Mental safety at work:

Tackling the biggest mental health risk – and opportunity – for organisations in 2024

Umbrella Wellbeing Report | March 2024

UMBRELLA

umbrella.org.nz

Table of Contents

▎ 01. Introduction and Executive Summary

Poipoia te kākano kia puāwai.
Nurture the seed and it will blossom.

In this Umbrella Wellbeing Report, we examine psychosocial and psychological safety (or "mental safety") in workplaces around Aotearoa New Zealand. Uncovering the crucial links between health and safety and team performance, mental safety may present both the biggest mental health risk, and opportunity, facing organisations in 2024.

Plain and simple, mental health is on the same legal playing field as physical health in the Health and Safety at Work Act (2015). In the last 6 months alone, we have seen growing scrutiny over how organisations are protecting (or failing to protect) mental health at work:

- WorkSafe issues notice to [Auckland One Rail] after finding the known psychosocial risk to workers of viewing, experiencing, or hearing about on-track collisions was not being managed effectively (November 2023)

- Unpacking the Employment Court's $1.8 million award for mental harm (December 2023)

- Former Noel Leeming employee to be paid $50,000 after suffering burnout (January 2024)

- Manager's 'culture of fear and intimidation' cited in [WorkSafe investigation] into man's death [at District Health Board] (January 2024)

A lack of mental safety is a key factor in many of these concerning cases. Take this excerpt from New Zealand Herald reporting in May 2023: "[WorkSafe], which investigated after 'allegations of a mentally unsafe workplace', remained 'seriously concerned about the school and further compliance measures may follow'."

For clarity, in this report we group psychosocial safety (a commitment to preventing mental harm at work) and psychological safety (a climate where workers feel able to raise concerns) together under the label "mental safety", forming the foundation of a systemic approach to psychological health and safety where psychosocial risks are minimised. Confused? You can flick forward to **Appendix 1** for further explanations of these terms.

Psychological health & safety
Legal duty to prevent harm.

Psychosocial risk
Elimination or minimisation of hazards at work
that have potential to cause mental harm.

Psychological safety
Confidence to speak up, raise concerns,
and ask for help within team.

Psychosocial safety
Organisational policies, practices and procedures for the
protection of worker psychological health and safety.

↑
↓
↑
↑
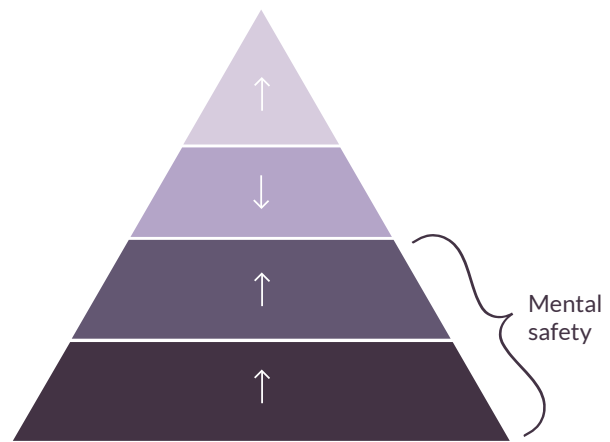
Mental
safety

The growing media scrutiny of mental safety isn't just based on anecdote. Accessing data from thousands of New Zealand workers who completed the Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment over the last two years, we provide business leaders with fresh insights into mental safety at work **(Chapters 2-3)**, including that:

- About half of workers (47.4%) don't agree that the psychological wellbeing of staff is a priority in their workplace, a key domain of psychosocial safety

- Workers in less psychologically safe teams have 8.3x higher odds of reporting bullying in the past 6 months, and 5.8x higher odds of intending to leave their jobs in the next 6 months.

But, the truth is, viewing mental safety as "just another thing organisations need to do" is a gross simplification. Improving mental safety is much more than dodging the stick of punishment; it is a carrot, too – an opportunity to enhance teams, to strengthen performance, and to earn an incontestable reputation for healthy work.

An organisational focus on strengthening mental health at work is demonstrated to have a return on investment of $5 for every $1 spent, according to research by the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (2021). Notably, our Wellbeing Assessment data **(Chapter 2)** suggests two times higher odds of underperforming for teams with low psychological safety. The case is a strong one. We delve deeper into these performance benefits in **Chapter 4**.

