Meredith Boucher began working for Wal-Mart in 1999. She was well regarded and received a number of promotions over the years. In 2008, she was made a Lead Assistant Manager in a Windsor, Ontario, store. Initially, her relationship with the Store Manager, Jason Pinnock, was positive and her performance appraisals were glowing. Then, in May 2009, Pinnock asked Boucher to falsify a log recording temperature in meat and dairy coolers. Boucher refused. Pinnock, who was worried the incomplete logs would negatively affect the store's ratings in an upcoming inspection, subjected Boucher to a disciplinary meeting. Concerned about this unfair reprisal, Boucher approached a superior to express her concerns. When Pinnock learned of the complaint, “he subjected her to an unrelenting and increasing torrent of abuse. He regularly used profane language when he spoke to her. He belittled her. He demeaned her in front of other employees. He even called in other employees so he had an audience when he berated her and showed his disdain for her.”

Boucher complained of Pinnock’s escalating harassment to senior management. Their investigation found her complaint was “unsubstantiated” and they threatened her with discipline for making the complaint.

Pinnock’s behaviour and Wal-Mart’s lack of response negatively affected Boucher’s health. “She said that she was stressed out. She could not eat or

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define psycho-social hazard and its effects on the health and safety of workers.
- Explain the causes and consequences of stress and fatigue in the workplace.
- Discuss the factors related to workplace violence and the effectiveness of prevention programs.
- Explain the root causes of bullying and how to properly manage bullying and harassment.
- Identify the hazards associated with working alone and discuss strategies for controlling them.
Meredith Boucher began working for Wal-Mart in 1999. She was well regarded and received a number of promotions over the years. In 2008, she was made a Lead Assistant Manager in a Windsor, Ontario, store. Initially, her relationship with the Store Manager, Jason Pinnock, was positive and her performance appraisals were glowing. Then, in May 2009, Pinnock asked Boucher to falsify a log recording temperature in meat and dairy coolers. Boucher refused. Pinnock, who was worried the incomplete logs would negatively affect the store’s ratings in an upcoming inspection, subjected Boucher to a disciplinary meeting. Concerned about this unfair reprisal, Boucher approached a superior to express her concerns. When Pinnock learned of the complaint, “he subjected her to an unrelenting and increasing torrent of abuse. He regularly used profane language when he spoke to her. He belittled her. He demeaned her in front of other employees. He even called in other employees so he had an audience when he berated her and showed his disdain for her.” Boucher complained of Pinnock’s escalating harassment to senior management. Their investigation found her complaint was “unsubstantiated” and they threatened her with discipline for making the complaint.

Pinnock’s behaviour and Wal-Mart’s lack of response negatively affected Boucher’s health. “She said that she was stressed out. She could not eat or
sleep. She had abdominal pain, constipation and bloating. She lost weight and began vomiting blood. Co-workers testified that Boucher went from a fun-loving, lively, positive leader to a defeated and broken person. On November 18, 2009, Pinnock once again berated Boucher over ten skids of product that were not unloaded. He “grabbed Boucher by the elbow in front of a group of co-workers. He told her to prove to him that she could count to ten.” Boucher was so humiliated that she ran out of the store. She never returned to work. Boucher sued for unfair dismissal. At appeal, she was awarded $300,000 in damages against Wal-Mart and $110,000 against Pinnock. After her departure from the store, Boucher’s health gradually improved.

Workplace harassment—often perpetrated by supervisors on subordinates—is a pervasive issue in workplaces. Wal-Mart’s unwillingness to protect Boucher when she complained is also not uncommon. Interestingly, the hazard posed by harassment and the injury it caused to Boucher were only recognized when she sued her employer, a process entirely separate from Ontario’s OHS and workers’ compensation systems. The case demonstrates both that workplace harassment has real health consequences and that employers are often reluctant to recognize psycho-social hazards as legitimate health and safety concerns.

Psycho-social hazards are the social and psychological factors that negatively affect worker health and safety. Psycho-social hazards can be hard to isolate in the workplace because they reside in the dynamics of human interactions and within the internal world of an individual’s psyche. Yet it is increasingly recognized that social and psychological aspects of work have real and measurable effects on workers’ health. Harassment, bullying, and violence are examples of psycho-social hazards. Other forms include stress, fatigue, and overwork. Even the absence of social interaction, in the form of working alone, produces its own hazards. Much of the challenge is recognizing that these hazards pose real threats to workers’ health. This chapter examines the types of psycho-social hazards and discusses their impact on health and safety.

