

Psychological injuries and returning to work

Work-related psychological injuries require unique treatment methods and approaches. A safe return-to-work considers both the compensable physical and psychological fitness of a worker. Providing modifications and/or work accommodations can help your worker feel supported to engage in a meaningful modified return-to-work plan.

Psychological injuries

Claim owners determine entitlement for a psychological injury. These claims are accepted when a worker has a confirmed psychological diagnosis that was caused by:

- **Traumatic event** – direct personal experience or witnessing an event that is reasonable assessed as that is sudden/ unexpected, frightening, or shocking, occurred at a specific time and place, and involved actual or threatened death or serious injury to oneself or others or was a threat to one's physical integrity (e.g., assault, motor vehicle accident).
- **Emotional reaction to an accepted physical injury** – psychological injury (may develop in response to a compensable physical injury or treatment).
- **Chronic onset** – objectively confirmed events that are excessive or unusual compared to normal pressures and tensions of work that accumulate over time, have lasted a long time, or include repeated incidents of objectionable or unwelcome conduct, comment, bullying, or action intended to intimidate, offend, degrade, or humiliate a particular group or person.
- **Presumptive coverage for correctional officers, firefighters, paramedics, peace officers, or police officers, or any other of class of worker prescribed by the regulations** – if a worker has a confirmed PTSD diagnosis or other traumatic psychological injury, it is presumed, in part, the diagnosis resulted from their job, unless there is evidence to the contrary (as of January 1, 2021, see Policy 03-01 for other periods for which presumptions apply).

Our goal is to quickly identify and treat work-related psychological injuries. Suitable modified work is part of the treatment plan.

Psychological injuries & WCB policy

- **Compensable work restrictions** (limitations in fitness for work capabilities) are based on an assessment of medical conditions (physical and/or psychological) which resulted from the compensable work-related injury. Work restrictions impair a worker's capability to perform date of accident work duties. WCB-Alberta identifies work restrictions based on medical and vocational information regarding the worker. The outlined fitness-for-work capabilities can be permanent or temporary in nature (Policy 04-05). **Compensable work restrictions must be accommodated within the modified work/position.**
- **Barriers** are non-compensable factors that may limit the success of a return-to-work plan or inhibit a worker progressing in their treatment and recovery. The likelihood of success is increased if the barriers are addressed or removed or accommodate in some way. However, they are not the same as medical restrictions and **do not need to be accommodated** within the job. WCB-Alberta will not provide aid when the sole obstacle is non-compensable.

Secondary psychological injuries

Secondary psychological conditions related to the compensable physical injury can arise from the following:

- **Traumatic incident** – the incident that caused the physical injury was traumatic, or the treatment received was traumatic (e.g., worker may have nightmare or flashbacks to these events, there is fear or anxiety about returning to the workplace because of these incidents).
- **Serious injuries** - may result in the loss of body part, reduced physical ability or changes in appearance. The worker may have mood disruptions or anxiety as they adjust to these changes. As well, they may have a fear of movement or reinjury impacting the progression of treatment.
- **Delayed recovery** - workers who experience failed surgery or multiple investigations with slow progress may experience mood disruptions or anxiety related to recovery.

Barriers unrelated to the psychological injury

Barriers not related to the psychological injury usually predates the date of accident or arises from issues unrelated to the work injury.

- Barriers related to the worker's personal life (e.g., divorce, death of a friend or family member, financial stress, family relations).
- Barriers related to pre-existing psychological conditions not made worse by the injury, however, is still requiring ongoing management (e.g., personality or anxiety disorder, schizophrenia).
- Barriers related to the work environment but not the injury such as poor employer/ employee relations, performance management or job dissatisfaction
- Other personal stressors such as financial and/or legal difficulties.

Return to work and psychological injury modified work considerations

Based on the accepted injury(ies), compensable work restrictions identified by the treatment provider, confirmed date of accident job demands (with consensus obtained between the employer and worker), and any barriers which offer additional considerations, WCB-Alberta can assist workers and employers in developing a safe, suitable, and sustainable return-to-work plan. Building a suitable return-to-work plan will expedite a worker's recovery, the return-to-work process, and reduce time-loss claims that can impact premiums.

However, the primary responsibility for determining possible workplace accommodations rests with the date of accident employer.

Due to their nature, work-related psychological injuries require unique approaches. Awareness and sensitivity to the accepted psychological injury(ies) will enhance the likelihood of a safe and sustainable return-to-work. These considerations can vary in duration (temporary or permanent).

- **Workplace accommodations** (e.g., no safety sensitive work, no work with specific populations).
- Work-task accommodations (e.g., perform alternate duties, modify the duties required to complete the job, , partnered/supervised work, self-pacing techniques, reduced volume, no direct supervision of others, assignment to only independent work tasks).
- **Change in work location** (e.g., work on an alternate site, provide a quiet workspace with fewer distractions, modify the triggers in the physical environment). Note, limitations should not preclude a worker from returning to date of accident employer if suitable modified work is available within the outlined capabilities.
- **Change to hours of work and/or days of work or scheduled rest breaks** (e.g., graduated RTW, split shifts, allow for frequent breaks).
- **Remove specific items, objects and/or equipment** (e.g., avoid customer interactions, specific equipment work around forklift or no occupational driving).
- **If needed, worksite-based exposure therapy sessions with occupational therapist** (e.g., allow necessary emotional support during the workday, access to site after hours to remove triggering items prior to full reintegration into the workplace).

Return-to-work planning meeting (RTWPM)

A Return-to-Work Planning Meeting (RTWPM) assists workers, employers, and claim owners (COs) in developing a safe, suitable, and sustainable return-to-work (RTW) plan.

During a RTWPM, a trained clinician will obtain consensus on date-of-accident job demands, initiate return-to-work discussions and explore possible modified work, establish a gradual return to work (GRTW) plan and explore modified work employment options to help ensure the worker can return-to-work safely, gradually and in a timely fashion.

For more information on RTWPMs, see our employer [fact sheet](#).

Cognitive psychosocial job demand analysis

A Cognitive Psychosocial Job Demands Analysis ([CPJDA](#), C1447) is an objective analysis of the essential cognitive and psychosocial components of a job, the resources required to perform the job.

- **Cognitive demands:** tasks that require thinking, information processing, learning, imagining, and anticipating.
- **Psychosocial demands:** includes both psychological and social aspects of work, such as mental, emotional, work environment, and social interactions.

The CPJDA is an important tool to enhance the employer's understanding of the psychological demands and risk factors in the work environment which may impact the worker's wellbeing, psychological safety, and ability to work. It outlines potential workplace and work task accommodations that provide the foundation for a return to timely and safe modified work opportunities to support the worker's recovery.