UMBRELLA

Of course, any conversation around mental safety needs to consider the "controls" available to us to mitigate the risk and maximise the opportunity. The last few chapters of this report **(Chapters 5-8)** are dedicated to what you can do – whether at an organisational or managerial level – to reduce bullying, navigate through change, and grow safety at your organisation. It may feel like a lot, but the reality is that the first step is easy: get to know your people and how mentally safe your workplace is right now.

You can learn more about psychological health and safety, psychosocial hazards, and psychosocial risk management with our comprehensive guide, or speak to our team about how we can help you to measure, assess, and address psychosocial risks.

Using Umbrella's 12 Factor Framework (aligned with ISO-45003), we help you identify the key risks in your organisation that may cause harm to the mental health and wellbeing of your people, and bring you closer to a workforce that is psychologically healthy and thriving. Just ask Vector, who partner with us, or read more in our case study with them.

UMBRELLA

02. Data: A snapshot of the numbers

Our data is powered by more than 7,000 users of the Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment*
– an organisational survey designed by psychologists to help your people tell you what is
driving their wellbeing.

About half of workers (47.4%) don't agree that the psychological wellbeing of staff is a
priority in their workplace, a key domain of psychosocial safety.

Across the seven team-level psychological safety questions we ask (Edmondson, 1999:
listed from highest to lowest):

It is safe to take a risk in this team.	**44.1%** Don't agree.
If I make a mistake in this team, it is not held against me.	**29.1%** Don't agree.
Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.	**26.2%** Don't agree.
No-one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.	**25.8%** Don't agree.
People on this team accept others for being different.	**19.3%** Don't agree.
It is OK to ask other members of this team for help.	**9.7%** Don't agree.

And, when it comes to bullying, 9.5% agree that they have been
subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or
behaviour in the past 6 months.

*All data was collected during 2021-2023 from working New Zealanders (N =7683) across 29 organisations from varied industries
(e.g., social services and healthcare, construction and manufacturing, administration, financial and insurance services, and
retail). This data was collected from organisations who opted-in and, while invitations are sent to all workers in an organisation,
participation was voluntary. A self-selection bias may therefore be present, and the sample may not be demographically
representative of the New Zealand workforce at large.*

UMBRELLA

Compared to workers in more psychologically safe teams,
workers in less psychologically safe teams have:

8.3x higher odds of reporting bullying in the past 6 months.	8.3x
5.8x higher odds of intending to leave their jobs in the next 6 months.	5.8x
3.8x higher odds of experiencing psychological distress in the last month.	3.8x
2.2x higher odds of reporting lower than usual performance in the last month.	2.2x

Interested in knowing these stats for your organisation (and so much more)?
We've run our Wellbeing Assessment with more than 25,000 employees across
countless industries, helping organisations to pinpoint their strengths and risk
areas. Our experienced researchers and psychologists have the skills and expert
knowledge to turn information into action. Importantly, we remain independent
and objective, reducing internal reporting bias and maximising employee
trust and participation.

Get in touch to find out more: office@umbrella.org.nz; 0800 643 000.

*All data was collected during 2021-2023 from working New Zealanders (N =7683) across 29 organisations from varied industries
(e.g., social services and healthcare, construction and manufacturing, administration, financial and insurance services, and
retail). This data was collected from organisations who opted-in and, while invitations are sent to all workers in an organisation,
participation was voluntary. A self-selection bias may therefore be present, and the sample may not be demographically
representative of the New Zealand workforce at large.*

UMBRELLA

03. Insights: What do the numbers mean?

These numbers tell a story.

As one of the first known investigations into psychological safety in New Zealand workplaces, the good news is the majority of workers we surveyed report working in teams that are generally psychologically safe. That means, they feel that their environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, that others have their back, and that they can raise problems and issues without fear. These perceptions of psychological safety are similar, albeit slightly higher, compared with recent comparative data from a study of New Zealand law firms (Clarke et al., 2024) .
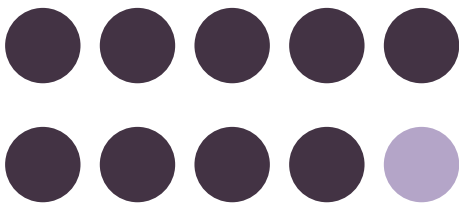
More than 9 out of 10 workers, for example, agree that it is OK to ask other members of their team for help.