**STRESS AND FATIGUE**

We all experience stress at some point in our lives. _Stress_ is a change in our physical and mental state in response to situations we perceive as challenging or threatening. Situations causing stress are known as _stressors_. Stress can
have a positive effect, making us more alert or more prepared to take on an important challenge. Stress can also have a negative effect, causing a range of physical and mental ailments. There are four types of stressors:

- **Acute stressors** are time-specific events of high intensity and short duration that occur infrequently, such as a performance review, a car accident, or an unexpected encounter.

- **Episodic (or daily) stressors** may be similar to acute stressors but occur more frequently, have a longer duration, and may be of lower intensity. Making repeated requests of a worker to work overtime is an example of an episodic stressor.

- **Chronic stressors** are stressors that persist over a sustained period of time, and include job insecurity, work overload, or lack of control.

- **Catastrophic stressors** are a subset of acute stressors but differ in their intensity, threatening life, safety, or property. Robbery and physical assault are examples of catastrophic stressors.

Stress can arise from all aspects of our lives, including our work. **Workplace stress** is stress that is brought on by work-related stressors. Canadians report work to be the biggest source of life stress. Almost three quarters of Canadian workers report that their work entails some stress, with 27% reporting that work is “quite a bit” or “extremely” stressful. The most frequently identified workplace stressors are heavy workloads, low salaries, lack of opportunity, unrealistic or uncertain job expectations, and lack of control over work. Researchers typically identify five factors contributing to workplace stress:

1. characteristics of the job being performed, such as workload, pace, autonomy, and physical working conditions,

2. a worker’s level of responsibility in the workplace, including the clarity of their role,

3. job (in)security, promotion, and career development opportunities,

4. problematic interpersonal work relationships with supervisors, co-workers, or subordinates, including harassment and discrimination, and
5. overall organizational structure and climate, including organizational communication patterns, management style, and participation in decision making (job control).

These five factors demonstrate that workplace stress arises out of situations and events within the employer’s control. This, in turn, makes the occurrence of workplace stress an occupational health and safety issue.

Workplace stress produces a range of physical and mental health effects. Early physical signs of negative stress include increased heart rate, sweating, and nausea, reddening of the skin, muscle tension, and headaches. Early emotional and mental effects of negative stress include anxiety, depression, apathy, sleep disturbance, and irritability. Long-lasting or intensifying stress results in a worsening of these symptoms as well as the appearance of new symptoms, such as lasting depression, heart disease, chronic digestive issues, reduced sex drive, uneven metabolism, and increased susceptibility to infectious diseases.

Research led by Robert Karasek has revealed that job control is a key factor in determining how work-related stress affects us. His job demands-control model is explained in Box 6.1. It is also possible for negative effects of stress to manifest themselves in groups of workers and not just individuals, due to workplace dynamics and environment. Group manifestation can arise from so-called toxic workplaces. Toxic workplaces are characterized by “relentless demands, extreme pressure, and brutal ruthlessness,” and represent the extreme of stressful workplace environments.

**Box 6.1 Karasek’s job demands-control model**

Before Robert Karasek’s groundbreaking work, most research into work-related stress focused on the effects of job demands, such as overload. Karasek discovered that the degree of control a worker has in her job plays a significant role in whether job-related stress will be positive or negative and whether ill health results.

Karasek developed a model that analyzed the interaction of job demands with job control. He created a matrix that included four types of work, as illustrated below (adapted from Karasek, 1979).
Low-strain and passive jobs are associated with low stress, although passive jobs can lead to low motivation and dissatisfaction. The important boxes are active jobs, associated with high job demands but where workers possess a high degree of decision latitude (i.e., control) in the work, and high-strain jobs, which contain high demand but little job control. The cumulative effect of working in an active job is that workers builds their ability to cope with stress. Conversely, sustained exposure to high-strain work leads to psychological and physical illness.

Karasek and his research partner later added the concept of “social support” to the model. Social support is the degree of isolation or support provided by both supervisors and co-workers. They found that high levels of social support can mitigate some of the negative effects of high-strain work. They also note that the most hazardous form of work is work combining high demand, low control, and low social support. Karasek found the effects most acute for workers in blue-collar occupations, which typically give workers little job control.

Research into the model has found links between high-strain jobs and high incidence of heart disease, hypertension, mental health
issues, and other negative health outcomes. While men and women experience job strain in similar ways, some recent research suggests that the presence of social support has a stronger effect in ameliorating negative stress effects for women than for men. Also, the stress-buffering effects of job control have a greater impact on older workers than younger workers, suggesting older workers have developed coping techniques that younger workers have yet to discover.

Karasek’s groundbreaking work reveals that job design, work environment, and worker autonomy are significant factors in determining whether work stressors will lead to negative health effects for workers. This finding suggests that HR tasks such as job design can profoundly affect the workplace hazards faced by workers.

