

Fit for Duty

We have heard the term 'Fit for Duty' many times throughout our careers, but do we really understand what it means?

One way to talk about being fit for duty refers to having the physical capabilities to perform a job. Most job requirements will require some form of physical exertion. To evaluate whether an applicant for a particular job is physically capable, a Physical Demands Analysis (PDA) can be performed. The applicant will be evaluated based on the predetermined requirements for the job. A PDA can be part of the selection process for hiring employees that would be able to meet the job demands.

The other, more commonly way to refer to being Fit for Duty is in response to impairment, such as being under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs. However, the definition of impairment in the workplace needs to be expanded to include other factors such as:

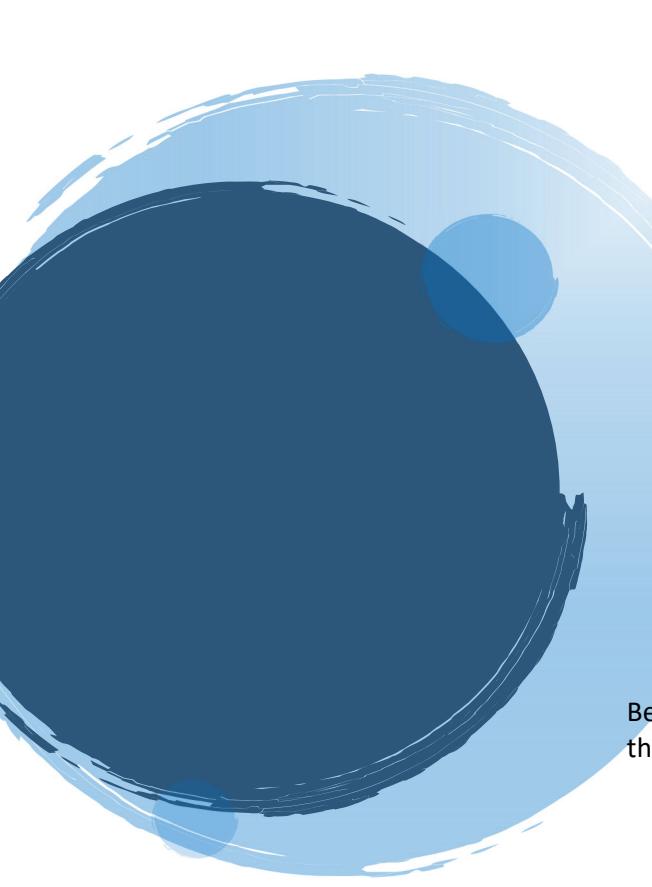
- stress
- Fatigue
- some health conditions, and
- legal or prescription drugs

Any of these factors could alter our ability to maintain alertness due to the side effects that can be associated with them.

Trauma and mental illness are also psychosocial factors that could result in impairment. Psychosocial factors are not as easily identifiable as an odor of alcohol, slurred speech, or stumbling - the common signs we associate with being impaired.

Stress in the workplace does not exclusively come from the pressures relating to the job. Personal life obstacles and situations are not left at the door when we arrive at work and can play a part in the ability to focus, productivity levels, capacity to keep minds on tasks, emotional state as well as communication. Stress is not a hazard that we instinctively look for in workers and often goes unnoticed. This is very typical in society to not want to burden anyone or open us to any negative feedback.

Any life situation can cause undue negative stress. also referred to as distress, such as the end or disturbance in a relationship, an ailing loved one or the loss of someone close to us. All people fluctuate in and out of times of stress. It is important to identify signs and symptoms of stress to know when it's taking its toll on the body. Symptoms to watch for:

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- Headaches
 - Shortness of breath / tightness in chest
 - Clenching jaws or grinding teeth
 - Feeling tired / anxious / depressed
 - Gastrointestinal issues
 - Increased use of drugs or alcohol
 - Deterioration of appearance

Beyond the physical signs of distress, other ways to detect stressors are things such as:

- decreased attendance
- lack of productivity
- increased agitation

Inability to sleep can lead to increased fatigue. Sleep disruptions can be experienced because of a change in shifts (rotating day vs. night), extended periods of overtime (whether additional days per week or hours per day), repetitive tasks and any interruptions we may experience when we sleep.

We may not be able to control the sleep environment or quality of sleep, however, it is important to evaluate the hazard of increased hours worked due to production needs. Job scheduling helps us plan and coordinate timelines as well as identify if temporary staffing is required. Some companies have an ebb and flow with production versus companies that have a more consistent output, so job planning will look different from company to company. Prior to starting new jobs, have a meeting with the production crew to identify if there could be potential impacts to a person's fit for duty status.

Tasks that are repetitive in nature should be rotated throughout the day or week to reduce the risk of complacency, boredom, or fatigue. Cross training allows for more fluidity when workers are on vacation or away sick, and to reduce potential burnout.

Fatigue is a hazard for the workplace that mimics the effects of having alcohol impairment. A blood alcohol limit of 0.08 - which is the legal alcohol limit in Canada – is comparative to a person's mental state when they have been awake for 21 hours. Fatigue causes our critical thinking ability to reduce and reaction time, and many of our physical and cognitive senses, are dulled.



Not all stress has to be negative. There is a good side to stress, also referred to as eustress. We can be stressed about the birth of a new baby, an upcoming trip, or anything that we're excited and nervous about. Some levels of stress can be an excellent motivator and can be very healthy to experience – so long as we are capable of destressing to maintain mental wellness.