A sizeable minority, however, report a less than rosy picture. Between one in five and one in three employees report that their teams are lacking when it comes to psychological safety.

Nearly half (44%) don't agree that it is safe to take a risk in their team – a finding that might be understandable in jobs that are more procedural and less innovative (healthcare or manufacturing, for example). However, for those teams that benefit from trying new things, pushing boundaries, and having challenging conversations to break new ground, these findings suggest room for growth and a possible avenue for improving New Zealand's woefully low productivity statistics.
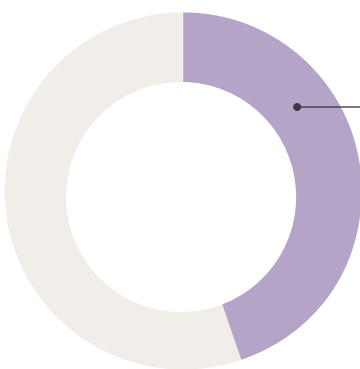
Nearly half (44%) don't agree that it is safe to take a risk in their team

[1]*Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment (M = 5.35, SD = 1.06) vs Clarke et al., 2024 (M = 4.49, SD = 1.08), using Edmondson's (1999) 7-item Psychological Safety Scale, with items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).*

UMBRELLA

Importantly, over a quarter of New Zealand workers don't agree that they are able to bring up problems and tough issues in their team. Coupled with the finding that nearly half of all workers don't agree that the psychological wellbeing of staff is a priority in their workplace, we are presented with a core challenge for businesses and senior leaders to tackle:

> *How do we meet psychological health and safety obligations when many workers feel unable to raise concerns in the first place, and half are not confident that psychological wellbeing is a priority in the workplace?*

Focusing on mental safety – building psychologically safe teams and psychosocially safe workplaces – is a sound place to start.

And, while our data does not show causal relationships, it suggests strong associations between poor mental safety and higher rates of bullying, psychological distress, low performance, and turnover intention. Facing eight times higher odds of being bullied if you are in a team with low psychological safety has got to be bad for business (not to mention team members). There is a significant opportunity here to use mental safety as a lever not just to build healthier individuals, but healthier workplace cultures, stronger retention, stronger performance, and reduced psychosocial risk.

04. An opportunity to create high-performing teams

When it comes to performance, the evidence couldn't be clearer. You don't have to take our word for it based on Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment data alone.

Brand new research out of the University of Canterbury (Clarke et al., 2024) highlights the compelling relationship between psychological safety and organisational performance.

Google has a lot to say on the topic, too.

> *Under a project codenamed "Project Aristotle", research from Google across 4 years in the 2010s found that psychological safety was at the very foundation of high-performing teams.*

Project Aristotle analysed team data across the entire Google workforce, trying to find out what differentiated high performing teams from average performing teams. The results of Google's data collection demonstrated that it didn't matter quite so much who was in the team. It mattered how they worked together.

The number one most important thing, at the bottom of the pyramid, was psychological safety. The next four – dependability, structure and clarity, meaning, and impact – were also important, but without psychological safety their impact on team success was limited. If you had clear structure and clarity, but low psychological safety, you were unlikely to be a high performing team.

The five dynamics of high-performing teams:

Impact: Team members think their work matters and creates change.

Meaning: Work is personally important to team members.

Structure & clarity: The team has clear roles, plans and goals.

Dependability: Team members get things done, on time, and meet a high bar for excellence.

Psychological safety: Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.

UMBRELLA

Research states that the highest-performing teams have one thing in common, psychological safety. When people feel psychologically safe, this can:

Promote innovation and creativity

Improve communication and collaboration

Enhance employee engagement

Reduce turnover and absenteeism

Quoted from Charles Duhigg's New York Times article on the research

> *"Project Aristotle is a reminder that when companies try to optimize everything, it's sometimes easy to forget that success is often built on experiences — like emotional interactions and complicated conversations and discussions of who we want to be and how our teammates make us feel — that can't really be optimized."*

To reduce risk, don't forget that the very steps that reduce mental harm at work also lend themselves to better team dynamics, stronger wellbeing, and higher performance. Mental safety is too important to get wrong, whatever way you look at it.

Our team at Umbrella is made up of experts in the world of mental safety – assessing it, training it, and growing it in teams.

