

New Zealand workplace study shows more than quarter of employees feel depressed much of the time

August 21 2019, by Professor Tim Bentley



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According to the World Health organization ([WHO](#)), the workplace can be a positive force for improving mental health.

But many workers are exposed to [work environments](#) that are [damaging to their psychological health](#) and leave them burnt out. As the nature of work changes—including technological advancements, reduced job security, and blurred work/non-work boundaries—[psychosocial harm is likely to increase](#).

Despite their popularity, many wellness initiatives directed towards "stressed" workers simply help people to [cope a little longer with a toxic and damaging environment](#). The underlying risks remain.

The New Zealand Workplace Barometer ([NZWB](#)) seeks to understand the causes of psychosocial risks—factors that encompass mental, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of what it means to be healthy.

We have [found](#) that more than a quarter of employees experience depression, but that a strong psychological safety climate is the most effective way to manage [mental health](#) at work.

Why we need a workplace barometer

Psychosocial risk factors include aspects of work design, the organization and management of work, and work relationships. Evidence from New Zealand and elsewhere [shows](#) that these factors considerably increase the risk of negative psychological, physical or social outcomes, including work-related stress, burnout or depression.

Despite these findings, there has been no comprehensive approach to understanding or preventing these risk factors in New Zealand before the introduction of the NZWB in 2018.

Its primary aim is to produce information on the prevalence, nature and impacts of psychosocial risk factors in the New Zealand workplace so organizations can improve worker health by attacking any problems at their source. But the NZWB also has an important engagement function, working closely with industry.

Participating organizations receive individual reports to monitor their performance over time and benchmark against other organizations. They also receive advice on how to improve their risk profile. This engagement has motivated preventive action and the inclusion of psychosocial risks in workplace health and safety policies and initiatives.

Key findings from year one

The NZWB is underpinned by the theory of psychosocial safety climate ([PSC](#)). This reflects the balance of concern management shows for workers' [psychological health](#) versus their productivity. It is a strong predictor of stress-related illness.

Findings from the NZWB's [initial year](#) of data draw on a sample of 25 organizations and 1,409 individual workers. We found that workplace mental health had a debilitating influence on the lives of study participants. More than a quarter felt depressed much of the time and a half said depression affected their work or non-work lives to some extent. Worryingly, these problems made life "very or extremely difficult" for nearly 8 percent of our sample.

The costs to organizations were also considerable. People who reported the highest psychological distress had up to 3.5 times more days off work than those with the least level of stress.

As expected, the psychosocial safety climate was significantly related to health outcomes, with lower reporting of depression, psychological

distress and physical health issues associated with higher PSC. These findings are critically important in understanding how mental health and stress-related illnesses might be addressed by improving workplace conditions.

Also worth noting is that the psychosocial safety climate had a powerful impact on organizational outcomes such as work engagement and leave intentions of workers. This provides further incentives for organizations to build a strong psychosocial safety climate.

Workplace bullying

Workplace bullying prevalence has remained [persistently high in New Zealand](#) compared to other countries. Our study found 12.2 percent of respondents were targeted with at least two negative behaviors weekly over the a period of six months.

Although this figure is somewhat lower than the rate of between 15-18 percent found in [previous New Zealand studies](#) by the [Healthy Work Group](#), bullying remains a concern. Our study found a strong relationship between bullying, mental health and organizational outcomes.

Interestingly, given the changing nature of how employees communicate and interact at work, we found that the prevalence of cyberbullying was relatively low. Just under 3 percent of our sample experienced this emerging risk.

The prevalence of sexual harassment was approximately 3 percent, although women experienced higher rates (4%). This mode of workplace ill-treatment should get further attention.

Inclusion has not previously featured as a variable of interest in major studies of workplace health. We found that workers' perception of

inclusion is a powerful predictor of a number of psychosocial risks, including job stress, work engagement, workplace bullying and depression.

This finding suggests the need for greater attention to diversity and inclusion within organizations as this will enhance workers' experience of work. It appears to be a protective factor.

The workplace can be a positive influence on worker mental health, but achieving this means paying attention to the work environment itself and not just helping staff to build resilience to cope with highly stressful and poorly led workplaces. The NZWB seeks to understand the deep causes of workplace mental health and offers positive solutions to enhance individual and organizational outcomes.

It is our hope more New Zealand organizations will join the free program in 2019, as a first step towards building a strong psychosocial safety culture and address key hazards in the [workplace](#).

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