



Mental Health as a Safety System

Supporting Strong Minds in High-Risk Forestry Work



Lariat
HR CONSULTING

Katherine Jones, CPHR
Lariat HR Consulting

Occupational Psychological Safety

A shared belief among workers that they can speak up about:

<input type="checkbox"/> Hazards	<input type="checkbox"/> Near Misses
<input type="checkbox"/> Mistakes	<input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue
<input type="checkbox"/> Uncertainty	

...without fear of repercussion or blame

Communication is expected and respected, because it directly impacts physical safety, decision-making, and overall well-being

“In the woods, silence about a concern is more dangerous than any forestry equipment. Psychological safety means every worker’s voice is treated as essential to keeping the crew alive.”



The Mental Health Continuum

	HEALTHY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING	Frequent and regular experience of positive thoughts and emotions	Some reduced experience of positive thoughts and emotions	Finding it difficult to experience positive thoughts and emotions	Almost never experience positive thoughts and emotions
PERFORMANCE & FUNCTIONING	My capacity to function is excellent	My capacity to function is good	My capacity to function is fair	My capacity to function is poor
SLEEP	Mostly get enough quality sleep	Sometimes get enough quality sleep	Rarely get enough quality sleep	Never get enough quality sleep
PHYSICAL WELL-BEING	My health is excellent	My health is good	My health is fair	My health is poor
SOCIAL WELL-BEING	Socially active	Decreased social activities	Avoidance and/or withdrawal from social activities	Don't go out or answer the phone
SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING	Established sense of purpose and meaning; beliefs and worldview are secure	Exploring sense of purpose and meaning; beliefs and worldview are challenged	Losing sense of purpose and meaning; beliefs and worldview are weakened	Lost sense of purpose and meaning; beliefs and worldview are shattered
ADDICTIONS	No or limited use of alcohol and/or substances and/or gambling	Regular but controlled use of alcohol and/or substances and/or gambling to cope	Increased use of alcohol and/or substances and/or gambling; hard to control with negative consequences	Frequent use of alcohol and/or substances and/or gambling; unable to control with severe consequences

Source: www.canada.ca

Employer Obligations – Duty to Inquire

Source	What it requires	Duty to inquire
Workers Compensation Act (ss. 21–23)	Employers must ensure worker health and safety.	If a worker appears unwell or unsafe, the employer must investigate to meet this obligation.
OHS Regulation (Parts 1–4)	Employers must identify hazards, investigate concerns, and maintain safe conditions.	Unusual behaviour or signs of impairment become a “hazard” requiring inquiry.
Human Rights Law	Employers must accommodate disabilities and inquire when disability is suspected.	Explicitly frames the “duty to inquire” when behaviour suggests a disability.



Contributing Factors to Stress



High-risk physical activities leading to injuries, fatigue



Isolation & Environment with long workdays, remote, severe weather



Personal pressures

- Family, health, etc.

Financial pressures

- Economic/Industry uncertainty

Shifting workplace situations



- Seasonal pressure
- Mixed-experience supervisors and crews
- Access to support
- Shifting shutdowns, curtailments

Trauma & Grief related to injuries and fatalities



Safety Sensitive Roles in Forestry

Inherent, high-risk tasks where even minor impairment could lead to serious injury, environmental harm, or fatality.

