff ethicists, and adequate benefits can help protect workers' psychological health and safety. These resources must be sustained in organizational budgets to ensure support for workers.

Embed operational policies and procedures to support health-care workers.

Clearly developed protocols, such as debriefing sessions after significant events, can help protect workers from moral distress. These protocols must be consistently applied across the entire organization.

Prioritize leaders' development.

Health-care leaders need to be compassionate and authentic while continuing to learn and grow. Their development and coaching are critical to supporting teams in challenging or stressful environments and must be cultivated and rewarded.

Cultivate an ethical work climate.

An ethical work climate improves transparency, enhances communication, and increases trust. Organizations should ensure that workers' voices are heard and included in decision making to promote a greater ethical focus.

Advocate for an updated health human resources strategy for Canada.

The pandemic worsened existing staffing challenges and left organizations with little choice but to introduce harmful policies such as mandatory overtime. Since this crisis will not end with the pandemic, organizations must do everything they can to keep the need for an updated health human resources strategy front and centre for policy makers.

Exploring Two Psychosocial Factors for Health-Care Workers

Support for Psychological Self-Care and Protection from Moral Distress in the Workplace: Facilitators and Barriers

To learn more, download the full report:
mentalhealthcommission.ca/resource/psychosocial-factors