



Mental Health

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced workers to rapidly adjust to new working environments and conditions, in particular, working from home. This has meant that workers, their representatives and employers have had to work together to transition quickly to new work from home arrangements. Consequently, major changes to the work environment and the way work is performed have increased the potential risks to workers' health and safety.

Working from home in the current context of COVID-19 will be a very new and difficult experience for most workers. Some will be working in environments which are not conducive to working productively and others will be juggling multiple roles within the household, like caring for children or sick relatives. For some workers, including those living with family and domestic violence, home may not be a safe or healthy working environment. It is also important that employers adopt and clearly communicate reasonable and realistic expectations around productivity and performance in these changed circumstances to alleviate any anxieties that workers may be feeling. In the event that it is not possible to make work safe and healthy at home, an alternative work environment must be provided so far as reasonably practicable.

Employers have a duty to ensure the health and safety of employees including their psychological health. This duty extends to work that is being conducted remotely or from home. Employers must take a systematic, consultative approach to identifying and managing health and safety risks related to working from home – both physical and psychological. Physical and psychological health and safety is interrelated. Failure to effectively manage work-related psychological health and safety can lead to both psychological and physical injuries. Similarly, failure to effectively manage physical health and safety can lead to psychological injury.

Your Health and Safety Rights

Every worker has the right to healthy and safe work. **Elected Health and Safety Representatives [HSRs]** also have powers and rights under health and safety law.

If you feel immediately unsafe at work, you can stop the unsafe work – but you must be available for other safe duties. **Before taking this action, talk to your union delegate and HSR.**

HSRs have the power to direct work to cease if there is an immediate or imminent risk to health and safety. Everyone must be available to perform alternate safe duties and if they can, HSRs must try to consult with management before issuing the cases work. HSRs may also issue a Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN) requiring the PCBU/employer to take certain actions. HSRs must have consulted with the PCBU/employer about the health and safety issue.

Under WHS law these rights exist only after the HSR has attended an approved training course. So, training is essential. In Victoria HSRs have these rights as soon as they are elected, regardless of whether they have been trained.



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Risks to Psychological Health and Safety

Hazards that present particular risks to psychological health and safety while working from home may include, but are not limited to:

- Increased workload and work demands
- Low job control, isolated work
- Role ambiguity
- Long working hours
- Fatigue
- Increased work-related stress
- Increased emotional effort in responding to stressful situations
- Lack of adequate tools or resources
- Poor communication and management of change
- Increased exposure to violence and harassment¹

Management of Risks

In consultation with workers, their unions and health and safety representatives (HSRs), employers must develop a plan to eliminate or minimise risks to the psychological health and safety of workers who are working from home. This plan must:

1. Identify what risks to the psychological health and safety of workers exist and which workers are affected;
2. Assess those risks, including their likelihood and potential to harm workers' psychological health and safety;
3. Implement controls that eliminate or minimise the risks so far as reasonably practicable; and
4. Monitor and review the implemented controls.

This approach requires full cooperation of employers, HSRs, workers and their unions - it is essential that everyone feels supported to report and discuss health and safety issues while working from home.

Management of Risks – Working from Home

The ACTU has released guidance for workers and unions which provides general advice on what can be done to ensure that employers are managing risks to working from home². Ways in which employers should manage risks to psychological health and safety can include:

¹ ACTU - [CORONAVIRUS \(COVID-19\): PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK](#)

² [ACTU - Coronavirus workplace checklist](#)



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- Discussion and agreement with workers in terms of how work and performance will be managed, expectations communicated and how development, progression, reward and recognition needs will be met.
- Acknowledging that work is being performed during a crisis; employers should alleviate workers concerns about meeting unrealistic performance expectations during this difficult time.
- Regular check-ins with workers to find out how they are coping with work and any new arrangements and determine any support required.
- Discussion and agreement on setting clear boundaries with workers in relation to start and finish times and breaks.
- Provision of advice and training to guide workers on how to make their working environment healthy and safe.
- A plan to communicate with and keep workers updated while they are working from home.
- An adequate procedure in place for workers to report risks to health and safety or if they are injured or ill.

