Mental health and safety

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We know Australian teachers experience a high level of work-related mental stress. This is illustrated in the early-career teacher attrition rate, numerous studies like the Organisation for Economic Co- operation and Development's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018, or simply by eavesdropping most staffroom conversations on a Wednesday at lunchtime.

To combat this, there is a lot of information and media content focused on self-help, in a trend coming to be known as "toxic positivity".

Does this advice sound familiar? Go for a 10-minute walk, close your eyes and take deep breaths, visualise a calm beach or your favourite place.

While these articles mean well, they tend to put the onus of workplace de-stressing on the worker.

Being proactive about your mental well- being isn't just about looking inwards. Psychological health is an important part of work health and safety (WHS), backed up by the Western Australian WHS Act 2020. If your school or TAFE college is creating an environment that is harming your health, it pays to know your rights.

WHS Act 2020

Time to get technical. But before we do, here are some terms you might want to remember:

- WHS Act 2020 – the work health and safety legislation that came into effect in WA from 31 March 2022.
- PCBU – person conducting a business or undertaking (put simply, your employer). In the case of public schools in WA, the PCBU is the Department of Education (DoE).
- • Psychosocial hazard – psychological and social aspects of the work environment and the way that work is organised that are potentially harmful to the health of workers.

Section four of the WHS Act 2020
defines health as meaning physical and psychological health. That means any provision of the WHS Act that refers to "health" includes psychological health. It also states the PCBU must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of its workers.

So, let's take a better look at those psychosocial hazards.

Psychosocial hazards

Some of the most common psychosocial hazards to look out for include stress, fatigue, bullying, violence, aggression, harassment and burnout.

While these can have an impact on all workers, those at the highest risk of having their well-being negatively impacted by psychosocial hazards include workers who are older, new to the organisation, doing new tasks or those in training, like graduate teachers.

As part of a risk management process, PCBUs should assess psychosocial hazards like:

• Inadequate support from supervisors and/or co-workers.

• Unclear or constantly changing management expectations about the responsibilities of the job/ incompatible expectations or demands placed on workers by different workplace stakeholders.

• Work demands, in particular: excessive workloads, high mental workload, extended work hours.

• Lack of job security, such as short- term contracts without guarantee of renewal.

When it comes to psychosocial hazards in education, we know from TALIS 2018 that the main source of stress reported by teachers in Australia is having too much administrative work to do (55 per cent), having too much marking (43 per cent) and keeping up with changing requirements from overseeing bodies (38 per cent).

When you know what to look out for, you can more easily identify the potential hazards in your workplace and report them. In schools this is a psychological injury investigation report form (PIIR form) and in TAFE use your college's online WHS reporting mechanism. Always consider when making a report to alert your health and safety representative (HSR) and union rep and seek further assistance from the SSTUWA if needed.

Bullying and harassment

As a psychosocial hazard, bullying can have a significant impact on your mental health and well-being, making it a WHS issue.

We know bullying can come from many different sources for teachers and lecturers, so it is important to know how to spot the signs.

Whether intentional or unintentional, behaviours that could be workplace bullying if they are repeated, unreasonable and create a risk to health and safety include [taken from the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety's (DMIRS) Workplace Behaviour Code of Practice]:

- Abusive, insulting or offensive language or comments.

- Aggressive and intimidating conduct.

- Belittling or humiliating comments.

- Victimisation.

- Practical jokes or initiation.

- Unjustified criticism or complaints.

- Deliberately excluding someone from work-related activities.

- Withholding information that is vital for effective work performance.

- Setting unreasonable timelines or constantly changing deadlines.

- Setting tasks that are unreasonably below or beyond a person's skill level.

- Denying access to information, supervision, consultation or resources to the detriment of the worker.

- Spreading misinformation or malicious rumours.

- Changing work arrangements such as rosters and leave to deliberately inconvenience a particular worker or workers.

It is important to note that reasonable management requests are not to be considered as bullying behaviour and a list of such reasonable requests are outlined within the code as well:

- Setting realistic and achievable performance goals, standards and deadlines.

- Fair and appropriate rostering and allocation of working hours.

- Transferring a worker to another area or role for operational reasons.

- Deciding not to select a worker for a promotion based on performance, skill or capability.

- Informing a worker about unsatisfactory work performance in an honest, fair and constructive way.

- Informing a worker about inappropriate or unreasonable behaviour in an objective and constructive way.

- Implementing organisational changes or restructuring.

- Taking disciplinary action, including suspension, or terminating employment where appropriate or justified in the circumstances.

For more information, members can refer to the workplace bullying Know Your Rights sheet on the SSTUWA website or go to the DMIRS website and access the Code of Practice.

Record it, report it, resolve it

Prevention is key to maintaining a safe workplace where mental well-being and health is a priority.

If you suspect your school or TAFE is not maintaining its duty of care to workers, then contact your HSR and union representative immediately. They can work with the school principal and DoE or TAFE human resources/health and safety teams in creating an appropriate WHS management plan and an emergency and critical incident management plan.

All hazards, including psychosocial, within the workplace have to be managed as per Regulation 3.1, Managing the risks to health and safety, of the Work Health and Safety (General) Regulations 2022 and should be reported to the principal/line manager and appropriate representatives, including your HSR or union rep.

To help your claim, it is important keep a record of the date, time, place and a brief account of the alleged inappropriate behaviour or circumstances, plus any other supporting documented evidence involved (written communications, possible witnesses), which should be recorded as soon as possible.

The SSTUWA runs education-specific five-day training courses for HSRs to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively aid in protecting and promoting the work health and safety of those they represent.

If your school does not have an elected HSR, why not initiate the process by asking your PCBU to conduct an election for one or more representatives? The SSTUWA can assist in the election process.

Looking for support or help with your mental health?

School and TAFE employees have access to the trained staff at PeopleSense via the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Reach them at peoplesense.com.au or 1300 307 912. Free of charge, independent and confidential, the EAP is designed to support the emotional and psychological health of employees through counselling and advice.