

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

The Umbrella and Geneva Wellbeing Annual Report 2026

The stress pathway: Understanding the mechanisms of harm

The Umbrella and Geneva Wellbeing 2026 Annual Report highlights the potential consequences for under-investing in psychosocial risk mitigation, and why it's so crucial to prioritise preventative interventions. Understanding how psychosocial challenges translate into physical and psychological harm helps to better manage them.

The pathway typically follows this pattern:



For traditional safety risks, the cause-and-effect is usually quite clear: Poor ergonomics can cause back pain; working at height can lead to falls.

Psychosocial hazards operate slightly differently. When we're exposed to psychosocial hazards such as excessive workload, job insecurity or workplace conflict, our brains detect a threat, which activates the sympathetic nervous system, triggering the "fight-or-flight" response. Stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol flood the body, raising heart rate, blood pressure and glucose levels to prepare our bodies for action.

Stress is a complex physiological response to a perceived challenge in the environment, and when that stress response is frequent, prolonged or severe in nature, there is little that most of us can do to overcome it, even with the best coping tools in place. That's why preventing physical and psychological stress (fixing the work) is generally a much more robust strategy for harm prevention than investing in health promotion or stress management (fixing the worker).

Psychosocial risks are present in every workplace. What matters is how they're managed. [Umbrella](#) and [Geneva Wellbeing](#) partner with organisations to identify psychosocial hazards, and assess and manage risks, which helps you to prevent psychological harm, improve performance and productivity and build safer, healthier and more sustainable workplaces.

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