**Harmful Behaviours Guidelines**

This guideline provides information on psychosocial hazards related to harmful behaviours. Harmful behaviours include:

* violence and aggression
* bullying
* harassment including sexual harassment or gender-based harassment, and
* conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions.

These can cause physical and psychological harm to the person they are directed at and anyone witnessing the behaviour.

A single or irregular exposure to these hazards may not create psychosocial risks or the risks may be very low. However, if workers are exposed to a hazard (or a combination of these hazards) over a prolonged period or in a severe way they can cause psychological and physical harm.

The controls provided are examples, you must consider what is reasonably practicable to eliminate or minimise the risks in your workplace.

# Identifying harmful behaviours

Overt or extreme forms of these behaviours (such as physical violence) may be easier to identify and are not tolerated in most workplaces. However, more subtle forms like crude language, sexist remarks and an overall workplace culture that is degrading or intimidating may not be taken as seriously and can be more difficult to identify.

Some of the things that may increase the likelihood of workers being exposed to harmful behaviours are set out below. This can help you identify when, where and why these behaviours may happen at work. For example, workplaces with low worker diversity (e.g. the workforce is dominated by one gender, age group, race or culture), some workforce characteristics (e.g. new and young workers, casual workers, workers in minority groups) and a workplace culture which tolerates or ignores harmful workplace behaviours are more likely to experience harmful behaviours.

Workers may be more likely to experience harmful behaviours or be more severely affected by it, because of their sex, gender, sexuality, age, migration status, disability and literacy. The risk of experiencing harm rises when a person faces multiple forms of discrimination. Attributes that make a person more vulnerable to these behaviours can also make workers less likely to report concerns or incidents.

Harmful behaviours can come from a range of sources including:

* External behaviours from customers, clients, patients, members of the public or from other businesses (e.g. between a plumbing and an electrical sub-contractor at the same work site, or a delivery person and a retail worker).
* Internal behaviours from other workers, supervisors or managers.

Harmful behaviours may be an inappropriate response to other psychosocial hazards (e.g. high job demands or inadequate support). To effectively control risks, you must control the underlying causes as well as directly addressing harmful behaviours.

**Violence and aggression**

Things that increase the likelihood of violent or aggressive behaviour include:

* providing care or services to people who are distressed, confused, afraid, ill, affected by drugs or alcohol or receiving unwelcome or involuntary treatment
* enforcement activities (e.g. the activities of police, prison officers or parking inspectors)
* working in high crime areas
* handling valuable or restricted items (e.g. cash or medicines)
* poor visibility in the workplace (e.g. poor lighting or barriers)
* restricted movement in the workplace (e.g. limited exit points)
* working alone, in isolation or in a remote area with the inability to call for assistance
* working offsite or in the community
* working in unpredictable environments (e.g. where other people may pose a risk to workers’ safety such as at a client’s home)
* interacting with customers, either face-to-face, on the phone or online, or
* service methods or policies that cause or escalate frustration, anger, misunderstanding or conflict (e.g. low staffing levels, customer service policies, setting unreasonable expectations of the services an organisation or workers can provide).

**Bullying**

Things that increase the likelihood of bullying include:

* presence of other psychosocial hazards:
* high job demands
* low job control
* low support
* organisational change, such as restructuring or significant technological change
* lack of role clarity, or
* poor organisational justice
* leadership or management styles:
* autocratic behaviour that is strict and directive and does not allow workers to be involved in decision making
* behaviour where little or no guidance is provided to workers or responsibilities are inappropriately and informally delegated to subordinates, and
* abusive and demeaning behaviour that may include inappropriate or derogatory language, or malicious criticism and feedback, and tolerance of this behaviour
* systems of work
* lack of resources or training
* inappropriate work scheduling, shift work and poorly designed rostering
* unreasonable performance measures or timeframes
* poor workplace relationships
* poor communication
* isolation
* low levels of support, or
* work group hostility.

