

# Introduction to Psychological Safety: What Employers Can Do



Dr. Bill Howatt, CEO & Founder



# Bill Howatt PhD., EdD., Post Doc UCLA



## 30+ Years of experience



Co-creator of the Psychological Safety Culture Audit



Founding Partner for MFIQ



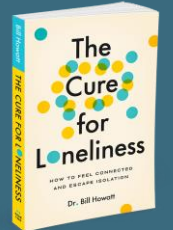
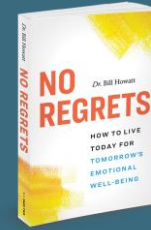
Contributor



Certificate Psychologically Safe Leadership

Certified Management Essentials (CME)

Mental Fitness and Pathway to Coping



Author of over 500 articles and over 50 books  
Audiobook: The Cure for Loneliness

Founder and President

Howatt HR

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### Roles:

- CSA Strategic Steering Committee on Occupational Health and Safety
- CSA Standard Z1003: Psychological Health & Safety Committee Member
- Chair of the CSA Technical Committee on the Management of Impairment
- Former Chief Research Workforce Productivity, CBOC
- Former Chief of Research and Development, Life Works
- Co-creator Globe and Mail Employee Recommended Workplace Award

### Workplace Research:

- Canada Pandemic Pulse Check: [COVID-19's Impact on Canadians' Mental Health](#) with the Mental Health Commission of Canada
- Moving to Action: Implementing the Workplace Safety & Prevention Services' Mental Harm Prevention [Roadmap](#)
- Canadian Standards Association (CSA) [Part 1](#): Investigating employers' practices in response to COVID-19 for safeguarding employees' psychological health and safety in the workplace and [Part 2](#): Employees' perceived psychological health and safety experience during COVID-19 through an inclusion lens.

# Cost of Mental Health to Employers



The current estimate for the economic cost of **mental health** in Canada is in excess of **~\$220B**. 50% of this cost is borne by **Employers**.

## Direct Costs

**\$30B**

Public  
Healthcare  
Spend

**\$2B**

Corporate  
Disability  
Spend

**<\$1B**

Private Personal  
Spend

## Indirect Costs

**\$100B**

Lost Paid Wages due to  
presenteeism &  
MH&W sick days

**\$70B**

Loss in Labor  
participation  
rate

**\$15B**

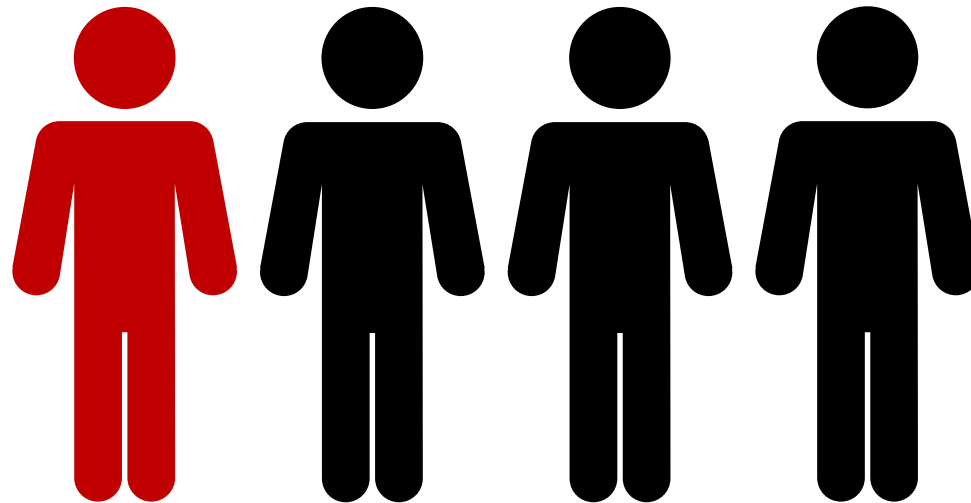
Social spillover  
costs

**<\$1B**

Disability  
insurance costs

# Stats Canada Is Now Reporting...

1 in 4



**Canadians aged 18 and older screen positive for symptoms of depression, anxiety or posttraumatic stress disorder.**

# Psychological Health & Safety Continuum

## Mental Health

the percentage of time spent in pleasant (i.e., flourishing) versus unpleasant (i.e., languishing) emotions.