Get in touch to hear about our group training and eLearning options for managers, teams, and senior leadership teams: office@umbrella.org.nz; 0800 643 000.

UMBRELLA

05. Creating mentally safe organisations

Before tackling anything else, it's crucial to ensure that organisational values are aligned with a psychosocially safe approach to work.

Start by reflecting on these prompts, and how true they are for your organisation:

- Does worker health (including mental health) rate highly in the minds of executives and directors, or does performance and productivity come at its expense?

- Are consultation, engagement, and communication viewed as essential or tick-box exercises?

- Are there aspects of workplace culture, kept alive by implicit values, that are harming people (for example, that working long hours is a rite of passage)?

Then, remembering that under the legislation we must firstly be aware of mental health issues and key psychosocial risks, the number one thing that organisations must do to build mental safety is to get an accurate picture of wellbeing at work (and track how it changes over time). This means asking people regularly about their key challenges at work, what they are struggling with, and what's working well, in order to put in place effective controls.

While consultation with workers is a behaviour driving mental safety in and of itself, more important is follow-through on this consultation, showing that feedback is valued and important. What is your plan for communicating change to workers? How will you use this opportunity to build trust over time?

In other words, get the basics right:

- Ensure there is authentic executive and senior leadership support for psychological health and safety, and that this is at the heart of organisational practices.

- Make worker feedback and participation in psychological health and safety issues a priority, with varied feedback forums available.

- Follow up on worker feedback with a clearly communicated action plan (and follow-through!).

- Regularly monitor psychological health and safety in the workplace; for example, through recurring surveys.

- Equip managers with high-quality training to manage mental health in their teams, and build psychological safety at the team level.

Successfully implementing the basics might seem daunting at first, and not all organisations have the in-house capability to identify and manage psychosocial risks, to design integrated programmes or to equip managers and teams with the skills needed to build mental safety.

Our team of specialists and organisational psychologists is able to assist. We have deep experience navigating the legal obligations, assessing and managing mental safety, and training leaders and team members.

Get in touch to learn about our end-to-end workplace mental health services – office@umbrella.org.nz, 0800 643 000.

06. Creating mentally safe teams: The role of a manager

People leaders have an important role in both modelling and encouraging the types of behaviour they want to see within the team, and discouraging and addressing behaviour that harms the culture of the team.

Trust is key here, including being competent, considerate, and predictable (i.e., doing what you say you will do). These are skills you can build over time, by regulating your emotions wisely, "leading loudly", and taking the time to talk with your team.

1. Regulate your own emotions

- Start by learning and knowing how to observe and describe your own emotions (not as simple as you might think!).

- Understand how to manage your own painful or unwanted emotions – you may need some help in learning to do this.

This self-awareness ensures that your emotions don't inadvertently trickle down to your team and, at worst, create an environment where team members have to ask, "Uh-oh, what mood is the boss in?" before approaching you for help. This is a sure-fire way to undermine psychological safety at the team level.

2. "Lead loudly" when it comes to wellbeing

- Role-model healthy work rhythms for your team.

- Lead by example in setting and maintaining boundaries around work hours, taking breaks, not sending emails at all hours, etc.

To reinforce psychosocial safety in your team, communicate clearly that your team member's wellbeing is a priority to you and that they can come to you with any concerns. Lead from the top, *loudly and boldly*, by setting and observing clear limits around your own behaviour that do not go unnoticed by your team. And encourage and reinforce these very same behaviours amongst your own team members, including helping people prioritise and delegate their workload, work flexibly, and take regular breaks.

UMBRELLA

3. Encourage good conversation (and really get to know your team)

- Encourage healthy debate within your team.

- Make mistakes and share with others what you learned from those mistakes.

- Regularly seek input, opinions and feedback from all team members.

Lastly, remember the cornerstone of mental safety: talk to your people. Seek input, opinions, and feedback from all team members, as often as you can.

Regularly check in and ask the right questions:

- "What's working well?"

- "What are you struggling with right now?"

- "How can I help you?"

And then, follow-through and make bold changes.

Remember, your wellbeing as a manager matters, too.

Reach out to your own supervisor, support networks, and lead loudly when it comes to the practices that help you look after your mental health. At Umbrella, we offer tried and tested 1:1 leadership coaching, eLearning, group training programmes, and psychological support for managers.