There are two main challenges associated with recognizing workplace stress as a hazard. First, stress is often perceived as an individual’s response to a situation, and any two individuals can react differently to the same stressor. This perception can lead managers to identify the issue with the individual rather than the stressor itself. This response is an example of an employer blaming the worker for an injury and a variation on the careless worker myth that we read about in Chapter 1. Faced with an explanation that blames the worker, it is important to be cognizant of the difference between root and proximate cause. “Stress is not merely a physiological response to a stressful situation. Stress is an interaction between that individual and source of demand within their environment.” In other words, while individuals may respond differently to stressors (which is the proximate cause of the health effect), the root cause of the reaction is the workplace dynamics that create the stressor.

Second, isolating workplace stressors can be difficult, especially chronic stressors. Non-work stressors do affect workers and can also be used by employers as an excuse to deny that stress-related health effects have workplace causes. Also, as with other types of ill health, individuals have different tolerances for stress, meaning the same stressors may affect one worker more than another. As a result, it can be difficult to have chronic stress recognized as a workplace hazard or the cause of a workplace injury or ill health. A workers’ compensation board, for example, is more likely to accept claims resulting in catastrophic or acute stress (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder) than chronic stress (see Box 6.2).
Box 6.2 Workers’ compensation and chronic stress

In January 2007, Parks Canada employee Douglas Martin filed a claim with Alberta’s WCB for chronic stress. For the previous seven years, Martin had spearheaded an effort to have park wardens armed while they were performing their duties (an ongoing health and safety issue in Parks Canada). This effort was stressful and conflict-ridden, and Martin felt he had experienced reprisals by his employer in the form of lack of promotion, training, and work.

The previous month, Martin had received a letter threatening him with disciplinary action over an unrelated matter. Martin “already had a written reprimand on his file and feared that the next disciplinary action would be dismissal. He alleged the letter, following the stress of years of conflict over the health and safety issue, triggered a psychological condition. He took medical leave beginning December 23, 2006, consulted medical professionals for treatment, and initiated a claim for compensation for chronic onset stress the following month.”

Martin’s workers’ compensation claim was refused and he lost his appeals of the decision. Alberta’s WCB policy stated that it accepts claims for chronic stress only if the worker meets each of four criteria:

- there is a confirmed psychological or psychiatric diagnosis as described in the psychiatric manual of mental disorders (commonly called DSM),
- the work-related events or stressors are the predominant cause of the injury; predominant cause means the prevailing, strongest, chief, or main cause of the chronic onset stress,
- the work-related events are excessive or unusual in comparison to the normal pressures and tensions experienced by the average worker in a similar occupation, and
- there is objective confirmation of the events.

The WCB accepted that Martin was experiencing psychological effects and that the stressors were predominantly work-related. They denied the claim on the grounds that the events were not excessive or unusual.
in comparison to normal pressures and that there was not objective confirmation of the events.

As in all WCB cases, the decision revolves around the specifics of Martin’s situation. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how the bar to successfully establish a WCB claim for chronic stress can be set so high as to be unreachable by most workers. Further, the requirement that the events be “excessive or unusual in comparison to the normal pressures and tensions experienced by the average worker” marginalizes workers who may have a heightened sensitivity to stress. Finally, the decision, by arguing that fear of dismissal is not unusual in the workplace, downplays the role of management in creating an unusually stressful situation.

Workplace stress is the result of workplace factors. Consequently, preventing the negative effects of workplace stress requires changes to job design, workload, organizational culture, and interpersonal dynamics. These factors are both broadly known to employers and within their control. What the persistence of stressful workplaces reveals is that employers in such workplaces prioritize maintaining profitability, productivity, and control of the work process over workers’ health.

Related to stress is the experience of fatigue. Fatigue is the state of feeling tired, weary, or sleepy caused by insufficient sleep, prolonged mental or physical work, or extended periods of stress or anxiety. Acute, or short-term, fatigue can be caused by failure to get adequate sleep in the period before a work shift and is resolved quickly through appropriate sleep. Chronic fatigue can be the result of a prolonged period of sleep deficit and may require more involved treatment. Chronic fatigue syndrome is an ongoing, severe feeling of tiredness not relieved by sleep. The causes of chronic fatigue syndrome are unknown.