## Eustress

the good stress that motivates daily purpose and self-worth (e.g., job satisfaction, thriving with a team to meet a deadline).

## Distress

the perceived difference between what one has and wants. It automatically triggers the fight/flight/freeze/fawn response.

## Mental Harm

a perceived psychosocial risk factor (e.g., work demand, exposure to trauma, bullying, rude leader). Frequency, duration, and intensity (FDI) increase the risk of psychosocial hazards (e.g., distraction, acting out).

## Mental Injury

mental harm is not negatively impacting emotions, and the ability to manage life demands and perform safely in the workplace for self and others is not affected.

## Mental Illness

clinical impairment in the ability to function. Symptoms must be managed for an employee to operate in the workplace. The root cause can be organic (i.e., genetics), psychosocial (i.e., work or life stressors), or trauma (physical and mental injuries).

# Why Psychological Safety Is Extremely Important

It is crucial to employee happiness, well-being, and engagement. It also is the foundation for a culture that fosters diversity, inclusion, and belonging and drives team performance.

Research has shown that psychologically safe teams are more effective. Google conducted a two-year study into what drives high-performing teams. They found psychological safety to be the most critical factor.

CEOs in the know understand a need to move from traditional to collaborative/psychological safety/inclusive leadership to have high-performing and engaged teams.



**The goal of psychologically safe workplaces is to facilitate ACCOUNTABILITY and LEARNING.**

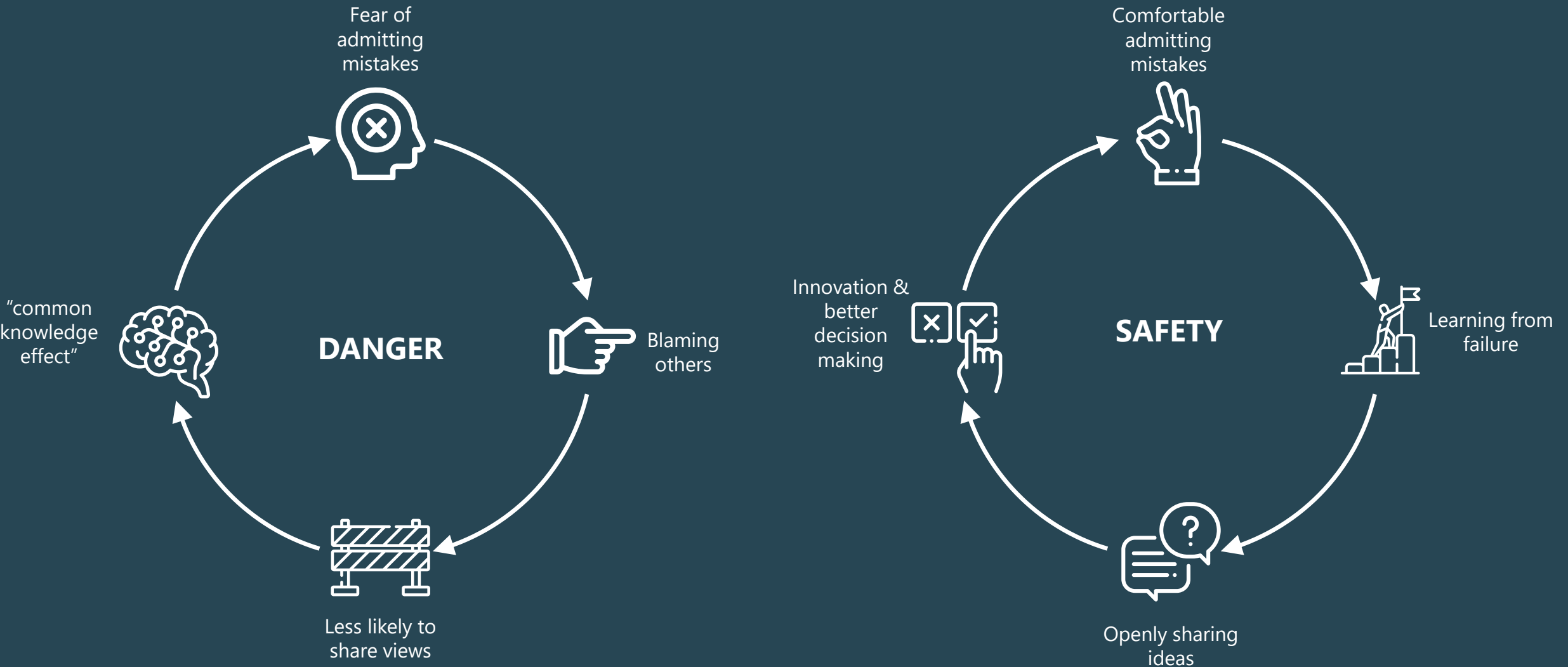
# Psychological Safety is the Foundation