**Harassment including sexual harassment**

Things that increase the likelihood of harassment include:

* acceptance of inappropriate behaviour (e.g. racially or sexually crude conversations, innuendo or offensive jokes are part of the accepted culture)
* power imbalances along gendered lines (e.g. workplaces where one gender holds the majority of management and decision-making positions)
* workplaces organised according to a strict hierarchical structure (e.g. police and enforcement organisations, medical and legal professions)
* use of alcohol at work activities and attendance at conferences and social events as part of work duties, including overnight travel
* workers are isolated, in restrictive spaces like cars or working from remote locations with limited supervision or restricted access to help and support
* working from home which may provide an opportunity for covert sexual harassment to occur online or through phone communication
* interacting with customers, either face-to-face, on the phone or online, and
* poor understanding among workplace leaders of the nature, drivers and impacts of sexual harassment.

While anyone can experience harassment there are certain groups who are more likely to experience it. Some workers may be at greater risk because of their age, gender, sexuality, migration status, disability and literacy.

Conflict or poor workplace relationships and interactions

Things that increase the likelihood of conflict or poor workplace relationships include:

* culture of tolerating swearing, name calling, spreading rumours or rudeness within the workplace
* lack of policies or processes to handle reports of unacceptable behaviour, and
* the presence of other psychosocial hazards (workers are more likely to be uncivil when they are stressed).

**Controlling risks from harmful behaviours**

Behaviours such as those listed above are known to cause harm. You must put control measures in place to eliminate or minimise risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

This section provides examples of control measures for managing the risks of violence, aggression, sexual harassment and bullying at the workplace.

Note: These are examples only. You must identify and implement control measures that eliminate or minimise the risks in your workplace, so far as is reasonably practicable.

# Physical work environment and security

The physical work environment can affect the likelihood of violence, aggression, harassment and bullying occurring and the ability to respond if it does happen. Consider the following control measures which may provide the highest protection for workers.

**Security**

* Security personnel or night-time security patrol.
* Video surveillance.
* Fixed and portable alarm systems.
* Communication systems like phones, intercoms and alarm systems are in place, regularly maintained and tested.
* Ensuring vehicles are fit for purpose (e.g. have central locking devices, tracking devices such as GPS systems to allow drivers in distress to be located, lighting inside the vehicle to allow the driver to be aware of passenger behaviour, vehicles are well maintained so they do not break down in unsafe locations or times).

**Access**

* Controlling access to the premises (e.g. electronically controlled doors with viewing panels that allow surveillance of public areas before the doors are opened from the inside).
* Preventing public access to the area when people are working alone or at night (e.g. via a security card or code, asking guests to leave the room while workers clean).
* Providing facilities and amenities which give privacy and security (e.g. private and secure change rooms or facilities for workers to use which are separate from customers).
* Separating workers from the public with fixed or removable barriers (e.g. high counters, furniture, screens on counters or screens between a driver and passenger).
* Installing a service window for night transactions and systems like pay-at-the-pump.

**Visibility**

* Ensuring internal and external lighting provides good visibility, including in car parks.
* Arranging furniture and partitions within the workplace to ensure good visibility of service areas, improve natural surveillance and avoid restrictive movement.
* Improving natural surveillance in areas such as offices, storerooms and other segregated areas (e.g. using semi opaque glass or screens).

**Environment**

* Ensuring there are no areas where workers could become trapped, such as rooms with keyed locks.
* Implementing appropriate temperature and noise controls, such as in waiting areas to reduce customer frustration.
* Securing any objects that could be thrown or used to injure someone.
* Providing workers and others with a safe place to retreat. In other situations, it may be possible to move the person behaving inappropriately (e.g. an aggressive student could be removed from the classroom while the behaviour continues).
* Ensuring a safe working environment for workers during travel (e.g. workers being in a vehicle together), at conferences, off site, at client or customer premises, and any other location where work is performed.

# Safe work systems and procedures

Safe work systems and procedures are administrative controls that should be part of your approach to managing risks at your workplace.

**Communication**

* Communicate with workers when they are working in the community or away from the workplace (e.g. a supervisor regularly checking in with the worker throughout their shift).
* Clearly define jobs and seek regular feedback from workers about their role and responsibilities.
* Clearly communicate to clients and customers that any form of violence, aggression harassment or bullying is not tolerated (e.g. in service agreements, contracts or on signs).
* Manage expectations of clients and customers by clearly communicating the nature of the products or services you are providing (e.g. online and using signage).
* Put up signs at the workplace (e.g. zero tolerance of aggression and violence; limits on products or services; security cameras are in use; or limited cash held on the premises).

