



Supporting Staff Recovery and Return to Work after a Psychological Injury

Introduction

The Black Dog Institute has released a free Workplace Recovery Toolkit to support employers managing psychological injury in the workplace. It is a valuable resource and well worth exploring.

However, when managing an active situation, it is not always clear what to do first or how to apply the guidance in practice. [Workplace Recovery Toolkit](#)

At GSS, we have reviewed the toolkit and supporting resources and distilled the most critical actions into a clear, practical sequence. This guide focuses on what managers need in the moment, not just theory, but simple, usable steps.

Where additional support is required, GSS can assist organisations to navigate complex situations and ensure responses are effective and aligned with work health and safety (WHS) obligations.

Why this matters?

The average psychological injury keeps someone away from work for 35.7 weeks, nearly five times longer than other injury types.

For companies already operating with limited capacity, this has a significant operational impact.

Early, informed action by a manager is one of the most effective ways to reduce both the duration and impact of psychological injury.

Why this is a work health and safety issue?

Supporting staff through psychological injury is not just good practice, it is a work health and safety responsibility.

Under WHS legislation, organisations must ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the health and safety of workers, including psychological health. This includes identifying and managing psychosocial hazards, not just responding after someone becomes unwell.

Common psychosocial hazards include:

- high or sustained workloads
- exposure to traumatic material
- low levels of support
- unclear roles or expectations
- workplace conflict

These risks must be managed using a standard risk management approach:

- identify hazards
- assess risks
- implement control measures
- review whether those controls are working



What this guide focuses on

This guide is designed to support situations where someone may be struggling or already off work due to a psychological injury.

It outlines what managers should do early, and what needs to happen before and during a return to work.

The steps are practical, while aligning with WHS requirements to manage psychosocial risks through early intervention, appropriate adjustments, and addressing underlying workplace factors.

The Role of Managers and GSS

Supporting staff through psychological injury is a shared responsibility.

Managers are often the first to notice when something is not quite right. GSS can support managers by providing guidance and ensuring responses are consistent, informed and aligned with WHS obligations.

Managers focus on the day-to-day

Managers are closest to the work and the team. Their role is to:

- notice early warning signs
- have safe, respectful conversations
- adjust work where needed
- maintain regular contact and support

Early, informed action by managers is one of the most effective ways to reduce the impact and duration of psychological injury.

GSS can provide structure and oversight

We can provide support to managers by ensuring responses are:

- consistent across teams
- aligned with WHS and HR requirements
- focused on both the individual and the workplace

This includes:

- providing guidance on psychosocial risks and WHS obligations
- supporting identification of workplace factors contributing to injury
- assisting with return-to-work planning
- advising on reasonable adjustments and risk controls
- ensuring appropriate documentation and processes are followed
- escalating risks where broader organisational action is required

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Step	What to do	Resources & Templates
Step 1	Notice it and name it - By the time someone goes on leave, something has usually been noticeable for some time. - Checking in early is the best way to prevent escalation and potentially avoid time off work. Focus on what you observe, not what you assume: “I’ve noticed you’ve been quieter in team meetings — I just wanted to check in.” - If performance issues also exist, keep those conversations separate. Stay focused on behaviours rather than assumptions.	Early Warning Signs of Mental Health Problems at Work Managing Mental Health Conversations
Step 2	Make contact early - If the person is already on leave, reach out early — even informally. A simple message such as: “I just wanted to check in — I’m here if you want to talk” can make a significant difference to recovery. - Focus on listening, not fixing. - Encourage them to connect with appropriate supports such as a GP or EAP if they have not already done so.	When an Employee Discloses a Mental Health Problem File Note Template — Contacting Absent Employees
Step 3	Adjust the workload - Support recovery by adapting work to match the person’s current capacity. Think about the type of work, not just the volume. Consider: - reducing high emotional load tasks temporarily - simplifying decision-making responsibilities - prioritising lower-demand or routine work Ask: “What would support look like for you right now?” and “What parts of your role are feeling most difficult?” - Be realistic about what adjustments can be made. - Clear expectations build trust and reduce uncertainty.	Reasonable Adjustments Identifying Suitable Duties
Step 4	Fix the workplace, not just the person - You cannot send someone back into the same conditions that contributed to the injury. - Before they return, take time to identify and address any workplace factors that may have played a role.	Primary Factors and Psychosocial Safety Hazards Identifying, Assessing, Controlling and Reviewing Hazards

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Step	What to do	Resources & Templates
	Under WHS obligations, risks arising from work design, workload, exposure to trauma and workplace relationships must be managed. Ask: • Was the workload realistic? • Were supervision and debriefs happening? • Was vicarious trauma being managed? • Were there unresolved conflicts? If the risk is still there, the risk of re-injury remains. • Fixing the workplace does not always require large changes. Often, it involves practical adjustments such as: • clearer priorities • reduced exposure to high-impact work • stronger supervision and support • regular, structured check-ins	 Risk Management & Assessment Sample Templates
Step 5	Build a plan together and keep reviewing it • Develop a return-to-work plan before the person returns. • This should be done collaboratively, with input from the employee and, where appropriate, their treating health professional. The plan should include: • suitable duties and any tasks to avoid • agreed workplace adjustments • what the team will (and will not) be told • a check-in schedule and review date • The first few weeks back are critical. Recovery is rarely linear, so build flexibility into the plan and adjust as needed. • Wherever possible, involve the employee in planning. • Consultation supports better outcomes and is a key part of managing health and safety risks effectively.	  Safe Work Australia RTW Plan — fillable template  Updating Colleagues on Return to Work Plans  Recover at Work Plan — Sample Template  Return to Work Discussion Template

The best toolkit is one you never need to use – We can help!

This guide is designed for situations where a psychological injury has already occurred.

However, the most effective approach is proactive by identifying psychosocial risks early, putting effective risk management processes in place, recognising early warning signs, and supporting staff before issues escalate.

For organisations, where high emotional demands, vicarious trauma and resource pressures are part of the work, this is not a “nice-to-have”. It is what protects both your people and your organisation.

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GSS can support this proactive approach by helping organisations to:

- assess and manage psychosocial risks
- implement practical risk management frameworks
- strengthen early intervention strategies
- guide managers through complex situations
- support recovery and return-to-work processes

Whether strengthening systems proactively or supporting an active case, having the right support in place makes a significant difference to outcomes.

If you would like to explore how this support could be applied within your organisation, please reach out.

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