



# **Supporting Mental Health in First Responders:**

## **Risk Factors for Work Disability**

**Ohio Fire Chiefs Association  
Materials Provided By  
[BCFirstRespondersMentalHealth.com](http://BCFirstRespondersMentalHealth.com)**

# Introduction

Work disability refers to the loss of some or all functional work ability and activity consequent to impairment. While a mental health condition alone can have a direct impact on the ability of an employee to remain in the workplace, there are usually other factors that will also affect that outcome. These are risk factors for work disability — health, personal, and environmental factors that can negatively affect an employee's ability to remain in or return to the workplace.

There are a large number of these risk factors but only some can be influenced and mitigated by an organization, particularly an employee's supervisor. This document focuses on those risk factors that an organization can potentially help to mitigate, and provides tips to supervisors on how to mitigate them. It's important to realize that the relevance and significance of each of these factors varies for each employee and can also vary over the course of a disability. A supervisor can only influence, these and no steps are guaranteed to be effective at removing a risk factor. But with awareness and action around these risk factors, the risk of disability can be reduced.

## Risk factors

### 1. Health care provider expectations of recovery and return to work

The employee's health care provider — whether that be a physician, a psychologist, or another qualified professional — has a profound impact on the likelihood of an employee returning to work. Most people have a lot of trust in the advice health care providers give, and if that provider doesn't believe an employee can remain in the workplace, there is a significant risk that the employee will remain off work. Of course, sometimes this is the correct course of action. But sometimes it is because the health care provider doesn't understand the organization and its ability to support an employee's recovery.

Here are some tips to alter health care provider expectations:

- Explain to employees that the organization, and you personally, are committed to providing support so they can remain in the workplace. Highlight the organization's mental health and workplace accommodation policies and the benefits available. Direct them to speak to their provider about these.
- Provide employees with a letter to take to their health care providers, along with a clear job demands analysis, explaining that the organization is committed to supporting employee and providing any reasonable workplace accommodations to job demands as well as the available benefits. (Note: the organization should have clear job demands analyses, including both physical and mental demands, for key positions.)
- Advise employees to consult their union or association representatives.

- With the permission of the employee, offer to speak to health care providers directly if they'd like to discuss the employee's job duties and how these can be modified. Make sure to explain to the employee the exact scope of the conversation — it should not include the worker's diagnosis and specific medical issues but should focus only on abilities and limitations, highlighting privacy requirements. If possible, have the employee take part in this conversation.

## 2. Employee expectations of recovery and return to work

Just as health care providers' expectations have an influence on employees returning to work, employees' own expectations have an influence on this as well. It will affect their attitudes towards the return-to-work process and how they engage in it. Most importantly, their expectations will influence the return-to-work expectations of their health care providers.

Here are some tips to alter employee expectations:

- Explain to employees that the organization, and you personally, are committed to providing support so they can remain in the workplace. Highlight the organization's mental health and workplace accommodation policies and the benefits available. (Note: organizations should have these in place.)
- Exhibit flexibility and understanding towards employees. Explain to them that they play an active part in the process and can collaborate in developing solutions.
- Ask them what is keeping them from work, what job activities they think they could do, and what job activities they think would be the most difficult.
- Explain the return to work process clearly and simply.

## 3. Disability beliefs — Fear of recurrence

An employee who has a mental health condition may fear that work will result in a recurrence of the condition or will exacerbate the condition. This may prevent a worker from returning to work. It is important to have a conversation with workers about those fears, ensuring you actively listen to their concerns.

Here are some tips to alter disability beliefs:

- Ask employees about the fears they have, and about job duties or aspects of the workplace they fear will affect their mental health.
- Explore the likelihood of those things arising while they are in the workplace.
- Explore solution with employees, involving appropriate stakeholders such as the worker representative and disability advisor, to determine what changes can be made to their work to alleviate those fears.

## 4. Job satisfaction

The satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, employees have with their current job also can influence return to work when employees experience a mental health condition. Unfortunately, these can be deep-rooted problems, affected by job duties, career aspirations, organizational culture, pay, and/or relationships with the supervisor and co-workers. This limits the

effectiveness of other actions taken by an organization once an employee experiences a mental health condition.

Here are some tips to alter job satisfaction:

- Communicate regularly with employees while they're off work or while they're at work with a mental health condition.
- Ensure they know that their health is your top priority.
- Ensure they feel appreciated, especially while undertaking modified duties.
- Ensure they have adequate instruction to carry out any modified duty.
- Alleviate concerns that their mental health condition might affect their future job progression.

## 5. Supervisor support

Having the support of a supervisor can have a meaningful impact on the wellbeing of employees. This support needs to be meaningful — both through the conversations they have and the actions taken by the supervisor.

Here are some tips to improve supervisor support:

- Show concern for employees' health and wellbeing. Take the issue seriously and make it a priority.
- Meet with employees regularly to discuss their concerns.
- Listen to employee actively and allow them to contribute their thoughts and ideas to workplace accommodations.
- Support reasonable accommodations and ensure employees have sufficient time to seek treatment.

## 6. Co-worker support

Co-workers and their attitudes are a key component for successful reintegration into the workplace. The supervisor (or line manager) plays a key role in building this support, managing the occupational relationship between the employee and their co-workers. It is important that this is considered a key job task for the supervisor and is given the attention it deserves.