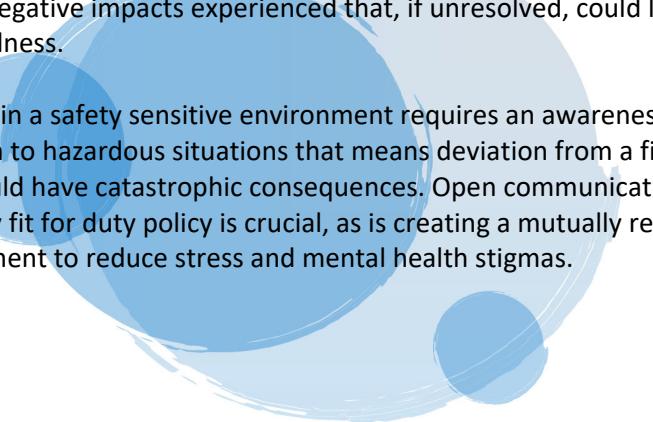
Over the last few years there has been an overwhelming increase in awareness of Mental Health and Wellness in the workplace and it has also changed the structure of how we do business.

Working from home, telecommuting, attending virtual meetings and training are now commonplace, but how has it affected our mental health? Many of us are being reintroduced to working in the office. For some, this is a welcome relief from social isolation. For others, it is a stressful shift back into work society.

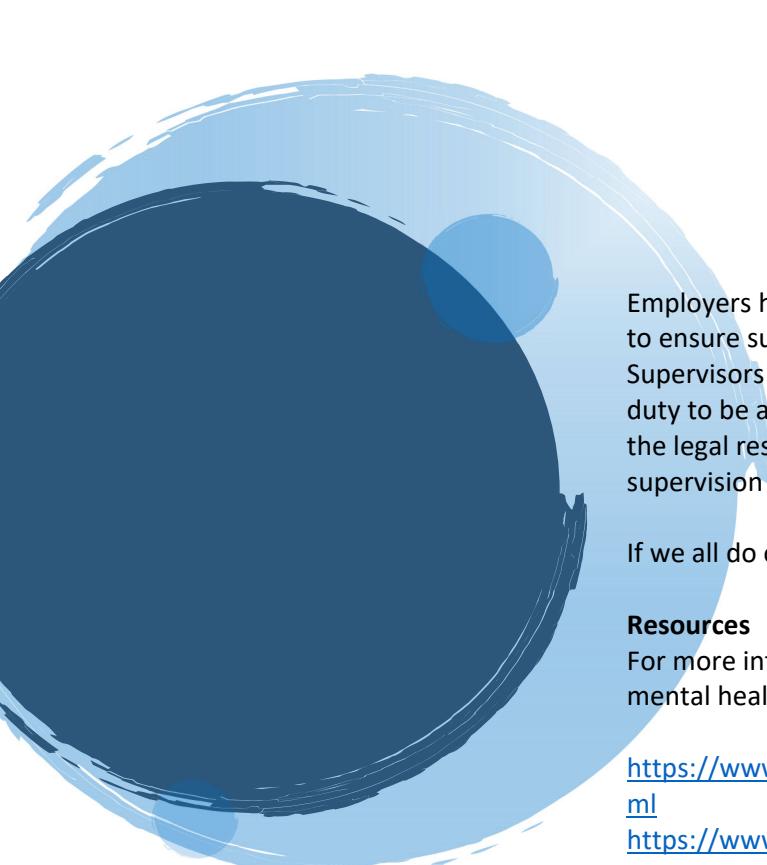
While the shift in the structure of the workplace has increased awareness around mental health, stress, and fatigue, if left unattended, they can affect mental health. Mental health is a delicate topic that carries a lot of stigmas that prevent us from seeking help. Especially for some generations or cultures where it is not something to be discussed openly, and rather kept to ourselves.

There are resources that can be provided to employees such as an Employee Assistance Program that can be part of your benefits package that can be used to seek help for mental health and other life challenges.

In addition, Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) can be utilized after a traumatic incident in the workplace. Many incidents that can occur at the workplace can be considered traumatic such as witnessing someone having a cardiac episode or seizure. CISM is most effective when a counselor addresses the workplace within 72 hours of an incident to debrief workers and discuss the normal symptoms that some people may experience following a significant event. Such as sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal disruptions, uncontrollable emotions to name a few. Prompt CISM can help reduce negative impacts experienced that, if unresolved, could lead to mental illness.



Working in a safety sensitive environment requires an awareness and attention to hazardous situations that means deviation from a fit for duty state could have catastrophic consequences. Open communication of company fit for duty policy is crucial, as is creating a mutually respectful work environment to reduce stress and mental health stigmas.



Employers have the responsibility to set clear expectations of fit for duty and to ensure supervisors and workers are supported in executing the policy. Supervisors have a responsibility to ensure workers arrive and remain fit for duty to be able to meet moral and legislated responsibilities. Workers have the legal responsibility to arrive at work fit for duty and to report to supervision when these requirements cannot be met.

If we all do our part to work safely, we can all go home safe.

Resources

For more information on fatigue, fit for duty, workplace impairment or mental health, please use the resources listed below.

<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/impairment/impairment.html>

<https://www.alberta.ca/impairment-workplace>

<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Health/pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=abq4925>

<https://coaa.ab.ca/document/canadian-model-version-6-0/>

<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/fatigue.html>

<https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/>



For more information, reach out to one of our knowledgeable Safety Advisors, today! Visit www.mhsa.ab.ca for regional contact information.

Courses offered to further educate workers, supervisors, and employers on the topic of Fitness for Duty:

- DER training: Developing & Managing Fit for Duty Policy & Program
- Reasonable Cause Supervisor Training
- Hazard Assessment
- Leading Safety