While lack of sleep is the primary cause of fatigue, it can be enhanced by other factors, including drug or alcohol use, high temperatures, boring or monotonous work, loud noise, dim lighting, extended shifts, or rotating shifts. As with other conditions, workers have differing sensitivity to fatigue. Fatigue can also make workers more susceptible to stress and illness.
Fatigue is a legitimate health and safety concern because workers who are experiencing fatigue are more likely to be involved in workplace incidents. Lack of alertness and reduced decision-making capacity can have negative effects on safety. Research has shown that fatigue can impair judgment in a manner similar to alcohol. WorkSafeBC reports the following effects:

- 17 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of 0.05 (the legal limit in B.C. and Alberta)
- 21 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of 0.08 (the legal limit in Canada)
- 24–25 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of 0.10.14

Most cases of fatigue are resolved through adequate sleep. The average person requires 7.5 to 8.5 hours of sleep a night (remember, this is an average—some require more, some less). While an employer cannot control how well a worker sleeps, they can adjust the workplace to mitigate fatigue. Shift scheduling is one of the most important administrative controls of fatigue: employers can ensure shifts are not too long or too close together as well as avoiding dramatic shift rotations (we discuss shift work in more detail in Chapter 7).

Employers can also ensure that workplace temperatures are not too high, work is interesting and engaging without being too strenuous, and adequate opportunities for resting, eating, and sleeping (if necessary) are provided.

VIOLENCE

Workplace violence is any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated, or assaulted in his or her employment. It can include physical attack, threats of physical attack, threatening language or behaviour (e.g., shaking a fist), or physically aggressive behaviour. The data around the prevalence of workplace violence is mixed. If judged by workers’ compensation claims, workplace violence is quite rare: only 2.5% of all Canadian lost-time injury claims in 2012 were related to incidents of violence (about 6000 incidents).15

That said, Statistics Canada reports that 17% of all acts of criminal violence (violence illegal under the Criminal Code) occurred at a workplace. They calculate that this amounts to more than 350,000 acts of workplace violence in Canada.16 The discrepancy is partially explained by the fact that many of those criminal acts did not result in the acute injury of a worker and, therefore, no workers’ compensation claim was filed. This discrepancy reinforces the
limited value of workers’ compensation claim data as an indicator of hazardousness in the workplace.

Whether more or less prevalent, workplace violence can extract a significant toll on workers, leading to injury and psychological ill health (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder). Health-care workers are most likely to experience workplace violence, followed by social workers and workers in retail or food service. It is notable that these occupations tend to be female-dominated. Customers, clients, and patients are the most common perpetrators of workplace violence, although violence from co-workers or supervisors remains prevalent.

Box 6.3 The myth of the disgruntled employee?

In February 2014, Jayme Pasieka, an employee at the Loblaw’s Distribution Centre in northwest Edmonton, Alberta, burst into his workplace and attacked several workers with a knife, fatally stabbing two people and injuring four others.\textsuperscript{17} The incident sparked extensive media coverage, much of it focused on Pasieka’s history of mental illness and erratic behaviour. Many commentators speculated that he was a “disgruntled employee.”

Such horrific incidents are, thankfully, rare. When they do occur, these types of incidents tend to receive a lot of media coverage, most of which focuses on the mental state of the perpetrator. The notion of the “disgruntled employee” returning to their place of work to exact revenge for some perceived grievance is well embedded in public mindset. Consider the popularity of the term “going postal”—coined after a postal worker shot a number of co-workers in the United States.

Our familiarity with the disgruntled-employee frame means journalists and employers often use it to quickly explain what caused a workplace incident. In a commentary on a raft of workplace shootings in the United States in 2010, Richard Denenberg and Tia Schneider Denenberg make this observation:

In sum, the Missouri and Georgia cases exemplify a media tendency to reach for facile explanations—notably the vague concept of disgruntlement—observing the complexities that
may lie behind an outbreak of workplace violence. Such generic assumptions often conflict with the specific facts, once they are revealed in second-day and third-day accounts. The notion that an aggressor feels aggrieved is essentially a tautology, yielding little insight, unless the reasons for the extreme behavior are adequately explored.

Attention should focus not only on the person but also on any defects in policies, procedures, or judgment that may have allowed rage to fester and ultimately explode.

Examining the characteristics of the workplace may enhance our ability to prevent violence as much as probing the character, personality, and belief systems of the offender.\textsuperscript{18}

In short, newspaper reporters’ use of the disgruntled-worker frame simplifies the (likely complex) circumstances that led to the violence. This can obscure root causes of the incident by hiding the effect of employer behaviour or inaction. As we saw in Chapter 1, the social construction of an incident can result in a misdiagnosis of the cause and, consequently, inappropriate recommendations for future prevention.

A variety of factors can increase the risk of violence in the workplace. Common concerns are the presence of money, drugs, and alcohol (which make workplaces targets for theft and robbery). Late operating hours and extensive access to the public are also factors that heighten the risk of violence. One of the reasons health-care workers are at greatest risk is their close proximity to people under physical or mental stress. The workplace environment can also play a role leading to violence. Stressful work situations, insecure and precarious employment arrangements, work overload, and unhealthy interpersonal dynamics can also increase the risk of violence.