Sawmills, Wood Production/Operations: Day to Day Operations

Heavy Equipment Operation: Skidders, Harvesters, Loaders, Graders

Manual Tree Felling and Silviculture: Chainsaws, Brush saws, proximities

Transportation: Log trucks, ATVs, terrain, hours, loads

Supervisors/Leaders: Decision-making

Wildfire and Emergency: Firefighters, medical response

Aviation: Pilots – Helicopter and tanker, crews

Industrial Support: Mechanics, fuel handlers, surveyors

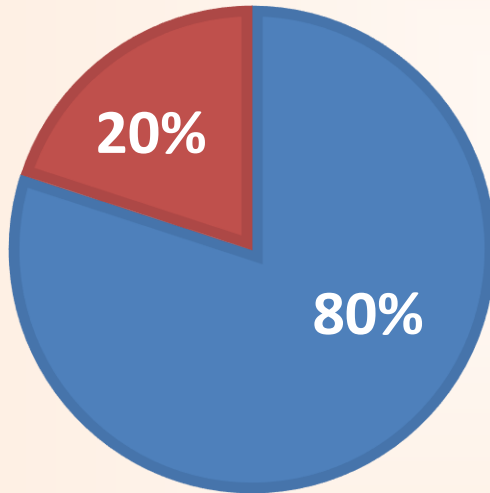


Reported Substance Use

All Industries

SAFETY SENSITIVE

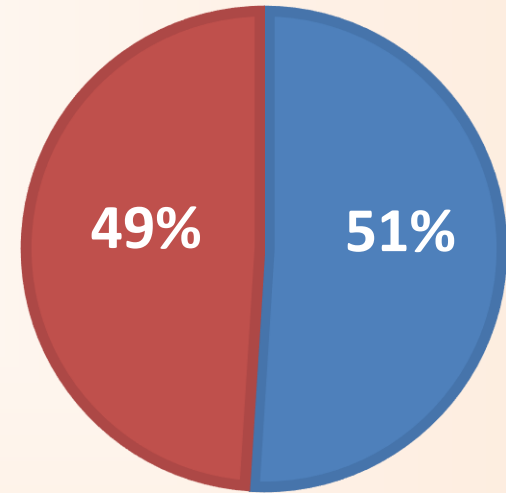
■ 2+ hrs ■ Use within 2 hrs



Forestry

SAFETY SENSITIVE

■ 2+ hrs ■ Use within 2 hrs



24% of forestry workers believe it is culturally acceptable to consume alcohol or cannabis before or during work, compared with **8%** across all industries.

Response to Perceived Impairment

62% of **Managers, Supervisors** and **Safety Personnel** report feeling undertrained to intervene and they say they struggle with:

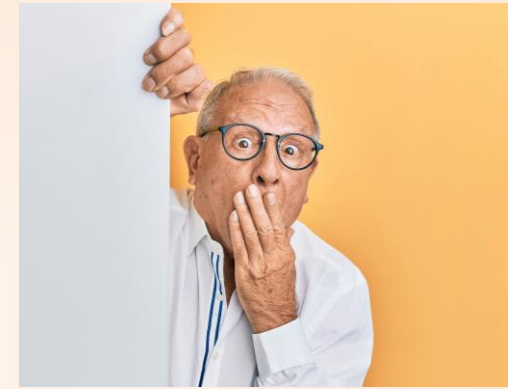
1. Distinguishing **impairment** from **fatigue or stress**
2. Navigating **privacy and human rights** considerations
3. Applying policies consistently
4. Managing **stigma and fear** of reprisal among workers



Early Warning Signs



**Irritability or
conflict**



**More
mistakes**



Withdrawal



**Attendance
changes**



**Fatigue or slower
reactions**



**Risk-taking
behaviour**



The 3-Minute Conversation

PRACTICAL and **REPEATABLE**

- ✓ Note behaviours, express concern, agree on next steps
- ✓ Frequency over depth.
- ✓ Reduce stigma around asking for help
- ✓ Build trust and psychological safety
- ✓ Catch issues early
- ✓ Help managers stay proactive
- ✓ Keep the tone supportive rather than corrective



Notice - *"I've seen that you seem more tired than usual."*

Connect/Care - *"I'm checking in because your safety matters."*

Navigate - *"Let's talk about what might help."*

Boundaries for Leaders

Stay in the Performance + Safety Lane

Focus on Observable Behaviours

- Work performance
- Safety concerns
- Attendance or reliability patterns

Keep the Conversation Supportive

- Express concern
- Ask how the employee wants to be supported at work
- Share available resources (BCFSC, EFAP, benefits, HR)
- Explore temporary adjustments, such as workload

Boundary anchor:

“I’m here to support you at work, not to get into personal details.”



Boundaries for Leaders

Maintain Confidentiality — With Clear Limits

- Keep the employee's situation private
- Share only on a need-to-know basis (HR, safety/accommodations)

Be clear that **confidentiality has limits** when:

- Safety is at risk
- There is impairment at work
- There is a duty to accommodate

Boundary anchor:

“This stays between us unless there's a safety concern or we need HR involved to support accommodations.”



