

Health and Safety Essentials

Lecture 11 – Psychosocial Hazards and Workplace Stress – An Introduction

George Steve Darmanin
MSc.OHSEM CMIOSH

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Recap Question 1 (Last week)

Which workplace scenario BEST illustrates *inhalation* as a route of exposure to a biological hazard?

- A. chef handling raw chicken contaminated with *Salmonella*
- B. A healthcare worker exposed to *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* from an undiagnosed patient 
- C. A laboratory worker sustaining a needlestick injury
- D. A farmer bitten by a tick carrying Lyme disease

Recap Question 2

Which statement correctly describes a Risk Group 3 biological agent?

- A. Unlikely to cause disease in humans
- B. Causes mild disease and does not spread
- C. Causes severe disease, presents a serious hazard to workers, but treatment is usually available
- D. Causes severe disease and has no effective treatment

Recap Question 3

Which of the following is *MOST* likely to contribute to work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)?

- A. Occasional manual handling with sufficient recovery time
- B. Repetitive tasks combined with poor workstation design and prolonged static postures 
- C. Short-duration tasks with task variation
- D. Use of adjustable seating and adequate lighting

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lecture, students should be able to:

1. Recognise psychosocial and psychological hazards within a workplace context.
2. Understand Malta and EU legal requirements and standards related to workplace stress.
3. Apply best practices to assess and manage psychosocial risks.
4. Develop strategies to mitigate workplace stress and promote well-being.



Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe

- Who is Simon Sinek?

Simon Sinek is a renowned leadership expert, motivational speaker, and author. He is best known for his concept of “Start with Why,” which explores how great leaders inspire action by focusing on purpose and values. His books, including *Start with Why* and *Leaders Eat Last*, are widely regarded as essential reads in leadership and organisational development.

In this short clip, Simon explains the importance of psychological safety in the workplace. He emphasises how good leaders create trust and foster a sense of safety among employees, which is crucial for reducing workplace stress, creating a positive psychosocial environment and enabling teams to thrive.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IV8wCxgj5p4>

EU Framework Agreement

- Work-related stress has been identified at international, European and national levels as a concern for both employers and workers. Having identified the need for specific joint action on this issue and anticipating a Commission consultation on stress, the European social partners included this issue in the work programme of the social dialogue 2003-2005.
- In 2004, the EU cross-industry social partners signed the framework agreement on Work-related Stress (2004) and on Harassment and Violence at Work (2007).

EU Framework Agreement

- Does not provide a definition of stress, but describes it as:

"a state, which is accompanied by physical, psychological or social complaints or dysfunctions and which results from individuals feeling unable to bridge a gap with the requirements or expectations placed on them".

- The framework emphasises the need to identify risk factors of work-related stress and to take appropriate actions to prevent, eliminate or reduce it.



European Commission – Definition

“Stress can be defined as the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reaction to aversive and noxious aspects of work, work environments and work organisations. It is a state characterised by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping.”

European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Guidance on work-related stress – Spice of life or kiss of death?, Publications Office, 2000



Legislation – Malta

- Cap 646 Article 12 – Duties of employers:

“ (1) It shall be the duty of an employer to ensure the physical and **psychological wellbeing** of his workers at all times and of all persons who may be affected by the work being carried out for such employer at their workplace.

(2) The measures that shall be taken by an employer to prevent physical and **psychological ill-health**, injury or death at work, shall be taken on the basis of the following general principles of prevention,

- a) by the avoidance of risk;
- b) by the identification of hazards associated with work;
- c) by the evaluation of those risks which cannot be avoided....

Psychosocial Risks in Europe: Prevalence and Strategies for Prevention

- Key Findings from the Eurofound and EU-OSHA Joint Report (2014)
- Source: Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

<https://osha.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Report%20co-branded%20EUROFOUND%20and%20EU-OSHA.pdf>

Key Findings

- 25% of workers report work-related stress most or all of the time.
- Work negatively affects health for a similar proportion of workers.
- Main psychosocial risks:
 - Monotonous or complex tasks.
 - High work intensity.
- Violence and harassment have severe impacts on well-being, though less frequent.
- Positive factors include work–life balance and social support.
- Trends show:
 - Decrease in long hours and lack of social support.
 - Increase in job insecurity, work pressure, and harassment in some areas.
- Gender differences: Men work longer hours; women face career progression challenges.
- Corporate awareness is high, but less than 30% have risk management procedures.
- Effective prevention requires a structured, participatory approach.
- Legislative and social partner initiatives play a vital role.



What is the Difference Between Psychosocial and Psychological Safety?

