

#### PURPOSE

This guide provides general information on the link between physical health and mental health in the context of a work environment.

#### MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS FROM PHYSICAL WORK, HEALTH AND SAFETY FACTORS OR HAZARDS

Research notes that 'physical' work-related health and safety (WHS) factors or hazards<sup>1</sup> can lead to significant impacts on an employee's mental health and wellbeing. In a working context, there are a number of WHS factors or hazards that can result in poor physical health outcomes, and it is important for employers and employees to recognise that these can have an impact on an individual that is beyond the physical (i.e. back pain from a poor work from home setup).

Some examples of how physical WHS factors or hazards can also impact an individual's mental health and wellbeing are below:

- Poor work environment triggers such as prolonged exposure to light, noise, ventilation, and temperature issues. Aside from impacts to our senses (i.e. hearing and sight), prolonged exposure to these issues can negatively affect our wellbeing and/or result in stress or anxiousness about our work environment.
- Poor ergonomic design of workstations (particularly in a remote work setting). This could include the usage of a laptop instead of a proper workstation, incorrect monitor positioning and inappropriate seating. These types of physical injuries can create a significant mental toll on individuals, particularly when they are having a significant impact on someone's day-to-day lives and are resulting in ongoing challenges to meet work commitments while in pain.
- Inappropriate or poor tools, equipment, and resources to undertake work requirements is a broader but related WHS hazard to the ergonomic design of workstations. This may include field or on-site work requirements of employees, and COVID-19 may have changed resource and equipment requirements (such as appropriate personal protective equipment). Concerns about inappropriate or poor tools, equipment and resources can result in mental health challenges even if no physical injury occurs, for example, this could result in stress or anxiousness before, during, or after an experience.
- Limited physical movement, exercise, and breaks. Aside from physical impacts that could potentially result from prolonged periods of time such as deep vein thrombosis and varicose veins, limited physical movement and breaks can be draining, lead to depression for some individuals, and potentially result in other negative coping mechanisms.

It is also important to note that mental health challenges in a work-related setting can also result in physical WHS concerns (in reverse to previous points). Loneliness is one example, with research highlighting that prolonged isolation and loneliness is twice as harmful to both our physical and mental health than obesity.<sup>2</sup> Burnout and dealing with a traumatic event (such as COVID-19) are other examples that can lead to poor physical health outcomes.

The link between physical health and mental health in a work-related setting is why research organisations such as the Black Dog Institute highlight that a mentally healthy workplace provides for a both a physically and psychological safe climate for employees. For example, the Black Dog Institute notes that a mentally healthy workplace equally considers and addresses stress issues and environmental triggers, and seamlessly links to safety frameworks focused on physical safety.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Physical hazards is a WHS term for factors or conditions within the environment that can harm your health.

<sup>2</sup> Forbes, [When home becomes the workplace: mental health and remote work \(2020\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Black Dog Institute, [Workplace wellbeing fact sheet \(2020\)](#)

#### TIPS FOR EMPLOYEES

Heads Up (an initiative developed by Beyond Blue and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance) has extensive guidance for employees on taking care of your mental health. A detailed guide on the topic is [available here](#), which includes a number of physical health considerations.

Some strategies that may also be useful to support good physical and mental health include:

- maintain a routine, and allocating time for work, family, and yourself
- if working remotely, coming up with an activity that replaces your 'commute' at the beginning and the end of each workday
- take breaks to enjoy some activities and or exercise
- ensure you are well set up to work from home and be mindful of the ergonomic design of your remote working arrangement
- eating healthy food and drinking water regularly will help equip our bodies to deal with the many challenges that we are experiencing.

*This guide provides a summary only of the subject matter covered, without the assumption of duty of care by Consult Australia. The summary should not be relied on as a substitute for legal or other professional advice.*