Guidance material has also been published by most regulators which outlines measures which employers should be taking to protect workers psychological health at home. Particular control measures which could also be considered include:

- Individual agreements between workers and the employer about the type of work that can be performed safely at home, resources and support required and the design of the new working arrangements³.
- Allowing workers additional autonomy and control over how they perform their duties at home⁴.
- Making sure that the employee assistance program (EAP) can be accessed and is regularly communicated to workers⁵.
- Providing workers with assistance in terms of transiting required resources from the workplace to the worker's home. For example, chairs and other ergonomic equipment which support concentration, reduce fatigue and risk of physical injury and encourage motivation⁶.

³ WorkCover Queensland - [health and safety for telecommuters](#)

⁴ WorkSafe Victoria - [minimising the spread of coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Working from home](#)

⁵ WorkSafe Victoria - [minimising the spread of coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Working from home](#)

⁶ Coronavirus: ATO should pay to create safe home work environments, says union



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Management of Risks – Violence and Harassment, Including Family and Domestic Violence

For some workers, physically attending a workplace limits their exposure to family and domestic violence, as well as providing economic security and access to support networks. The evidence is clear that work and financial security is a crucial factor in supporting people to leave and recover from family and domestic violence⁷. For some workers, COVID-19 will mean more time in unsafe home environments, either through a requirement to work from home and/or reduced working hours. In this situation, risks to workers psychological and physical health and safety can be minimised by:

- Consulting with workers regularly about their health and safety needs while working from home, including ensuring adequate access to HSRs and other union representatives.
- Offering and widely communicating the availability of entitlements such as paid family and domestic violence leave to attend appointments or make arrangements to leave an unsafe home situation, flexible work arrangements and other entitlements which support workers experiencing family and domestic violence⁸.
- Ensuring that online or telephone discussions about risks of family and domestic violence are conducted confidentially and safely.
- Considering the provision of security devices for all workers that can be triggered in the event of an emergency.
- Providing referrals to appropriate counselling, legal, health, financial and other family and domestic violence support services.
- Providing a safe, secure and accessible reporting mechanism, including nominated contact officers with adequate training and skills.

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was accepted that family and domestic violence is a workplace issue with a real and tangible impact on workers and employers. As result, the majority of Australian employers now provide some kind of support for workers experiencing family and domestic violence. However, only 30 percent provide access to paid leave, leaving too many workers with the impossible choice between their safety and their paycheck. The increased requirement to work from home and reduced financial security caused by COVID-19 has greatly increased the risk of family and domestic violence. This has a significant impact on workers, and consequently, increased the need for employers to assess these issues and take reasonable steps to keep workers safe.

⁷ See for example Cortis N & Bullen J (2015), Building effective policies and services to promote women’s economic security following domestic violence: state of knowledge paper, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety, Landscapes, Issue 07, August at pp 2 and 8; and Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence Report, Volume IV, Chapter 21 ‘Financial Security’, 93

⁸ Fair Work Ombudsman - [Employer Guide to Family and Domestic Violence](#)



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Management of Risks – Review and Evaluation

Managing risks to workers health and safety in the home context will be uncharted territory for many employers and workers. This is why it is more important than ever to review any new arrangements to make sure that they are keeping workers safe from harm. The best way to review and assess arrangements is for employers to consult with workers, HSRs and their unions. This can be facilitated in many ways, even when working from home and social distancing arrangements are in place:

- Provide HSRs and unions with the resources and time to consult with workers. This includes providing a phone or computer, if appropriate, and providing them with paid time to have these conversations.
- Train HSRs on how to use data collection tools, such as online surveys.
- Collaborate with HSRs to develop data collection tools and agree on a plan to gather responses from workers who are at home.
- If an HSR has not completed paid training, arrange to enroll them in a mutually agreed course that is available online.
- Always facilitate communication between the HSR and workers working from home and encourage workers to contact them if there is an issue.
- Ask the EAP provider to report on the enquiries that have been made. Most providers will be able to provide the number of sessions accessed and the trends in enquiries.

Properly reviewing and evaluating risk control measures requires full cooperation of employers, HSRs, workers and their unions. It is essential that everyone feels supported to provide feedback, speak up and participate in the process.