

The science behind high-performing teams and safer work: Why addressing psychosocial and physical health matters

The Umbrella and Geneva Wellbeing Annual Report 2026

Fixing the work, not the worker, by preventing psychological and physical harm

When it comes to paradigm shifts in workplace health, one of the biggest in recent years has been changing the focus from [fixing the worker to fixing the work](#).

Years of research tells us that manual handling training and its focus on teaching workers “how to lift” is wholly ineffective at preventing musculoskeletal harm. Why?

This focus on fixing the worker fails to control the true source of the risk, or workers’ exposure to it. Sending a worker - even one equipped with all the correct lifting techniques - back into an unsafe or poorly designed working environment will inevitably leave them vulnerable to injury.

The issue is not the training itself, but that proper training alone cannot prevent harm when the working environment remains unchanged. Emphasis should go on fixing the work conditions that lead to sources of repetitive strain - both on people’s bodies and their minds - remembering that even small shifts can have a big impact.

Often, we treat psychosocial risks and physical safety risks as two different problems, with two separate solutions. A recent wellbeing survey (conducted by [MATES in Construction](#)) assessed more than 3,300 workers across construction, infrastructure and manufacturing in New Zealand. Nearly half of the workers reported pain, illness or disability. This is more than double the usual rates experienced by New Zealand adults.

The key drivers of these increased rates were stress and mental strain, along with years of physical wear-and-tear. While construction, infrastructure and manufacturing are industries that have honed in on important physical health and safety matters, these workers identified that stress and mental strain were also playing key roles in their back problems, fatigue and increased risk of injury.

It is important to remember that we feel better in our minds, when our work environment is physically healthy, and a workplace encourages regular movement during the day - this helps workers feel better mentally and work with greater focus.



Our team at [Umbrella](#) and [Geneva Wellbeing](#) is made up of experts in the world of navigating work and non-work risks to wellbeing. Along with our strategy and assessment services, we deliver tried and tested, evidence-based training and early-intervention programmes to help you and your team to zero in on what matters, put into practice the tools that will help you thrive, and build a better relationship with work. Get in touch to hear about how we help organisations all over the country to manage their physical and psychosocial risks.

Contact us:

office@umbrella.org.nz

0800 643 000