Workplaces committed to becoming psychologically safe for all **WORKERS** make every reasonable effort to:

Reduce mental harm caused by negligent, reckless, or deliberate conduct.

Promote mental health through awareness, resources, and education.

# Psychological Danger & Psychological Safety





# Psychosocial Factors Impact on the Workforce

## Common examples



## Chargers

- Feel Safe to perform work
- Feel Accomplishment
- Feel Pride
- Feel support
- Feel confident
- Feel clear on direction

## Drainers

- Worried about safety
- Feel overwhelmed
- Feel disengaged
- Feel lonely
- Feel stressed
- Feel confused over priorities

Drains can drive Hazards that can result in mental harm, mental injury and mental illness

## Suggestion:

- Leverage ISO 45003 to learn more about psychosocial factors
- Pick workplace assessment like Psychologically Safe Culture Audit designed to provide data on psychosocial risk factors and hazards and protective factor impact.

# Workplace Psychosocial Hazards May Sound Like...

I am torn,  
**I don't know**  
what they  
want me to do

This place is  
**Toxic**

I am just  
**Emotionally**  
exhausted

I am so angry  
**It just wasn't fair**

That was  
**Humiliating**

I feel  
**stressed**

I am  
**Burnt out**

I just can't stop seeing it  
**Over and Over**

Why can't they just let me  
**Get on with my job**

I just  
**Don't know**  
What I'm supposed  
to be  
**doing**

**I am scared**  
They'll go off their head

I feel like a  
**Failure,**  
How am I supposed to  
**Do all this**

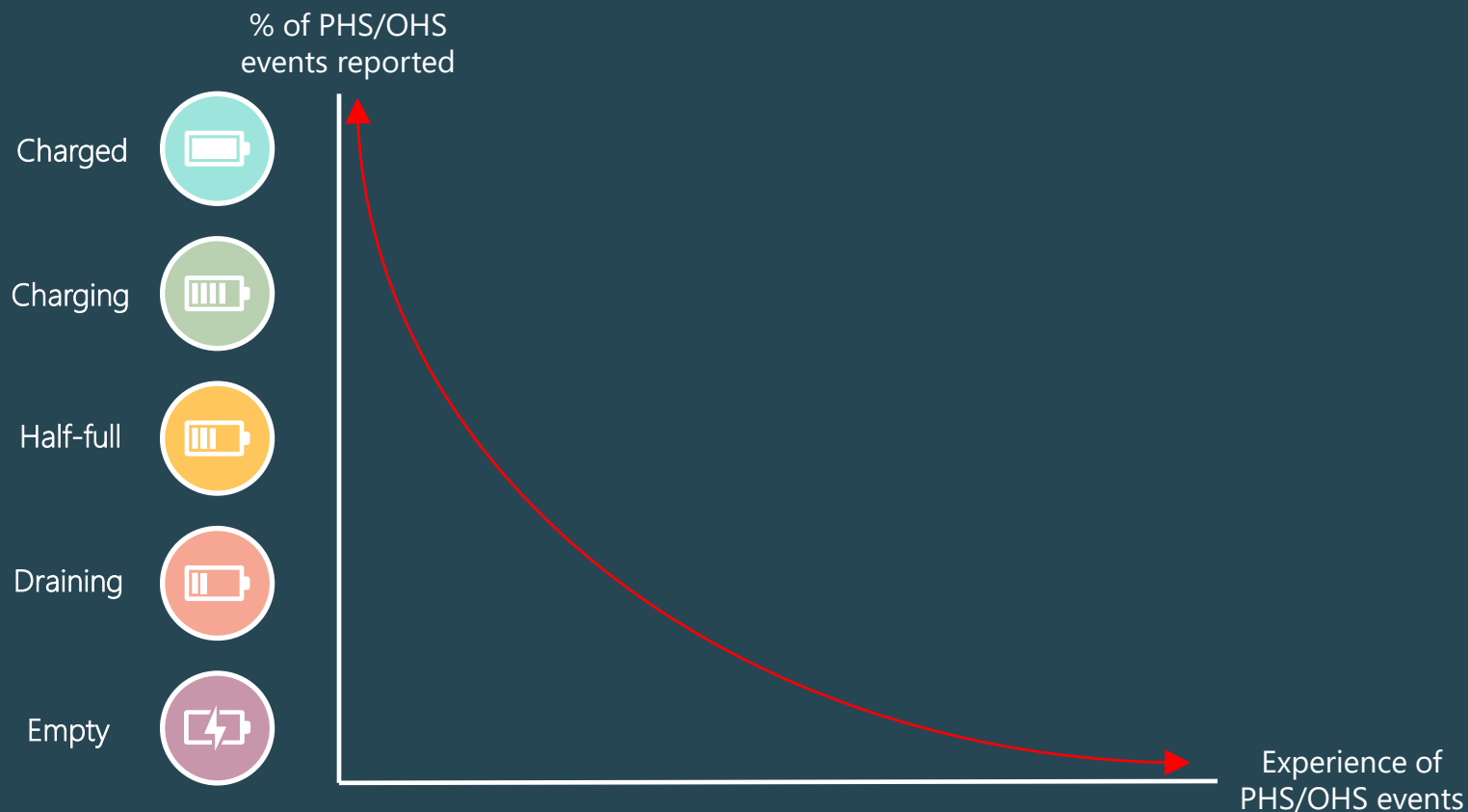
**I can't sleep**  
Thinking about it

Micromanaging is  
**Undermining my**  
confidence



# Positive Emotions & PHS/OHS Events

On average, as charge decreases, workers were more at risk for PHS/OHS events as well as being less likely to report them.



# What Is Driving the Emergence of Psych Safety?

- ✓ **OHS legislation** regarding workplace violence and harassment. Employers have a legal duty to protect workers from harm.