**Procedures**

* Ban or refuse service to persons with a history of poor behaviour (e.g. patrons at pubs or clients gyms). If service is necessary, such as for medical care, put in place additional measures to protect workers and others.
* Provide alternative methods of customer service to eliminate face-to-face interactions (e.g. online or click-and-collect services, or no contact delivery drops).
* Establish procedures for dealing with harmful behaviour from customers or clients and how workers and managers can respond.
* Limit the amount of cash, valuables and medicines held on the premises and handle them securely (e.g. only accept cashless payments) see the Guide for Transporting and Handling Cash for more information.
* Use face shields where spitting or intentionally coughing is a risk.
* Avoid the need for workers to work alone where possible (e.g. working in pairs, closing the business with security personnel present, or providing a safe escort to a worker’s transport).
* Provide supervision of work and support for workers, especially new, young and inexperienced workers.
* Procedures for working in isolation and uncontrolled environments (e.g. carrying out situational risk assessments to determine at each visit the safety of a client’s home before commencing duties).
* Provide a sufficient number of workers (e.g. during peak periods of customer attendance and for the level of care needed for clients).
* Alternate tasks in the workplace - particularly tasks requiring high levels of customer interaction - with other work tasks and ensure workers have regular breaks if aggression or incivility is likely.
* Encourage workers to keep records and screenshots if harmful behaviour occurs online or through phone communication and report the behaviour to their supervisor.
* Assess risks of client aggression and violence and whether additional control measures are required for dealings with some clients.
* Implement management plans where a client is known to have a history of aggression or violence. Develop the plan in consultation with appropriately qualified people and communicate it to all relevant workers.
* Reduce waiting times and missed calls (e.g. by training ‘relief’ workers to take calls or transferring calls to other areas).
* Encourage workers to escalate problem calls to senior workers.
* Encourage workers to report incidents and behaviours of concern.
* Provide a range of accessible and user-friendly ways to make a report informally, formally, anonymously and confidentially.

**Information and training**

* Improve role clarity by ensuring workers have well-defined roles and clear expectations.
* Provide adequate resources and training to workers so they are able to perform their role confidently and competently.
* Provide information on the standards of behaviour expected in the workplace, including the use of social media or other technologies.
* Train workers in how to deal with difficult customers, conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques, when and how to escalate issues to managers or supervisors, and procedures to report incidents.
* Train managers and supervisors on how to deal with difficult customers and conflict resolution when issues are escalated.
* Plan for regular handover and information exchange with workers, other agencies, carers and service providers.
* Understand client condition/disability/triggers/care and behaviour management plans.
* Ensure workers understand how to make a report, their right to representation and the support, protection and advice available.
* Make it clear that victimisation of those who make reports will not be tolerated
* Train key workers (contact persons) to receive reports and give support and advice.

**Policies**

* Implement appropriate workplace policies as part of managing work health and safety risks.
* Set, model and enforce acceptable behaviour standards for all people in the workplace.
* Foster a positive and respectful work culture where violence, aggression, harassment and bullying are not tolerated.
* As power imbalances and inequality increase the risk of gendered and sexual harassment, consider implementing policies and strategies to address gender inequality, lack of diversity and power imbalances at the workplace.
* For work-related events, reinforce workplace policies and behaviours expected of workers, ensure responsible service of alcohol policies are followed and that workers know who to turn to if they experience or witness inappropriate behaviour at the event.
* Avoid sexualised uniforms and ensure clothing is practical for the work undertaken.
* Act in a consistent manner when dealing with reports of violence, aggression, harassment and bullying, including providing sufficient and appropriate feedback to workers who have raised concerns.
* Allow workers to refuse or suspend service if people fail to comply with the expected standard of behaviour.
* Ensure processes and systems for reporting and responding to incidents are widely communicated and regularly reviewed.
* Provide supportive, consistent and confidential responses to reports.

**Review**

* Regularly evaluate work practices, in consultation with workers and their representatives, to see if they contribute to poor behaviours.
* Review control measures after incidents or changes in behaviour.
* Review and monitor workloads, staffing levels and time pressures.
* Collect de-identified details of all reports, including those that are not pursued formally by the complainant, to help you identify systemic issues at the workplace.