Please reach out to see how we can help you (and your team): office@umbrella.org.nz, 0800 643 000.

UMBRELLA

07. Bullying and safety in the workplace

One in ten people we surveyed using our Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment agreed that they had been subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour in the past 6 months.

As already noted, workers in less psychologically safe teams have more than eight times higher odds of reporting bullying, compared to workers in more psychologically safe teams.

How can leaders and organisations create a mentally safe environment to prevent workplace incivility and bullying, and reduce mental harm?

---

1. Foster psychological safety.

One of the key factors in addressing this issue is cultivating an organisational culture that values respect and civility. If organisations can work to prioritise psychological safety, leaders can create a safe atmosphere where people feel comfortable speaking up and sharing their concerns. Offering workshops and training sessions to workers on what psychological safety is, and how safe their team really is, can equip them with the tools to address incivility among team members and build stronger relationships, along with the steps below.

---

2. Assess mental safety in your workplace, regularly.

As we already know, assessment is key to meeting psychological health and safety obligations in the workplace. This can be done through a confidential annual or quarterly survey on factors such as incivility and bullying, whether effective supports are in place for them, and what management can improve on to better support the wellbeing of workers. Not sure where to start? Our Wellbeing Assessment tool identifies key factors that might be helping or hindering your employees' health and performance.

---

3. Model positive behaviour from the top down.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping mental safety, perhaps even more so where bullying is concerned. Leaders are encouraged to set an example by demonstrating respectful communication, actively addressing incivility if these incidences are seen and providing guidance on appropriate workplace conduct.

Along with this, openly acknowledging and discussing incivility is key to managing it effectively. Encouraging open conversations about the impact of uncivil behaviour can raise awareness and allow individuals to express their concerns without fear of disapproval or retaliation. When leaders prioritise respect in their culture, this sends a powerful message to the rest of the organisation.

Interested in reading more? Read our extended article on this topic here: Understanding and dealing with workplace bullying.

For workers who need support while experiencing bullying or incivility, Employee Assistance Programmes are often a go-to, offering confidential counselling, advice, and resources to help navigate workplace challenges and enhance overall wellbeing.

If your current EAP provider does not meet your teams' needs, switch your organisation to Umbrella's Enhanced EAP to provide your people with timely access to mental health support from our expert team of counsellors and psychologists.

Find out more by speaking with our team: office@umbrella.org.nz, 0800 643 000.

UMBRELLA

08. Change, restructure, and safety in the workplace

During times of change and restructuring, the importance of mental safety in the workplace cannot be overstated.

Wellbeing Assessment data shows that fewer than half of all workers agree that they are consulted adequately about change at work. That figure can be improved when mental safety is at the heart of a change process.

1. Communicate with the goal of generating feedback

When managing change as a leader, transparent, timely and regular communication is crucial. But more than just communicating with the goal of being heard, a mentally safe approach would ensure that generating feedback is at the forefront.

This means enabling two-way communication channels where workers at every level can safely share their concerns, ask questions, get support and clarify information. Most importantly, it also means that there is a plan in place for how this feedback will be reviewed, responded to and actioned quickly.

Professor Amy Edmondson, psychological safety researcher at Harvard University, recommends that leaders should, among other suggestions:

- acknowledge they don't have all the answers and need others' input and ideas.

- be transparent with motives and reasoning behind key decisions, including communicating why certain feedback cannot be actioned, if applicable.

2. Lead values-first

A mentally safe feedback process (outlined above) is likely to reveal which organisational values are perceived by employees as being under threat. This should indicate where to start when addressing fears and concerns, knowing that values are important to get right first before addressing logistics.

Leading values-first also consists of leaders building an authentic narrative throughout the change process. Providing reassurance of what isn't going to change, insights into what's coming up next, being honest about current challenges and highlighting the benefits of the changes can help people to form a bigger picture and look for opportunities (not just threats).

3. Work from the team level if organisational culture is hard to budge

We know from research conducted using our Umbrella Wellbeing Assessment that levels of psychological safety can vary widely across teams. What this tells us is that every individual and team leader plays a role in building mental safety through being respectful, curious and caring when interacting with their team.

Asking genuine questions, being understanding of mistakes, and offering help are small steps that are available to everyone and can make the difference in slowly creating a safe environment at the "local" level. This means that even if senior leaders, executive teams or the board are not necessarily leading with mental safety, it's still possible to build and maintain safety for the team that you're in.