While acts of violence are unpredictable, an employer can take steps to develop a violence-prevention plan to minimize both the risk of a violent act and the harm caused by the act. Violence prevention should be a part of the overall HRAC process. Particular actions to consider include workplace design to restrict access, increasing visibility and communication, and creating escape routes for workers. Administrative policies and work practices...
can reduce some of the common risks: these might include reducing the use of cash, eliminating the use of working alone, and implementing a buddy system. A prevention program should also incorporate training for managers to spot warning signs of violence, and steps to reduce stress levels in the workplace. Governments can also take action by expanding the definition of violence as a workplace hazard (see Box 6.4).

**Box 6.4 Family violence as safety hazard**

In November 2015, the Alberta Family Violence Death Review Committee, a government committee mandated to investigate deaths due to family violence, reported on its investigation into the 2011 murder of a woman by her spouse at her workplace. The husband had called and visited her repeatedly at work, threatening violence. The employer, co-workers, and security guards at the site were aware of the threats but did little. The woman did not press charges at any time, in part due to cultural pressures. No one attempted to prevent the husband from accessing the workplace on the day he killed her.19

In its report the Committee made the following recommendation:

The Alberta Government amends the Occupational Health and Safety Act and Code to recognize and include family violence as a workplace hazard. Family violence is to be defined as it is in the *Protection Against Family Violence Act* and must include: direct family violence (where the family violence is at the workplace) and indirect family violence (where the family violence is outside of the workplace) and it directly affects the workplace through employee’s performance or by creating an unsafe work environment.20

Recommending that violence as a safety hazard be defined to include violence that may take place outside the workplace (but has workplace consequences) is a significant shift from traditional approaches to violence as a safety issue, which tend to focus only on workplace-based violence.

The government accepted the recommendations of the report and promises to implement changes to the *OHS Act* (as of time of writing,
they had not yet been introduced). An interesting follow-on question is whether injuries occurring at work that stem from family violence will now be deemed compensable injuries by the Workers’ Compensation Board. At present, such injuries are not considered to arise from the course of work and are thus non-compensable.

BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

A growing concern in workplaces is the issue of workplace harassment and bullying. **Workplace harassment** is behaviour aimed at an individual (or group) that is belittling or threatening in nature. This can include actions (e.g., unwanted touching) or words (e.g., insults, jokes) that have the effect of causing psychological harm to victim(s). Harassment can take a variety of forms, including racial/ethnic harassment, sexual harassment, and general workplace harassment. **Bullying** is similar to harassment and comprises repeated actions or verbal comments that lead to mental harm, isolation, or humiliation of a worker (or group), often with the intent to wield power over them. Often harassment and bullying are used interchangeably and, indeed, the definitions are highly similar. In this book, we differentiate the terms for two reasons. First, harassment is often associated with specific grounds protected under human rights legislation, such as gender, race, age, and religion. Bullying applies more broadly to any set of behaviours that create harm. Second, it is accepted that harassment can occur unintentionally, while bullying is a more intentional process. Both are ways for the harasser/bully to exercise control and power over the harassed/bullied through fear, humiliation, embarrassment, and denigration.

Harassment and bullying can involve physical contact but are distinguished from violence in that the purpose is not physical harm but emotional and psychological harm. Harassment and bullying can also include acts that indirectly affect the targeted worker(s), such as undesirable shift scheduling, unreasonable workloads, spreading rumours, or denying leave requests. Harassment, bullying, and violence can occur concurrently.

There is debate about how to best conceptualize harassment and bullying. Many argue that it is a human rights issue and should be treated through human rights processes, usually meaning independent tribunals or the courts.
Others suggest that harassment and bullying are instances of individual misconduct best resolved through human resources processes such as better selection, training, and disciplinary practices. The authors of this text argue, without intending to reduce the significance of the human rights dimensions of harassment, that harassment and bullying are also health and safety issues. The reason harassment and bullying are OHS issues is that they can be controlled by the employer and have clear health effects for the targeted worker(s).

The psychological effects of harassment and bullying can be extensive and include anxiety, panic attacks, depression, shame, and anger. The physical effects mirror those of stress and can include inability to sleep, stomach pain or headaches, high blood pressure, heart palpitations, and loss of concentration/memory, as well as eating and digestive disorders. Further, workers exposed to harassment are found to be more at risk of illness, injury, and assault. The negative health outcomes and increased risk of illness and injury can persist well after the harassment has ceased. In extreme cases, bullying and harassment can cause *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD). PTSD is typically brought on by a terrifying event, and symptoms include flashbacks, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the event.