- ✓ **Human rights legislation** protects all workers from being marginalized due to differences, from skin colour to belief systems.
- ✓ **Disability claims** due to mental injury. Some workers' compensation boards influence employers to focus on mental harm prevention.
- ✓ **Employee retention.** Future of work research suggests the new workforce expects employers to support and protect employees' well-being.
- ✓ **Sustainability.** United Nations goals influence ESG design and senior leaders to set and measure how employers can affect workforces' physical and mental health.
- ✓ **Values.** Due to personal experience or because they authentically care about their people, more senior leaders are leaning into this conversation.

# What Is a Psychologically Safe Culture?

## Psychological Safety Is Not:

- Just being nice to workers
- Letting workers do what they want
- Having no expectations
- Being soft
- Excusing behaviors
- Absolving accountability

**Psychological Safety Is** the intention to create a culture with humanity, respect, working together with purpose.

- Accountability for performance and results
- Learning culture
- Feeling welcome differences
- Safe place to speak up without fear of repercussions or retaliation
- Feeling heard, and that your opinion is valued

**The Benefits of Psychological Safety:** Maximizing workforce potential and protecting workers from mental harms. It is the foundation for creating an inclusive workplace because it means removing fear and silence.

# Protective Factors:

Be clear on the difference between generalized & targeted

## What is a protective factor:

What employers do with intention (programs and policies) to mitigate psychosocial factors from doing harm, as well as to promote and support workers mental health and the employee experience.

### General Protective Factors examples:

- EFAP
- Benefits

- Can be beneficial.
- However, common challenge is left to worker to figure out the application.