Interested in reading more? *Read our extended article on this topic here: Better ways of managing change when leading a company through acquisition*

As a team leader, know that any restructure or change is likely to spark multiple challenging conversations and changes in team dynamics.

This makes it essential to have the right tools and strategies in place to handle those conversations with confidence and humility. Leaders can learn how to apply these essential tools and strategies to create a safe space with Umbrella's leadership training options – covering psychological safety, psychological first aid, and change management, among other topics.

Get in touch with us to learn more: office@umbrella.org.nz, 0800 643 000.

UMBRELLA

09. Where to start?

Know where to go for help

It's no surprise if you find yourself getting stuck. Building mental safety can be gritty work at the best of times, let alone when you're needing to hold challenging conversations, or support and validate people's responses when the going gets tough (for example, during a major change process, a bullying incident, or managing other critical psychosocial risks). These are all tricky, complex situations that need time, space and energy to lead well.

Sometimes it can be useful to receive psychological insight or advice from an independent expert. If that's the case for you, our team members at Umbrella are skilled at facilitating a range of leadership and team training sessions and eLearning programmes that centre around mental safety, psychological health and safety, and psychological wellbeing.

We've also run tens of thousands Umbrella Wellbeing Assessments, Wellbeing Pulse checks, and Psychosocial Risk Assessments over the last few years, helping individuals to assess their wellbeing while providing expert objective guidance and insight on your critical psychosocial risks at the organisational level. We'll also guide you on where to start with eliminating or minimising risk, helping you to meet health and safety obligations by monitoring risk.

For more individualised support, we offer leadership coaching, evidence-based business advice, and strategic consulting, allowing you to tap into our experienced network of registered clinical and organisational psychologists and researchers. For team members who want safe and effective psychological support, check out our Enhanced EAP package and make the switch to a better EAP.

Get in touch if you'd like to find out more about mental safety and how we can help you to meet your health and safety obligations, and boost performance at the same time.

We work with clients throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and have offices in Auckland and Wellington.

PO Box 24445, Wellington
P: 0800 643 000
E: office@umbrella.org.nz

Appendix 1. The terms defined

Putting the "logical" back in psychological health and safety

As more and more people are talking about mental health at work, we are seeing an equal rise in people who are enthusiastic to share the good word, without knowing exactly what each of the concepts mean (and how they differ).

Science is partly to blame here. Researchers saying one thing when they mean another, or choosing labels that are excruciatingly close to existing ones (e.g., psychological safety vs psychosocial safety).

It's time to clear up some concept confusion, starting with understanding what psychological health and safety really is, and then three key concepts that fall out from it, including:

- Psychosocial hazards and risks;
- Psychological safety; and
- Psychosocial safety.

What is psychological health and safety?

This is the legal duty to care for psychological or mental health of workers, not just physical health (Health & Safety at Work Act 2015). As outlined in the Act (s44(4)), this means needing to have up-to-date knowledge of issues relating to mental health at work, including critical psychosocial risks (more on these below), and having processes and resources to respond to, eliminate and/or minimise these risks.

Similar to physical health and safety in the workplace, psychological health and safety approaches are systemic in nature, focused on having the right systems, resources, and processes in place to monitor, identify, and address risk.

The way we achieve compliance with psychological health and safety requirements is by focusing on three core areas: psychosocial risk, psychosocial safety, and psychological safety.

UMBRELLA

What are psychosocial hazards and risks?

Usually the focus of any psychological health and safety remit, psychosocial hazards refer to anything in the workplace that has the potential to cause psychological or physical harm. These might be related to how work is organised, social factors at work, or aspects of the work environment, equipment and hazardous tasks. Psychosocial hazards can be present in all organisations and sectors, and from all kinds of work tasks, equipment and employment arrangements.

Common psychosocial hazards might include:

- high (or low) workload
- low autonomy
- exposure to emotionally disturbing work
- harassment from colleagues or customers
- poor organisational change management.

Psychosocial risk relates to the likelihood of harm occurring from psychosocial hazards. However, not all psychosocial hazards will be of concern to every organisation. It is important to identify the specific hazards present in your workplace and assess how much harm they could cause to employee health, safety, wellbeing, and overall organisational performance. Identifying, assessing, and managing psychosocial risks should be conducted in alignment with other physical health and safety risks, through a management system which is integrated into the organisation's broader business processes.