- The Garden Analogy
 - A healthy vegetable patch represents a psychosocially safe workplace.
 - Psychosocial safety = The environment (soil) promoting overall growth.
 - Psychological safety = A specific nutrient within the soil.



What is Psychosocial Safety?

- Ensures mental, emotional, and physical health.
- Minimises stress and fosters positive relationships.
- Supports collaboration and well-being.



Threats to Psychosocial Safety

- High/Low Job Demands
- Low Job Control
- Poor Support
- Low Role Clarity
- Poor Change Management
- Low Recognition and Reward
- Unfair Practices
- Conflict and Toxic Interactions
- Remote/Isolated Work
- Uncomfortable Conditions
- Traumatic Events
- Violence, Bullying, Harassment



What is Psychological Safety?

- Feeling safe to share without fear of humiliation or punishment.
- Encourages openness and innovation.
- Supports team collaboration and trust.



Stress and Safety

- Stress impacts both psychosocial and psychological safety.
- Psychosocial safety: Stress from prolonged exposure to hazards.
- Psychological safety: Stress can hinder openness and trust.



Actionable Steps to Improve Safety

- Foster respect and openness.
- Promote clear communication and role clarity.
- Provide autonomy and support.
- Recognise and reward contributions.
- Ensure fairness and balance in workplace practices.



Psychosocial hazard case studies

- <https://www.comcare.gov.au/safe-healthy-work/prevent-harm/psychosocial-hazards/more-information-on-psychological-health-and-safety-in-the-workplace/whs-regulations-case-studies>
- Although the 4 cases are under Australia's WHS Law, these are probably all relevant to Malta and the EU.
- Discuss in Breakout Rooms – Copy and paste link in your browser

Case Study Discussion – Analysing Psychosocial Hazards – Breakout Rooms

1. Instructions for Breakout Rooms:

1. Each group will be assigned one case study.
2. Read and discuss the details of your case study using the provided link.
3. Work collaboratively to answer the questions below.

2. Questions to Answer:

1. Identify the Hazards:

1. What are the key psychosocial hazards in this case study?

2. Evaluate Relevance:

1. Are these hazards relevant to workplaces in Malta? Why or why not?

3. Adaptation Strategies:

1. How could the actions taken in the case study be adapted to suit Maltese or EU workplaces?

4. Implementation Challenges:

1. What barriers might exist in implementing these strategies in Malta?



Break



How to Conduct a Psychosocial Risk Assessment

- Adapted from source:
<https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-work-related-stress-risk-assessment>
- Five essential steps:
 1. Identify hazards and those at risk.
 2. Evaluate and prioritise risks.
 3. Decide on preventive actions.
 4. Take action.
 5. Monitor and review.

Step 1: Identify Hazards and Those at Risk

- Key psychosocial hazards:
 - Job content (e.g., lack of variety, meaningless work).
 - Workload and pace (e.g., overload, tight deadlines).
 - Work schedules (e.g., shift work, long hours).
 - Control (e.g., lack of decision-making power).
 - Interpersonal relationships (e.g., bullying, harassment).
 - Role in organisation (Is the role clear? Does it conflict with other roles?...)
 - Work-life balance
- Consider vulnerable groups (e.g., migrant workers, young workers).



Step 2: Evaluate and Prioritise Risks

- Assess risk factors:
 - Likelihood of harm.
 - Severity of harm.
 - Frequency of exposure.
- Use tools such as questionnaires or interviews.
- List in order of priority
- Prioritise risks and create an action plan.



Step 3: Decide on Preventive Actions

- Actions to prevent work-related stress:
 - Allowing enough time for workers to perform their tasks
 - Providing clear job descriptions
 - Rewarding workers for good performance
 - Enabling workers to make complaints and have them taken seriously
 - Giving workers control over their work.
 - Minimising physical risks
 - Allowing workers to take part in decisions that affect them
 - Matching workloads to the capabilities and resources of each worker
 - Designing tasks to be stimulating
 - Defining work roles and responsibilities clearly
 - Providing opportunities for social interaction, and
 - Avoiding ambiguity in matters of job security and career development.



Step 4: Take Action

- Content:
- Develop an action plan:
 - Prioritise tasks.
 - Allocate resources.
 - Assign responsibilities.
 - Set timelines.
- Communicate findings to all employees.



Step 5: Monitor and Review

- Evaluate effectiveness of measures:
 - Assess solutions' impact on stress levels.
 - Monitor for emerging hazards.
 - Update measures regularly.
- Line managers play a crucial role in day-to-day monitoring.



Evaluating Risk Levels: Low, Medium, or High

- Risk Evaluation Criteria:
 - Likelihood: How likely is the hazard to cause harm?
 - Severity: How serious would the harm be?
 - Frequency: How often are employees exposed to the hazard?
- Risk Categories:
 - Low Risk: Rare occurrence, minimal harm.
 - Medium Risk: Moderate likelihood, noticeable harm.
 - High Risk: Frequent or likely occurrence, severe harm.



