

Mental Health: Moving Beyond Risk Management

Danica Hooper

State Manager & Psychologist/People Solutions Australasia

The attention given to mental health issues in the mining sector has been steadily growing of recent years, thanks to public awareness campaigns, new work health and safety legislation, and industry research initiatives. Not surprisingly, businesses have begun to adopt familiar risk management frameworks to address mental health concerns; focusing their attention on minimising psychological harm and injury. Within these frameworks, interventions have tended to centre heavily on individual-level issues such as providing employees with access to employee assistance programs (EAPs) as well as personal resilience training. Less emphasis has been placed on the organisational factors that affect and promote mental health. The next stage of maturity for organisations is moving beyond simple risk management frameworks and individual-level determinants of mental health, to incorporate a multi-level health promotion strategy.

Mental Health: The Current State of Play

Mental health problems are recognised as a significant concern for the Australian population, with approximately 45% of adults experiencing a mental health issue at some point in their life¹. Unfortunately, however, mental health concerns are often under-recognised in our communities and organisations, thus hindering the opportunity for early intervention and effective recovery.

The cost of overlooking mental health in organisational settings is significant. Not only do organisations miss the opportunity to support their workers through difficult times, but they also face serious costs from turnover, absenteeism, reduced productivity, compensation claims, and legal proceedings. In this respect, it is estimated that lost productivity as a result of mental health concerns costs Australian businesses \$5.9 billion each year; equating to approximately \$771 for every full-time employee within a business². Despite these costs we know that intervention can be highly effective, with some studies estimating close to a 500% return on investment in the form of increased productivity³. Consistently, there is now a strong government, business, and community push to respond quickly and responsibly to mental health needs in the workplace. This push is reinforced by the Work Health and Safety Act (2011) which explicitly refers to the obligation of employers to manage all risks, both physical and psychological; via the monitoring of risks, proactive management of risks, and the provision of information, training and instruction around managing such risks. The obvious question that arises out of this obligation is “what is your business doing in order to monitor, proactively manage and educate around psychological risks in the workplace”?

¹ ABS, 2007

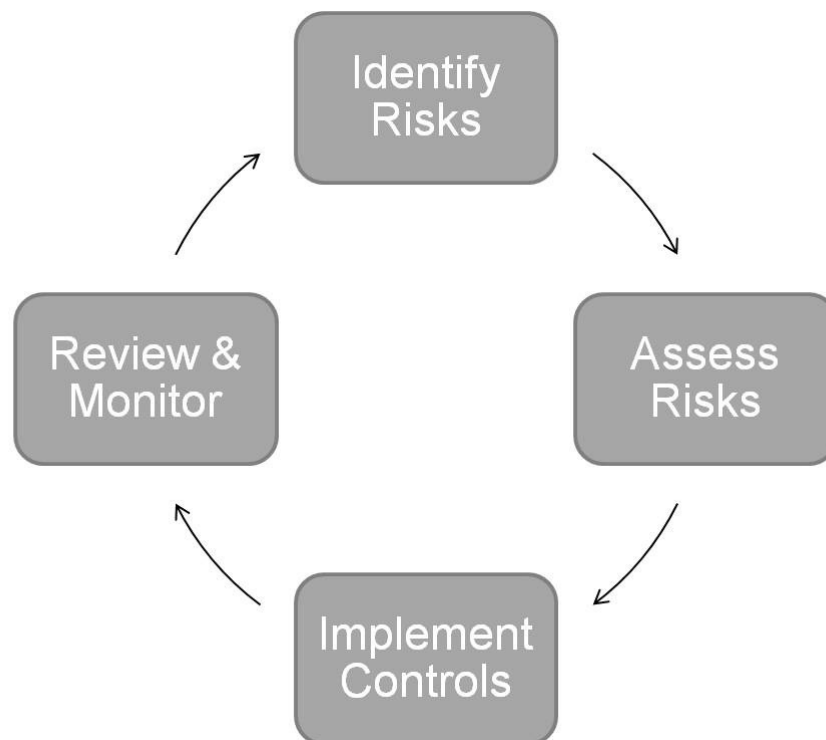
² Hilton et al., 2010

³ University of QLD/QLD Centre for Mental Health Research

Managing Psychological Risks

Applying a multi-level risk management framework is an important aspect of managing psychological risk in the workplace (see Figure 1 below). This familiar framework involves firstly identifying and assessing the psychological risks to workers, which can be achieved through a combination of initiatives such as reviewing generic and industry based research, and local diagnostic initiatives (e.g., employee surveys, focus groups, exit interviews, EAP statistics, and other forms of HR metrics). Relevant controls are then identified, implemented, reviewed and monitored.

Figure 1: General Risk Management Framework



Whilst this risk management framework is a well utilised tool in any HSE professional's kit, its widespread application to psychological hazards is relatively new. Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many organisations are focusing their attention on implementing controls at the individual-level rather than thinking more broadly and systemically about the factors that contribute to mental health concerns for workers. Individual-level initiatives, for example, focus on educating individuals in order to enhance their personal levels of resilience and to minimise their own future mental health concerns; or alternatively providing individual counselling and support to individuals currently experiencing mental health problems (i.e., EAP). Whilst individual-level controls form an important component of any mental health strategy, an overemphasis on these initiatives erroneously implies that mental health outcomes are essentially the result of an individual's make-up and not meaningfully contributed to via environmental and organisational factors. Such an implication can not only be dangerous from a stigma perspective, but it also limits an organisation's ability to take preventative action through a variety of organisational-level initiatives.