### Targeted Protective Factors Include:

- Specific psychologically safe leadership training
- Mental fitness

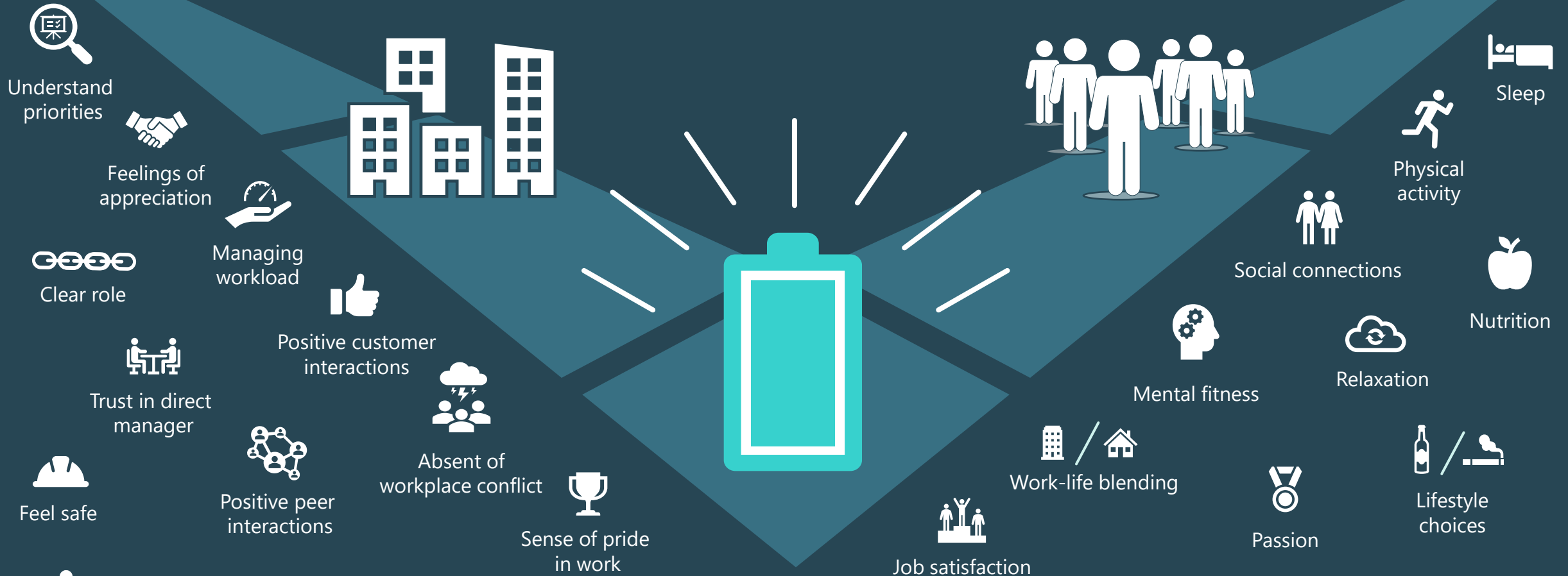
- Targeted on preventing specific psychosocial risk factor.
- Evidence based provides opportunity for test 1 and test 2 to evaluate impact.