While all workers can be victims of harassment and bullying, certain groups of workers are more likely to be the targets, because of their respective statuses in society at large. Two such groups include women and racialized workers (see Box 6.5), who make easier targets because the bullying and harassment are consistent with widely held prejudices (e.g., consider how common race and gender jokes are). Recent research has shown that experiencing multiple forms of harassment—gender and ethnic harassment along with general workplace harassment—compounds the negative health effects compared to experiencing one form, putting racialized women at particular risk of negative health effects from harassment.

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**Box 6.5 Racialized workers**

Discussing issues such as race can be challenging. In one respect people possess certain immutable characteristics, including skin colour and other surface features, that are associated with “race.” However, race is a social construction. Society imbibes certain characteristics (i.e., skin colour) with meaning and not others (e.g., eye colour) and as a result
ascribes significance to them. The trait in itself is not significant but is given importance through social convention. The ascribed meaning leads people to experience the world differently based upon the immutable characteristics.

Society not only ascribes significance to these traits but structures social relations around them. People are differentiated and distinguished according to the characteristics. This is the process of racialization. All people are racialized; society implies meaning to being “white” or “black,” for example. Our experiences of the world are thus shaped by this social construction. However, the ascription of characteristics is not neutral. Some “races” are imbued with positive qualities and some negative. Whether society ascribes negative or positive qualities shapes a person’s status in society.

In this book we utilize the term racialized workers to apply to individuals perceived to be a part of a race or ethnicity to which particular, often negative, characteristics are ascribed by social structures (e.g., Black, Hispanic, Asian). We also recognize that race intersects with other characteristics, including gender, age, sexual orientation, and ability, to form a matrix of human experience in society.

There is no clear profile of who might be a harasser. The range of tactics, behaviours, and approaches used by bullies and harassers is extensive and reflective of specific contexts. One typology of bullies includes four categories:

- The screaming Mimi: A bully who displays mood swings and unpredictable anger and commonly uses public humiliation as a tool.
- The constant critic: A hypercritical nitpicker who regularly points out others’ inadequacies and errors, and uses negative evaluation of performance as a tool to belittle.
- The two-headed snake: Aimed at rising in the organization, they aim their bullying at those below them, using rumours and divide-and-conquer schemes to turn co-workers against the target.
- The gatekeeper: Obsessed with control, they allocate resources and information in ways to ensure the target’s failure and to create reasons to question their performance.
These types of bullies may sound very familiar, but it is important to not forget that the issue of bullying is workplace-wide and not solely the result of an ill-mannered or calculating personality. The categories should be interpreted as strategies employed by bullies, rather than personality sketches.

Often, managers bully or harass subordinates (although bullying from co-workers and clients/customers is also common). This is not surprising, given that bullying and harassment are ways to wield power over another person. Managers, because of their role in an organization, already possess power over workers. Attempts to exercise this power can lead to management approaches that rely upon bullying. Some researchers suggest that employers may overtly or covertly encourage bullying by managers as a way to maximize the work the employer can extract from its workers.²⁵

The line between “tough” management and “bullying” management can be difficult to ascertain, especially if the bullying takes the form of misuse of managerial prerogatives such as scheduling, work assignments, and the like. Usually bullying as a management technique is reflective of the organizational culture that has developed in a workplace. For their part, workers respond to OHS threats such as bullying with a range of behaviours that include exit, voice, patience, and neglect. These responses are explained more fully in Box 6.6.

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**Box 6.6 Responses to harmful work environments**

When a worker experiences any OHS hazard, including harassment, bullying, or a toxic workplace, the worker can respond in a range of ways. In examining individual behaviour in response to deteriorating conditions, Albert Hirschman first developed the notion that people respond either through exit or voice, and the choice is determined by attitudes toward the situation.²⁶ Others later added to Hirschman’s theory by positing two other options, patience (sometimes referred to as loyalty) and neglect:

- Exit: The worker decides to get away from the undesired situation, either by quitting the employer or transferring to another location or job within the same employer.
• Voice: The worker decides to speak up in an attempt to change the situation. Voice can take a number of forms, including attempting to repair the situation directly, lodging a complaint, filing a grievance or, less constructively, retaliating with their own inappropriate behaviour.

• Patience: The worker decides to do nothing in the hopes that the situation will eventually improve. Workers adopt a patience approach when their loyalty to the organization or the cost of exiting is greater than the price of experiencing the negative situation.