Here are some tips to ensure co-worker support:

- If job duties are reassigned due to workplace accommodations, spread the additional workload among as many co-workers as possible so no one individual carries too much of this responsibility.
- Clearly communicate employees' accommodations and limitations to co-workers if it affects their work or how long the employees are expected to be off work, within the bounds of confidentiality.
- Have an open and collaborative communication style that encourages co-workers to communicate their needs and concerns with the supervisor
- Address stigmatization and negative talk.

More information can be found in the document *Co-Worker Support in Stay at Work/Return to Work*.

## 7. Work-life balance issues

The inability of employees to manage their mental health condition, their work, and their personal life can often lead to disability. When choosing between those three, employees will often prioritize their personal responsibilities (e.g., family) and their mental health over their work. There are limits to what a supervisor can do to help restore this balance, though it's important to be aware how this may be contributing to disability. You can refer them to strong, appropriate, and extensive resource supports. You are only required to do what is reasonable — there are limits to that in order to ensure the operations of the workplace are not unduly affected. These tips are just suggestions and should be taken in the context of the overall needs of the workplace.

Here are some tips to help in restoring balance:

- Consider more flexible hours so that employees can seek treatment and take care of family responsibilities.
- Consider solutions such as working from home.
- Refer the employee to your EFAP provider, which may help employees find family support services such as day care, home support services, parenting resources, compassionate care, eldercare resources, or residential care options.

## 8. Co-morbidities (other existing physical and mental health conditions)

Employees who are facing multiple physical or mental health conditions will inherently face greater challenges when trying to reintegrate into the workforce. It is important to understand that having multiple health issues can exacerbate other health issues. Sometimes this requires addressing multiple health challenges, not just the triggering mental health condition.

Here are some tips to help address co-morbidities:

- Tell employees to discuss all their health issues with their health care provider and to have limitations due to these included in the Work Ability Assessment Form.
- Collaborate with the employee to develop any reasonable accommodations for those limitations in addition to the triggering mental health condition.

## 9. Catastrophization

Sometimes people can think that their conditions are far more serious or disabling than they actually are. The role of the supervisor is not to act as a psychologist in these matters. It is important to stay positive and supportive, and seek assistance from the appropriate resources if you feel an issue is beyond your ability.

Here are some tips to help reduce catastrophization:

- Talk in positive terms.
- Focus on the employees' abilities, rather than limitations or restrictions.

- Maintain regular contact with employees to get updates on their recovery.
- Provide timely accommodations and ensure the process is quick. The longer employees are off work, the more likely they are to view their condition as disabling.

## 10. Perceived injustice

Perceived injustice can occur when people feel like their human rights are violated, their notions of equity or beliefs are challenged, or when they believe their suffering or losses have been caused by someone. This can interfere with the employee's willingness to engage in treatment or actively engage in the accommodation process. Similar to catastrophization, the role of the supervisor is not to act as a psychologist in these matters.

Here are some tips to help reduce the effect of perceptions of injustice:

- Ensure that the process is transparent and that relevant stakeholders, including the worker's representative, are involved.
- Ensure all decisions related to workplace accommodations and any claims adjudication are clear and can be easily understood by the employee.
- Ensure that all processes are followed and agreement is sought with the employee if any are deviated from.

## 11. Lack of family and community support

Support from one's family and community can help ameliorate the most severe effects of a mental health condition. Unfortunately, not everyone has that type of support outside of the workplace. Although the supervisor cannot provide that additional support, there are a few things they can do.

Here are some tips to enhance support outside of the workplace:

- Provide the employee with a list of community resources that can offer support.
- Refer the employee to any workplace peer support programs that may exist.
- Refer the employee to the organization's EFAP provider. (Note: organizations should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their EFAP provider and any other workplace programs such as peer support programs.)

## 12. Substance use disorders

The co-occurrence of a substance use disorder and another mental health disorder can result in special needs with regards to reintegration in the workplace. Once disclosed, supervisors need to both acknowledge and accommodate for substance use disorders. As with any other health issue, confidentiality around this is required.

Here are some tips to address substance use disorders:

- If you think the employee may have a substance use disorder, contact your HR department.
- Refer employees to the organization's alcohol and drug program.
- Maintain contact, if allowed, with employees if they need to take leave to attend a treatment program, assuring them that their job is secure.
- Refer employees to the organization's EFAP provider.

- Make employees aware of the organization's alcohol and drug policy and the benefits and supports the organization offers in these matters.
- Ensure safety if employees may be a danger to themselves or others in the workplace.

## 13. Coping style

Sometimes an employee may cope with a mental health disorder through avoidance and a high degree of passivity. This can interfere with the return to work process if the employee doesn't engage in it sufficiently.

Here are some tips to mitigate avoidant or passive coping styles:

- Ask open-ended questions with developing workplace accommodations.
- Ensure employees provide their own ideas on how to reintegrate into the workplace, and actively collaborate in the organization's processes. (Note: it may be necessary to seek input from the health care provider to ensure they are ready to be at work.)
- Maintain regular contact with employees and don't wait for them to bring concerns to you.