Risk Matrix

- Organisations often use a Risk Matrix to visually map and prioritise risks based on these factors. For example:

Likelihood	Severity	Risk Level
Rare + Minimal	Low	Low Risk
Moderate + Noticeable	Medium	Medium Risk
Likely + Severe	High	High Risk

Simple Example Assessment:

- Hazard: Excessive workload
 - Likelihood: High (Likely)
 - Severity: Medium (Noticeable Harm)
- Hence Highly Likely x Medium Severity Harm = **High Risk**



HSE Stress Indicator Tool (SIT)

- <https://youtu.be/gRySsN85U3s>
- The Stress Indicator Tool helps you understand the causes of work-related stress and take action to protect your people and your organisation.
- It is an online 35-question survey centred around the six key areas of work design: demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.
- Workers complete the survey anonymously, giving honest feedback on their experiences and perceptions of stress at work. The results can be used as part of the risk assessment process in HSE's Management Standards approach.
- There is an additional set of questions, developed with the University of Hull, for people who work partly or fully from home. This covers stress, anxiety, and depression and reflects changes in working practices and technology.
- Once the survey has closed, the analysis report is generated automatically. It summarises workers' views, highlights areas for improvement, and provides recommendations, without the need for manual data entry. This ensures accurate, reliable information to support action on work-related stress.
- <https://books.hse.gov.uk/Stress-Indicator-Tool/>
- Register for HSE next webinar:
- [Driving culture change with HSE's tools: How to achieve success in 2026 – Thursday 27 November at 3:00pm](#)