# Resilience at Work is Built Through Join Responsibility

## Employer Actions

+

## Employee Actions



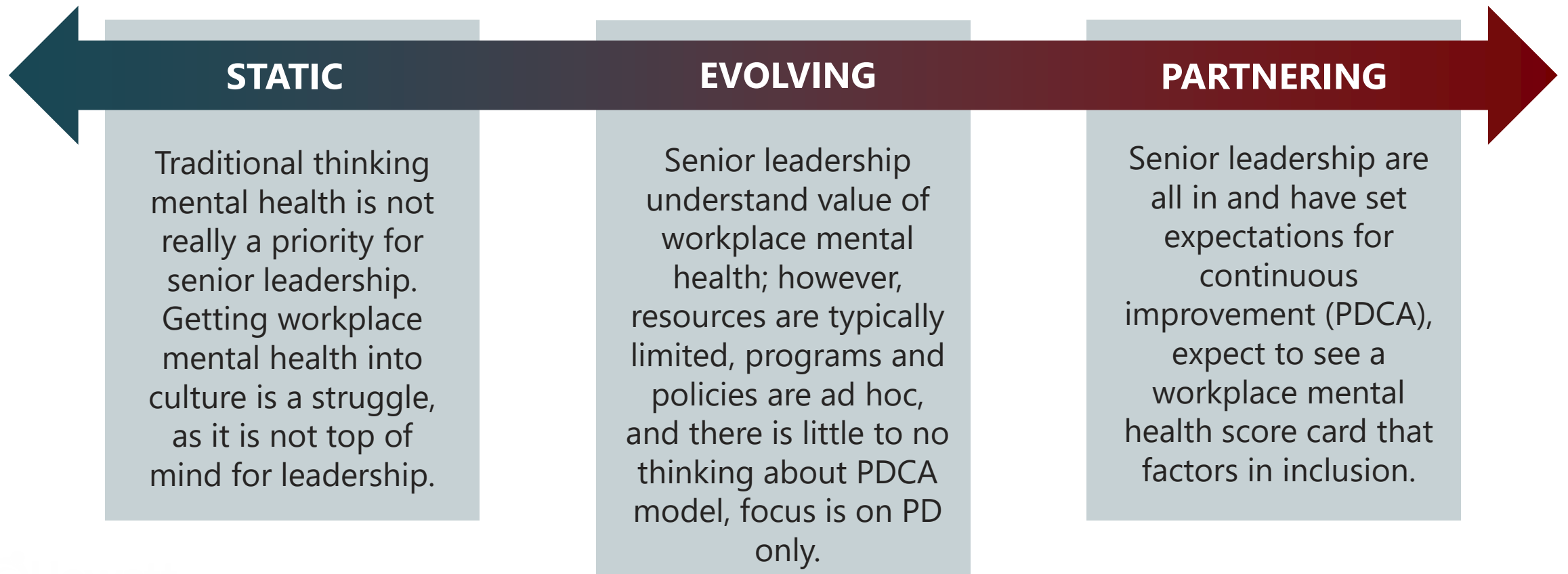
# What Employers Can Do to Have Impact





# Maturity Model: Where do you estimate your organization is today?

The organization's maturity and readiness to change to implement PHS is a factor for success.



# Employers Can Facilitate Protective Factors

To curb workplace mental requires employers being strategic in their objectives one issue at a time. To provide the right treatment requires having the right diagnosis. Having behavioral/perceptual data is beneficial for decision making.

*Critical thinking is required for evidence-based impact:*

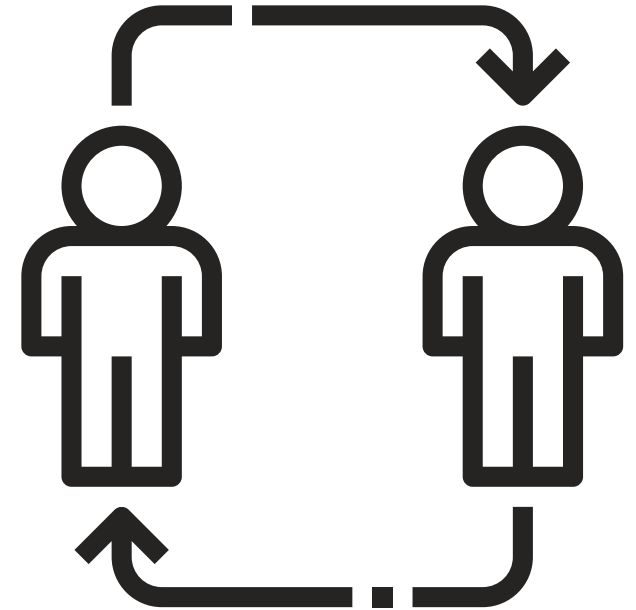
- Do our inhouse psychological safe facilitators have the necessary competencies for facilitating psychological health and safety?
- What psychosocial factor are risk factors based on what data?
- What psychosocial hazards risk are showing up in the workplace?
- What workplace mental health protective factors (i.e., behaviours, programs, and policies) are in place now?
- What evidence protective factors are working based on what evidence?
- What options are available with in employers' resources and budget to mitigate risk and to promote mental health?