What we know from the existing body of research is that there are a number of organisational and psychosocial risks that are common across most workplaces, and which contribute significantly to the psychological health outcomes of workers. These risks include high demands, low control, low role clarity, poorly managed change, poorly managed relationships, low levels of support, low recognition and reward, perceived organisational injustice, and poor person-job fit. By integrating initiatives targeted at these factors along with the individual-level controls, organisations are better placed to offer a holistic mental health strategy for their workforce (see Figure 2 for an overview of intervention levels and Table 1 for example initiatives at each intervention level).

Figure 2: Intervention Levels

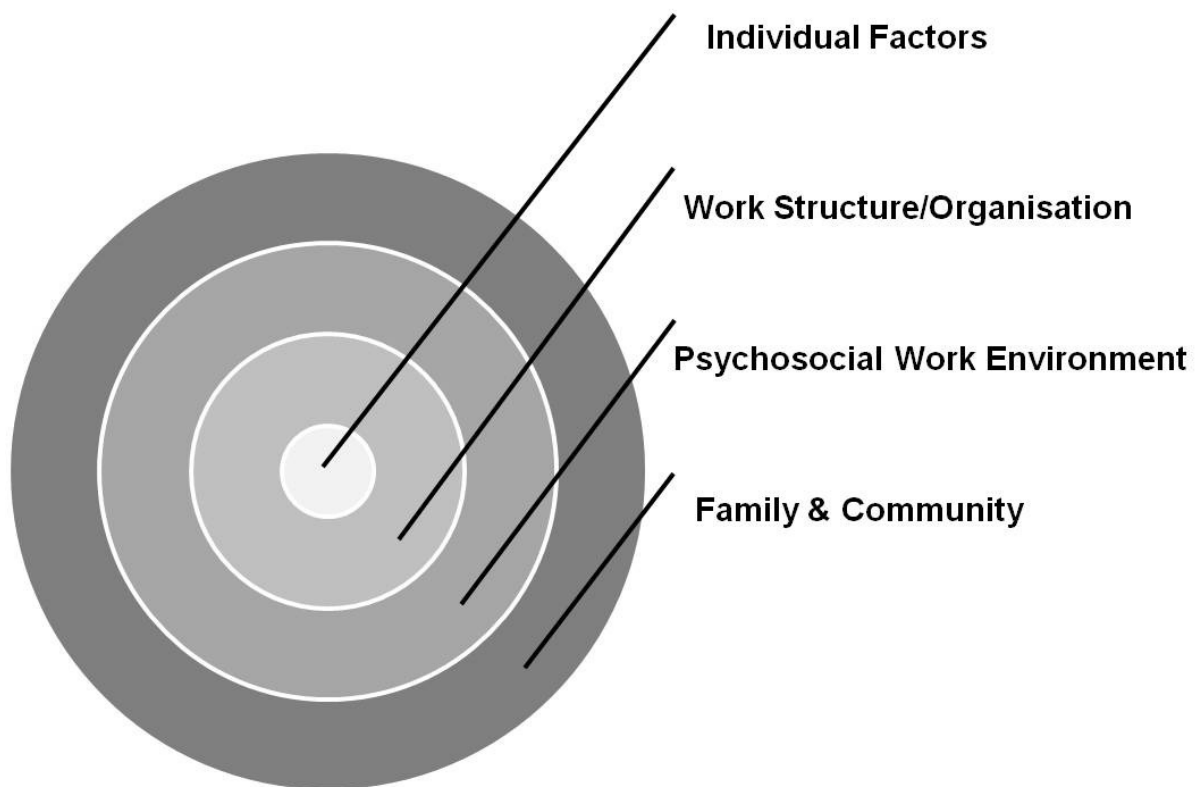


Table 1: Example Multiple-Level Control Options

Intervention Level	Prevent/Promote (Primary)	Early Detection (Secondary)	Intervention (Tertiary)
Individual	Job Selection Education	EAP Promotion	EAP/External Support
Work Structure/ Organisation	Work Redesign Health Promotion	Org Trends Work Adjustments	Return to Work Plan Work Adjustments
Psychosocial	Manager Training Stigma Reduction	Leader Support Peer Support	Buddying
Community/Family	Comm. Engagement	Support Networks	Family EAP Access

In addition to ensuring any risk management framework is applied to multiple levels of risk (i.e., individual, organisational, psychosocial, and community), it is also recommended that mental health initiatives are integrated into OH&S systems more generally; whereby mental health initiatives form part of the overall OH&S strategy and are promoted and delivered in conjunction with other OH&S initiatives. In this way, psychological hazards a) have a greater chance of being legitimised as genuine health and safety concerns; and b) steps are taken to reduce the stigma attached the mental health concerns through normalisation and an acknowledgement of the ways in which the workplace can contribute to the mental health outcomes of workers.