• Neglect: The worker does nothing, based on the belief that the situation will not change or might grow worse. The worker might try to avoid the source of the situation but will generally take no action to change the situation. Workers choose this option when the costs of exiting are too high and their relationship to the organization is sufficiently damaged to prevent either voice or patience.27

Workers may adopt different strategies when confronted with bullying behaviour or may cycle through the various options. For example, a group of workers facing a co-worker who undermines them in meetings, makes false claims about their work performance, and verbally attacks them may react in different ways. Those workers who are not very invested in the workplace (e.g., they are new or they feel they have options elsewhere) may simply start looking for a new job.

Other workers may at first choose patience (in the hope the worker’s behaviour will change) and then move to voicing their concerns (e.g., filing a complaint or by socially excluding the bully). If the issue remains unresolved, some workers (e.g., those close to retirement) may choose neglect while others will move to exit the workplace.

Recognizing that workers might respond in four different ways to the same negative situation reminds us that there is no single “sign” of a poor workplace environment. Employers interested in preventing harassment and bullying must be careful to observe the myriad ways in which workers react to deteriorating situations.
There are several ways to address harassment and bullying in the workplace. First, an employer should (and, in some jurisdictions, must) develop policies regarding harassment in the workplace. The administrative controls should outline acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and actions, indicate employer and worker responsibilities, and create a process for investigating and resolving complaints. Any investigation must proceed in a manner that is transparent, fair to both parties, and as confidential as is possible. Investigations should also identify the root cause of the incident and how to prevent similar incidents in the future.

Workplace policies are important, but they are only as effective as the degree of their implementation and enforcement. Effective policy implementation requires the employer to train all workers, including managers, on how to prevent and address harassment. Training for managers is particularly important. It can help managers spot possible harassment and teach them the difference between legitimate management discretion and bullying management techniques. Training workers around respectful interactions and cultural sensitivity can help distinguish between legitimate interpersonal conflict and bullying and harassment.

Finally, research shows that the leading indicator of workplace bullying and harassment is the organization’s climate. In workplaces where workers feel unsafe, incidents of bullying and harassment are more frequent. Conversely, creating a safe and respectful climate increases workers’ sense of safety and lowers the negative consequences of bullying and harassment. Creating a safe workplace climate is a multi-levelled process, requiring a high degree of commitment to respectful interactions, clear communication, transparent management, and individual and collective accountability.

**WORKING ALONE**

It may seem strange to include working alone as a psycho-social hazard, given that it is a working condition that removes psycho-social interactions from the workplace. Yet it is precisely the absence of other people that makes working alone a significant psycho-social hazard. Working alone is a unique type of hazard in that, in and of itself, it may not be hazardous. Nevertheless, working alone exacerbates other hazards present in the workplace.

**Working alone** occurs when a worker is performing tasks out of contact with persons capable of offering assistance in case of emergency. If an incident
were to occur (e.g., if the worker became unconscious) there would be no one available to respond, increasing the risks of harm to the worker. The key to working alone is that the worker is isolated in some fashion from co-workers or responsible individuals. A worker can be working alone even if there are other people present in the workplace. For example, a receptionist in the front room is working alone if others in the office cannot hear or see him.

A second key aspect of the concept is that the contact needs to be with someone capable of and responsible for responding. A worker can be working alone even if there are members of the public present (e.g., a crowded street). The public are not responsible for the worker and so may not respond (or even be aware of the need to respond) should something happen. Certain types of working alone situations come quickly to mind (e.g., the gas station attendants discussed in Chapter 2), but there are many types of working alone that may not be as obvious (see Box 6.7).

**Box 6.7 Who works alone and why?**

Many different kinds of workers can find themselves working alone. Consider these common examples:

- A barista opening up a coffee shop early in the morning
- A farm worker cleaning out a grain bin
- A homecare nurse visiting patients in their homes
- A custodian cleaning a school overnight
- A postal worker delivering mail
- A front receptionist greeting customers
- A truck driver transporting goods between cities
- A maintenance worker repairing a machine in a shut-down portion of a factory

How many of these jobs could be performed more safely if there were two workers present? Most of these jobs would have a lowered risk of incident or reduced consequences from an incident if a second worker were present. This raises the question as to why these jobs are routinely performed alone.
Usually employers cite economic efficiency as the reason for having workers work alone. It makes no sense (financially) to have two receptionists greeting customers or having a passenger with the truck driver. Nevertheless, in many cases, assigning two workers to perform a job has little effect on efficiency. For example, sending homecare workers in pairs adds safety, increases the quality of patient care, improves working conditions, and does not negatively affect the number of patients seen in a day.