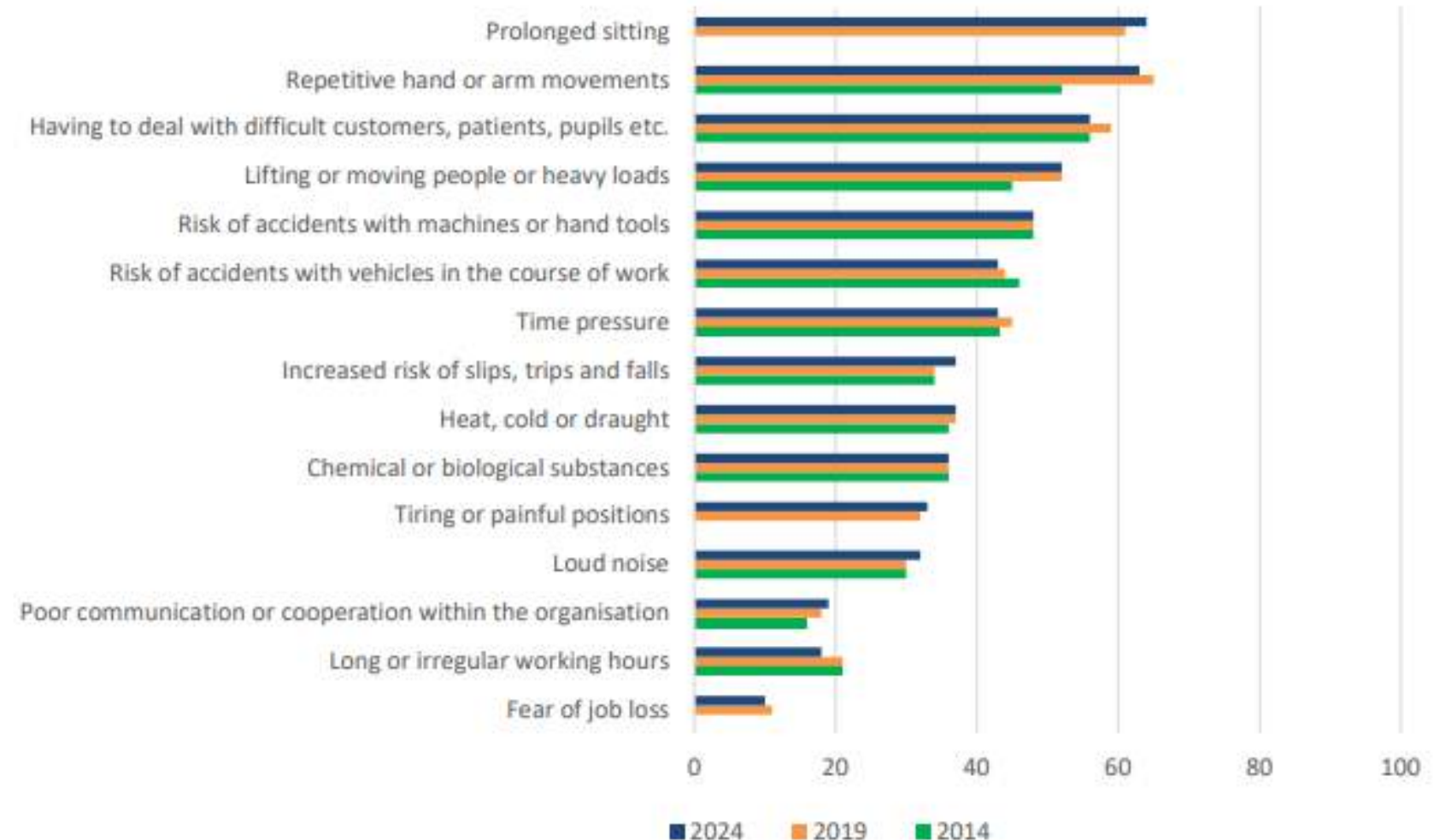
ESENER Survey

- Does your establishment have an action plan to prevent work-related stress?

<https://visualisation.osha.europa.eu/esener/en/survey/detailpage-national-bar-chart/2024/emerging-risks-and-their-management/en/E3Q300/activity-sector/MT>

ESENER 2024

- The fourth European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) was carried out in 2024, covering over 41,000 establishments across all business size classes and activity sectors in 30 European countries. First results of ESENER 2024: [ESENER-first-findings-2024_EN.pdf](#)



Psychosocial Risks During COVID-19

- Increased Uncertainty: Job insecurity, financial stress, and fear of redundancy.
- Remote Work Challenges: Isolation, blurred work-life boundaries, and digital fatigue.
- Healthcare and Frontline Workers: High stress due to workload, fear of infection, and moral distress.
- Impact on/from Education: All levels of education were unprepared for online learning, many families lacked adequate resources such as enough laptops, space, setup. High stress on educators, students and parents/guardians.
- Organisational Changes: Frequent policy updates, lack of clear communication, and rapid shifts in work models.



Mental health at work after the COVID19 pandemic

Source: European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2024

https://osha.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Mental%20health%20at%20work%20after%20the%20COVID%20pandemic_en_0.pdf

- Increase in work-related stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic
- A considerable proportion of respondents felt that their work stress has increased (44.6%)
- Increases in work stress were higher for professional (46.2%) or service (44.4%) occupations than for skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled (manual) workers (40.8%)
- Many respondents experienced severe time pressure (46%), over a quarter (26.4%) reported poor communication or cooperation, 17.7% reported a lack of control over their work, 15.7% experienced violence or verbal abuse from third parties, and 7.3% reported experiencing harassment or bullying from colleagues

Industry-Specific Psychosocial Risks and Strategies – Examples to consider

1. Healthcare:
 - Risks: Burnout, fear of infection, moral distress due to resource shortages.
 - Strategies: Staff rotation, peer support, enhanced PPE access.
2. Education:
 - Risks: Rapid adaptation to remote teaching, increased workload, parental pressures.
 - Strategies: Training in digital tools, mental health support, collaboration with stakeholders.
3. Construction:
 - Risks: Job insecurity, tight deadlines, long working hours, exposure to harsh environments.
 - Strategies: Clear communication on project timelines, workload management, on-site mental health support.
4. Retail:
 - Risks: Customer conflict over safety measures, fear of infection, high workload.
 - Strategies: Training in customer conflict management, flexible staffing, safety protocols.
5. Tourism and Hospitality:
 - Risks: Job insecurity, fluctuating COVID-19 protocols, high emotional demands.
 - Strategies: Government wage support, cross-training, emphasis on staff well-being.

Discussion Questions (Optional)

1. Identify Key Psychosocial Risks:

1. What are the most significant psychosocial risks faced by the sector you are discussing (e.g., healthcare, construction)?
2. How did the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate these risks?

2. Evaluate Relevance to Malta:

1. Are the risks and strategies discussed in the slides relevant to Maltese workplaces? Why or why not?
2. Which risks seem to affect Malta-specific industries most severely (e.g., tourism, SMEs)?

3. Propose Solutions:

1. Based on your assigned sector, what measures could be taken to mitigate psychosocial risks in a Maltese context?
2. What role do Maltese/EU regulations play in these solutions?

4. Draw Cross-Sector Comparisons:

1. Are there any shared psychosocial risks across the sectors (e.g., work pressure, poor relationships)?
2. How could strategies from one sector apply to others?

5. Future Preparedness:

1. What lessons can be applied from managing psychosocial risks during COVID-19 to better prepare workplaces for future crises?



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