



Action on Workplace Stress:

**Mental Injury Prevention Tools
for Ontario Workers**

**Using the Copenhagen Psychosocial
Questionnaire (COPSOQ)**



Action on Workplace Stress

A Worker's Guide to Addressing Workplace Causes of Mental Distress

This guide and resource kit will provide workers a basic understanding and a place to start to learn about workplace stress and what to do about it. The guide gives definitions, common causes of mental distress, legal frameworks (focusing on Ontario), possible actions to take, and resources available. It is an introduction and action guide created by workers for workers.

These tools are not clinical diagnostic tools. They are not meant to diagnose medical or psychological conditions or to be used by a physician to these ends. These tools are designed to identify problems that may exist within the workplace and provide possible avenues to address them.

This resource kit and tools are provided with a focus on the Ontario jurisdiction – workers in other provinces or in federally regulated workplaces should refer to their own legal framework.

What is the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ)?

The Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire ([COPSOQ](#)) is a tool where workers record their exposures to psychosocial hazards and general health outcomes. The questionnaire helps make the link between what psychosocial hazards may be affecting worker health outcomes. The survey has been validated and extensively used in Denmark, Spain, Belgium and Germany. There is reference population data available that allows you to compare the results of your workplace to a representative sample of the Danish working population. The questionnaire contains questions on work environment factors, the personal experience of symptoms, the relationship between work and home life, and conflicts and offensive behaviours.

The purpose of using the survey is to identify which stress factors have been associated with health symptoms so the results can provide a focus for efforts to prevent the stress. Surveys are considered screening tools (early warning system) designed to catch problems before they causes serious psychological and physical health effects. Questionnaires also provide an educational function because they get participants to think about the different aspects of workplace stress. Questionnaires are often the measures of risk factors because there are few if any ways to “objectively” measure these exposures. However, they should not be used to “diagnose” anyone — in fact only the group results are reported, not any particular individual’s response. In a presentation in Germany, researcher Tage Kristensen (2004) discussed using the COPSOQ and advised, “It is important to distinguish between basic conditions of work that are “part of the job” and factors that could be changed. Do not try to change what cannot be changed and do not accept what should be changed” (slide 4).

In order for questionnaires to be valid and truly represent the group being surveyed, it is important to get a good response rate (preferably over 80% but at least over 60%). To get a good response rate you need support and a plan (see below for some tried and true techniques that have helped other workplace get a good response). We also advise to use this questionnaire as an opportunity for dialogue with your employer rather than as a “report card” (Kristensen, 2004).

A tried and true method for maximizing response to a survey is to have a staged plan:

1. put together a working group and get endorsements from workplace parties respected by the group you are surveying
2. put out an announcement with the written endorsements two weeks before launching the survey
3. launch the survey (with some “fanfare” if appropriate and if it will help)
4. two weeks after the launch, thank those who already filled in the survey and remind the others to do so
5. four weeks after the launch, send out a second reminder emphasising the importance of their participation (and thanking those who already have)
6. six weeks after the launch, announce the deadline (in two weeks) for closing the survey and remind them of the importance

7. eight weeks after the launch close off the survey and announce a target date to present the results/report (when you present the results be sure to address what should be done next (if possible, include sample solutions to any issues identified)
8. Surveys can be tabulated in excel and summarized in a small report. For help to tabulate and summarize, contact your union if you have one, or Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) www.ohcow.on.ca, or the Workers Health and Safety Centre (WHSC) www.whsc.on.ca.

This is a labour intensive exercise and you need to have people who can stick with the plan and see it to the end (patience, persistence, and the ability to “nag”). As you can see, deciding to do a survey requires a significant commitment. Also, before deciding to use a survey tool, it is important to consider the following issues (some of which were taken from the authors of the COPSQ survey)

Do NOT use a questionnaire (like the COPSQ survey) for this or any other hazard unless:

- **There is a clear intention of taking action if indicated.**

If people are asked to answer questions about their views and symptoms, they expect you will respond to them. If you don't intend to respond to them, better not ask them in the first place. Under such circumstances doing a survey will make the situation worse (raising people's expectations and then disappointing them) as compared to not doing a survey at all.