What is psychosocial safety?

Otherwise referred to as the "psychosocial safety climate", this is about the strength of policies, practices, and procedures in place to protect workers' psychological health and safety at work, and reduce their psychosocial risks.

It is usually regarded as an organisational or cultural factor, reflecting aspects such as:

- management values (e.g., mental health prioritised at the same level as productivity)
- commitment to health and wellbeing
- strong communication around psychological health and safety
- worker participation in psychological health and safety issues.

While psychological health and safety represents the external and legal climate in which businesses operate, including the obligations they must meet, psychosocial safety represents the internal culture that facilitates strong psychological health and safety compliance.

UMBRELLA

Companies that start with psychosocial safety as their foundation are much more likely to achieve long-lasting and genuine health and safety compliance, in part because workers feel that their organisation's approach to mental health is genuine, grounded in care and really "listening", not a scapegoat-hunting or tick-box exercise.

What is psychological safety?

Originating with research conducted by Amy Edmondson at Harvard Business School, psychological safety is primarily a marker of team (rather than organisational) dynamics. It represents a team climate in which people are comfortable speaking up, raising and tackling issues, asking for help, being (and expressing) themselves, feeling that they won't be punished for making a mistake, and that others will have their backs. Feeling psychologically safe allows employees to perform at their best **(see more in Chapter 5)**.

A psychologically safe team is foundational for psychological health and safety because it allows for accurate monitoring and identification (which is a legal duty under the Act), and provides an environment that enables risk controls to be embedded successfully. For example, a lack of psychological safety (feeling unable to disclose issues or share concerns) may lead to increased rates of bullying (a critical psychosocial risk), and lower disclosure (a barrier to meeting health and safety obligations).

Notably, 2024 coverage of a WorkSafe investigation into an organisation where one worker tragically died, reported that "workers were unable to speak up about concerns… and the workers, afraid of repercussions, requested anonymity". A lack of psychological safety, in this case, was a notable factor contributing to a series of alleged psychological health and safety violations.

It's because of this importance that we offer psychological safety training at Umbrella, helping managers and leaders to understand what it is, how to foster it in their teams, and how to use it to foster creativity, innovation, and performance.

Contact us to discuss a solution that will work for your team: office@umbrella.org.nz; 0800 643 000.

So, what is mental safety?

In this report, we group psychological and psychosocial safety together as "mental safety". As the pyramid shows, mental safety forms the solid grounding for any successful organisational approach to psychological health and safety. Why? Because it represents a value-led commitment to prevent harm and maximise worker participation, rather than being driven by top-down legal compliance alone. This ensures that efforts to fulfil this commitment are sustainable, authentic, and effective.

Without a strong basis of mental safety, strategies and initiatives are bound to fall flat, and harm prevention is severely limited. With it, psychosocial risks are much easier to identify, eliminate and mitigate, leading to greater legal compliance – and stronger, high-performing teams.

Psychological health & safety
Legal duty to prevent harm.

Psychosocial risk
Elimination or minimisation of hazards at work that have potential to cause mental harm.

Psychological safety
Confidence to speak up, raise concerns, and ask for help within team.

Psychosocial safety
Organisational policies, practices and procedures for the protection of worker psychological health and safety.
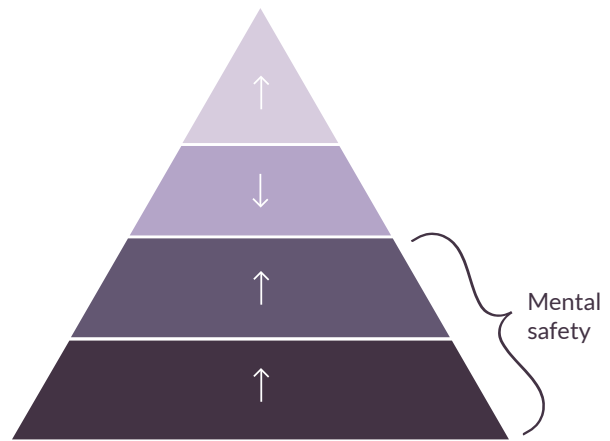
Mental safety

Keen to discuss mental safety at your workplace?

Contact:

office@umbrella.org.nz
0800 643 000