Employers utilize working alone when it makes economic sense for them. Those considerations are valid, but for OHS practitioners, safety considerations must also be included in the calculation. How many jobs regularly performed alone really need to be structured in that fashion? And how much working alone is simply the result of habit and convention?

The risks associated with working alone are diverse. Common concerns include the possibility of theft, assault, or attack by an outside party or a worker’s client or patient. This risk is increased by the presence of money, drugs, or other valuables. Women are also more at risk of assault when working alone in these situations. Other risks include uncontrolled hazards causing harm to a worker without others noticing and taking action. For example, a worker working alone may pass out from gas exposure or fall on a slippery surface and have no one to come to their aid. Even injuries like heart attacks or other health issues can be made worse by the lack of immediate response.

There are two basic ways to control the hazard posed by working alone. The first approach is to eliminate it by ensuring workers are never in a situation where they are out of contact with other workers. Policies that require a minimum of two workers to be on shift at a time, or prohibiting late night overtime, can administratively control working alone. Prohibiting working alone is a central practice of emergency first responders (i.e., police, fire, ambulance). Keep in mind that eliminating working alone does not eliminate other hazards, which may require other controls. For example, two workers in a remote location will still require some communication strategy in case something happens to either or both of them.
The second approach to controlling working alone is to establish a two-step communication process with workers working alone. First, the worker needs a way to communicate to another person if they are in need. Radios, telephones, or panic buttons can all work as outgoing communication devices. Second, there needs to be incoming communication on a regular basis in case the worker is unable to communicate (e.g., they are unconscious). This incoming communication can take the form of a regular check-in to the worker or an automatic response if the worker fails to complete a periodic check-in. The frequency of check-ins is determined by the nature of the hazards to which the worker is exposed.

The choice between hazard elimination and communication controls is controversial. Employers argue that prohibiting working alone is too costly and inefficient. Some also argue that employing two workers is not necessarily safer than one worker (e.g., two workers can just as easily be rendered unconscious by hydrogen sulfide gas on a remote worksite as one). This latter argument confuses hazards associated with working alone (e.g., lack of assistance) with other hazards of the work (e.g., chemical hazards). Worker advocates, on the other hand, argue that communication devices, while useful, are not fail-safe and do not address all the risks associated with working alone. For example, there can be significant time delays between when an incident occurs and when the automatic response is triggered. Further, the automatic response may not result in immediate assistance being rendered.

There are times when prohibiting working alone is not practicable. Yet the bulk of the debate about working alone rests around issues of cost, efficiency, and employer control over the work process. Working alone is another example of how employer and worker interests may conflict around issues of health and safety.

**Summary**

Somewhat ironically, Meredith Boucher’s experience of harassment at Wal-Mart occurred because she refused to create a safety hazard by falsifying food inspection data. Her supervisor’s subsequent decision to expose her to a psycho-social hazard (which her employer failed to control despite repeated requests) was only resolved when she sued her employer and manager. A faster and less costly way to resolve this issue would have been to treat the harassment she experienced as a health and safety issue. This would
have allowed Boucher to refuse the unsafe work and force an investigation when Wal-Mart failed to remediate the hazard. It also would have made her eligible for workers’ compensation benefits if the harassment caused her to experience ill health.

Psycho-social hazards—such as stress, fatigue, violence, harassment, and bullying—are the result of inadequately controlled workplace hazards. Working alone is a product of choices about how to prioritize safety and efficiency. While not all aspects of psycho-social hazards are within the control of employers (e.g., how much an employee sleeps at night), employer decisions about job design, workplace culture, and acceptable behaviour from co-workers, supervisors, and members of the public are among the root causes of the injuries caused by psycho-social hazards.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

› What are some of the negative consequences of workplace stress and how can providing greater job control alleviate them?
› What steps can an employer take to prevent fatigue in the workplace? What factors affecting fatigue are outside of an employer’s control?
› Would you say workplace violence is rare or common in Canadian workplaces? How do you interpret and reconcile the two sets of data about workplace violence presented in this chapter?
› How might harassment and bullying be a management strategy for controlling workers and the work process?
› Why is working alone considered a hazard?

EXERCISE

⚠️ Write a 400- to 500-word essay answering each of the following questions:

1. If workplace harassment was more readily perceived as an OHS issue, rather than a human rights violation or human resources problem, how might that change how employers respond to complaints of harassment? In answering, examine
how harassment violates the OHS Act in your jurisdiction and consider options for remediation (with attention to the exit-voice-patience-neglect theory).

2. Consider a case of working alone, either from the examples in the text or your personal experience. What are the pros and cons of preventing the working alone (assigning two workers to the task) versus reducing the hazard via communication systems?

NOTES
2 Ibid., para 37.
3 Ibid., para 34.