- **The filling out of the survey is completely voluntary.**

Ethics always enter into any survey data collection. Surveys always have to be voluntary. Make sure you make it clear that filling out the COPSQ is completely voluntary and anonymous. Also, be sure to explain that workers may choose not to answer specific questions even within the survey.

- **You can guarantee a high degree of confidentiality.**

The questions on a survey such as this are very personal and if the participants don't trust you to keep them in confidence then either they will not respond at all or else they won't tell you their true feelings. Whoever is administering the questionnaire must be seen by the participants as trustworthy and able to hold their information in confidence. Reporting the results as group averages and not including any personal information ensures that it won't be traced back to an individual. To help maintain this confidentiality, return completed questionnaires in a blank sealed envelope.

- **You have a plan to address personal issues that the survey may “stir up.”**

Never engage in any screening (or surveying) activities without creating in advance a complete plan for execution and follow-up. Screening implies a duty of follow-up. Be ready with information about where to refer people (EAP or qualified counselling and support services) if the survey causes someone to ask for help.

- **You're willing to be flexible in finding solutions.**

The survey results should be seen as a tool for dialogue and development — not as a “report card.” There are no standard solutions to the problems. Solutions need to be developed locally and integrated in the other aspects of the organization. It is important to distinguish between basic conditions of work that are “part of the job” and factors that could be changed. Do not try to change what cannot be changed and do not accept what should be changed.

Planning for a successful survey

- Select a workplace lead group or steering committee to spearhead the plan to gather information using the COPSOQ and to facilitate the action plan to address the factors that the COPSOQ may identify.
- Make a plan from beginning to end; tailoring the steps in this resource to your workplace — i.e. How will you communicate with workers? Who will do what? How will they get computer access (at home)?
- Have you spoken to your union health and safety department or the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) about whether they can help with the interpretation of the results and provide ideas for solutions?
- How will you guarantee confidentiality? Do you need a third party (the union H&S dept or OHCOW or WHSC) to help with the administration of the survey? Will you use an online survey service (see your union H&S dept or OHCOW or the WHSC for assistance), or will the questionnaire be filled out on paper (if so, who will enter the data into a computer? — remember to address all confidentiality issues)
- What will the employer’s role be in the survey process? For example, will you seek the support and involvement of your employer in this process (remember to address confidentiality concerns)? Or will you and the workers do the COPSOQ on your own and then bring results and recommendations to the employer?
- If you plan to keep the employer at arm’s length during the survey planning and implementation process, as a courtesy, you may wish to inform the employer about the survey with updates on its progress (the sample letter is in Fig. 3).
- If there is a JHSC, worker health and safety representatives, or other union representatives in the workplace, how will these groups be informed and engaged? (the sample letter is included in the COPSOQ Survey Materials on the MIT landing page). It may be valuable to get their “buy-in” and endorsement at an early stage.
- Make sure you have a plan to make workers aware of what is going on and of what to expect — about the efforts to identify and address the issue — and gain their support and involvement in reporting circumstances to their supervisors/employers and in filling out the COPSOQ. Setting an actual timeline with dates specified will help (it can always be revised if you miss a deadline). It is important to include a written statement assuring anonymity and confidentiality if they choose to complete the voluntary survey.

- Make preparations in anticipation of the results. Look for resources ahead of time so when you find out the main issues, you're prepared with possible solutions.
- Consider who can help you.

Do you have a JHSC or health and safety representative? If so — involve them.

Are you unionized? If so, involve the union and tap into its resources and support.

What about OHCOW? OHCOW is a multi-disciplinary team of occupational health professionals in five service areas across the province that help Ontario workers link workplace causes to health outcomes.

- Review the resources and links available in this resource.

Controlling the psychosocial hazards

Once you have identified and assessed the problem using a tool such as the COPSOQ questionnaire, it is time to take actions to control the problem.

First, you will analyze and communicate the results and develop solution ideas.

By this stage you will have coordinated with OHCOW to have assistance in obtaining the COPSOQ results from your workplace. An online survey program makes it easy to generate a report to summarize results.

Report the results of the survey to the workers who filled it out.