# Moving from Transactional to Transformational

Activity alone is not enough to create habits required to create a psychological safe workplace. Commitment and follow up no different than OHS. Psychological health is no different than physical health to develop new habits requires time, practice, and re-enforcement.

## **Mental health prevention program example:**

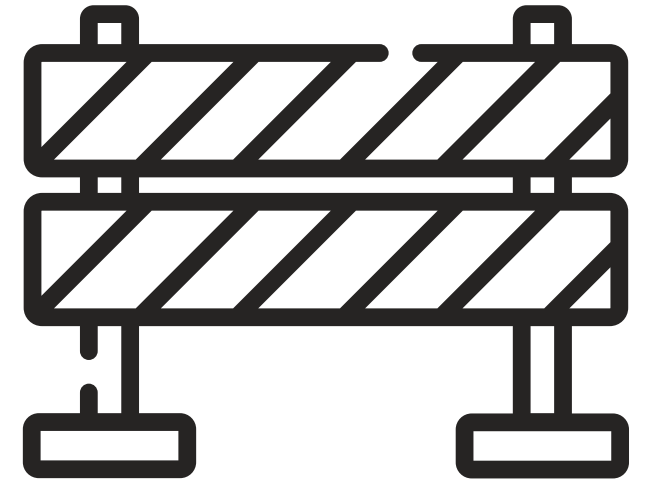
- Training workers in a three-hour resiliency course verse providing workers an opportunity to engage in a 12 month mental fitness programming are not remotely equally for developing skills and habits.
- *Workers who learn how to improve their psychological resilience by just 5% decrease their risk of a mental illness diagnosis by 10%-15%.*



# Barriers that Inhibit Success

Why many employers' workplace mental health initiatives fail to have impact is because of the lack of consideration for what barriers may be inhibiting potential and success. By engaging workers and getting their point of view employers can better understand what if any risk the below barriers may be playing both positively and negatively.

- Employee motivation to change
- Mental health Stigma
- Lack of understanding on the link between psychological safety and mental health (e.g., role environment has on employee experience).
- Degree leadership buys and values workplace mental health
- Leadership role the value of self care (e.g., take vacations).
- Privacy concerns
- Lack of variety or consideration for personalized programming as no two employees have the same needs
- Accessibility to programs challenges (i.e., access to technology, scheduling)
- Programs implicit bias
- Psychological safe facilitators competency
- No formal process for auditing and validating programs with workers
- Lack of consideration for how to facilitate program adherence



# Employers Will Likely Continue to Invest

Allied Market Research, the global Corporate/Workplace Wellness Industry generated \$49.81 billion in 2019 and is expected to reach \$66.20 billion by 2027, registering a CAGR of 5.9% from 2020 to 2027.

Moving from action to search for evidence.

## **Recommendations to increase workplace mental health initiatives success:**

- Ensure mental health strategy accounts for Barriers
- Adopt a Plan – Do – Check – Act approach to workplace mental health.
- Less is more. Accept activity does equal outcomes. Pick one or two prevention initiatives and focus on them and search for evidence they are working.
- Adherence accept this is a majorly challenge. To get people to change is hard. Population health improvements are complex and require taking an evidence-based approach.



# WORKPLACE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY ASSESSMENT (WPSA)

Gaining a baseline understanding of your employees' experience and engagement in the workplace is key to choosing the best way forward to support their mental well-being. This assessment provides behavioural base data drawn from measures of diversity, inclusion, psychological safety and more.

**For more information visit:**

<https://www.howatthr.com/workplace-psychological-safety-assessment/>



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## EXPLORING WORKPLACE MENTAL HEALTH