- Arrange to discuss your report with OHCOW so that you and your group or committee understand it fully.
- Create written material (such as the draft in this resource kit) to use in a report-back meeting with workers where you will share the results.
- Conduct a meeting with workers to share results and provide them with your prepared written material. At the meeting, ask for ideas from the workers on possible solutions to resolve the psychosocial hazards that can be part of the next stage of making recommendations to the employer. Workers always know their job best, and they know what improvements are needed to fix problems. You can invite a representative from OHCOW to this meeting and if available, they will be glad to attend and assist you to explain and present the results.
- Assure workers that you will follow up on these results with the employer, and tell them how you plan to do it (JHSC, union processes, special meetings, written recommendations, etc).
- Promise to update workers as the process proceeds.
- You also need to gather all possible information available at the workplace about how the employer's policies and procedures impact on what you found. You need to know what exists in the workplace already before you can figure out what to recommend. Workers have a right to know what the employers policies and procedures are

regarding health and safety, so ask for copies if you don't have them. Gather other workplace information such as work policies, job descriptions, lost time data, WSIB information, EAP totals, or any other information to help in the analyzing process.

Striving for change

In this step, you take what you found to the employer and ask for changes to be made. You now have an idea of what the main three workplace factors are that are affecting the health symptoms of the workers. You have asked, received, and collated worker ideas for addressing these factors. You have reviewed documents (and incident history) from within the workplace that can shed light on what protections and focus may already be under consideration. Now you will use all the meeting and communication forums at your disposal to work with the employer for solutions.

- Your group or committee can write a letter to the employer describing the information you have gathered and ask them to meet with you to discuss your listed recommendations. Ideally, the letter can be from the worker members of the JHSC or health and safety representative, but it can also be done by a group of workers or a union local. See Fig. 6 for a sample letter.
- The worker members of the JHSC can put the item on the agenda for the next committee meeting and present the results and recommendations at the meeting. Doing this will ensure that the issue is logged in the minutes of the meeting, and may be an effective forum for gaining the employer's involvement and cooperation in the process. If your local is too small for a committee, the worker health and safety representative can make written recommendations to the employer for you. In both cases, once the employer receives written recommendations, they must reply in writing within 21 days with a timetable for implementation or reasons why they don't agree with the recommendations. See Fig. 4 and 5 for recommendations.
- Continue to work to implement recommendations.

Sample Solutions

The following are some examples of solutions that were found in the ILO *Stress Prevention at Work Checkpoints: Practical improvements for stress prevention in the workplace* (International Labour Office, 2012).

http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_168053.pdf

We've taken three of the most common workplace factors (high workload, bullying, and, work involving emotionally disturbing situations) and extracted some of the ILO (and Danish Labour Inspectorate) suggestions:

Possible solutions for high workload

In general the ILO document suggests the following broad areas for intervention (International Labour Office, 2012):

- adjust the total workload;
- prevent excessive demands per worker;
- plan achievable deadlines;
- clearly define tasks and responsibilities;
- avoid under-utilizing the capabilities of workers.

Specifically Checkpoint 6 deals with adjusting the total workload:

“Adjust the total workload taking into account the number and capacity of workers.”

1. Assess individual and team workloads
2. Taking into account individual differences, adjust workloads accordingly
3. Add additional workers as needed
4. Reduce unnecessary tasks such as excess paperwork
5. Reduce interruptions
6. Change work process to streamline work requirements

Solutions for bullying (and other offensive behaviours):

In general the ILO document suggests the following broad areas for intervention (International Labour Office, 2012):

- establish an organizational framework concerning offensive behaviour;
- organize training and raise awareness;
- establish procedures and action models;
- provide rapid intervention to help those involved;
- organize work areas/locations so as to protect workers from offensive behaviour.

Solutions for work involving emotionally disturbing situations:

The following prevention ideas are from a Danish document (*Guidance Tool for Hospitals*) that helps workplace inspectors assess psychosocial hazards and also provides ideas about solutions (Swedish Work Environment Authority B, 2012):

- Feedback, coaching and acknowledgement from colleagues and managers
- Specific objectives for work (when is the work result good enough/success criteria?)
- Possibility of withdrawing (a place for privacy)