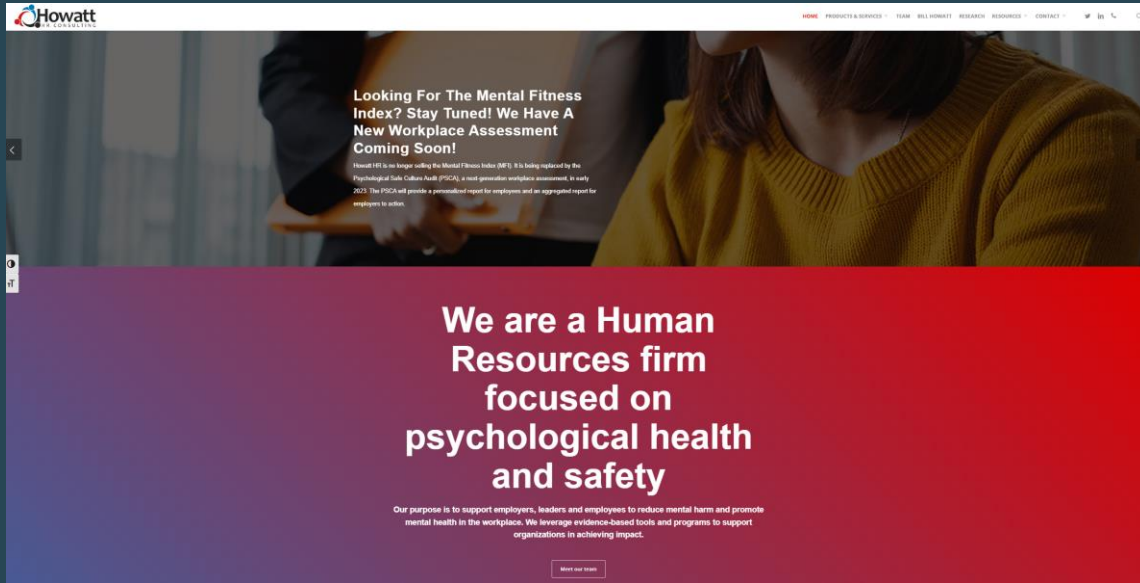
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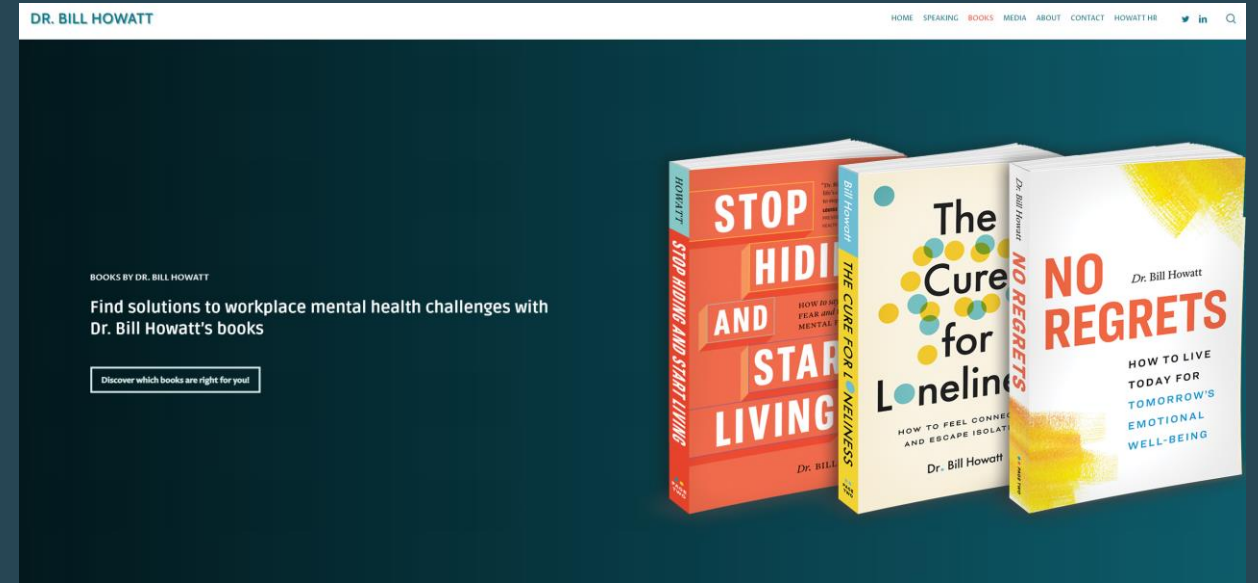
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# For More Information



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*One of my favorite activities today is coaching employers on how to create psychological safe cultures where employees come to work with purpose, feel psychological safe and flourish.*

*Dr. Bill Howatt*



# Questions?