Boundaries for Leaders

Avoid Becoming the Employee's Emotional Outlet/Therapist

Show empathy, but avoid becoming counsellor

DO NOT:

- × Ask for medical details
- × Try to interpret symptoms
- × Suggest diagnoses or offer therapeutic advice
- × Probe into trauma, medication, or treatment
- × Ask “why” someone is struggling
- × Offer personal opinions about mental health

Boundary anchor:

“I want to make sure you have the right kind of support — let’s connect you with resources that are better equipped for this.”



Boundaries for Leaders

Set Clear Expectations and Follow Through

Leaders should:

- ✓ Clarify expectations
- ✓ Document conversations
- ✓ Set timelines
- ✓ Follow up consistently

They should **not**:

- ✗ Lower standards indefinitely
- ✗ Avoid difficult conversations out of sympathy
- ✗ Allow safety risks to continue

Boundary anchor:

“We can explore supports, and expectations for the role still need to be met.”



Boundaries for Leaders

Know When to Pause the Conversation

If an employee becomes:

- Highly emotional
- Disoriented
- Impaired
- Unable to engage constructively

The leader should pause and redirect to support, not push through.

Boundary anchor:

“Let’s take a break and revisit this when you’re feeling more grounded. For now, let’s make sure you have support.”



Self Care for Leaders

Protect Your Own Emotional Boundaries

Leaders often absorb the emotional weight of their teams.

Healthy boundaries include:

- Not taking responsibility for the employee's wellbeing
- Not internalizing guilt
- Not being available 24/7
- Seeking HR or leadership support when needed

Boundary anchor:

"I am here to support you, and I also need to stay within my role so I can do that effectively."



Signs of Need for Supporter Self-Care

Emotional

Irritability or impatience
Emotional numbness
Guilt for needing space
Feeling responsible for the other's wellbeing

Cognitive

Difficulty concentrating
Intrusive worry
Second-guessing yourself

Behavioural

Avoidance
Over-functioning
Neglecting your own needs
Reduced social engagement

Relational

Resentment
Feeling unappreciated
Loss of boundaries
Atypical family interactions

Physical

Fatigue or exhaustion
Headaches, muscle tension, or stomach issues
Changes in sleep



Cortisol – The Stress Hormone

Impact on the Body

- Mobilizes energy by increasing glucose availability
- Suppresses non-essential functions:
 - Digestion
 - Reproductive hormones and functions
 - Growth and Repair - Healing Immune Response
- Prepares the body for fight-or-flight response



Impact on the Mind

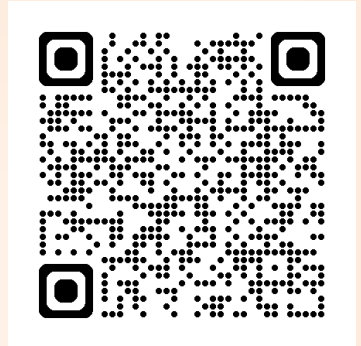
- Elevated cortisol can affect mood, memory, and concentration
- May lead to anxiety or difficulty focusing

Chronic High Cortisol

- Can cause sleep disturbances, weight gain, and weakened immunity

Effective stress management is important for overall well-being

Tools & Supports



BC Forest Safety Council - Mental Health Program for BC Forestry Workers

- **Connection to Care**

- Call **778-247-2273** (CARE), Monday through Friday from 8:00am to 8:00pm (PST) to speak with a trained mental health professional.
Immediate Help – Anonymous – Confidential
- **Online Resources** – Depression, Anxiety, First Responders, Work Stress, Relationships, Neurodiversity, Parent/Child, Trauma, New Immigrants

- **Links to Further Support**

- Crew Talks, Posters and Resource Packages
- Alcohol and Drug Use Support



Connection to Care – Depression Support

Websites

- Bounceback BC
- HereToHelp BC
- Mental Health Supports and Resources in BC
- Understanding Depression
- Multicultural Mental Health Centre
- How to Deal with Depression
- How Men Can Fight Depression – [Heads Up Guys](#)
- Managing Your Mood

Worksheets

- Cycle of Depression
- Coping Skills for Depression
- Waking Up Refreshed
- Distress Tolerance – 5 Sense Regulation



BC Forest Safety

Safety is good business

Activity: Scenario Circles

Instructions:

Break into small groups and discuss:

1. What early warning signs might you see?
2. What would a supportive conversation sound like?
3. What adjustments could a supervisor make to accommodate the employee?

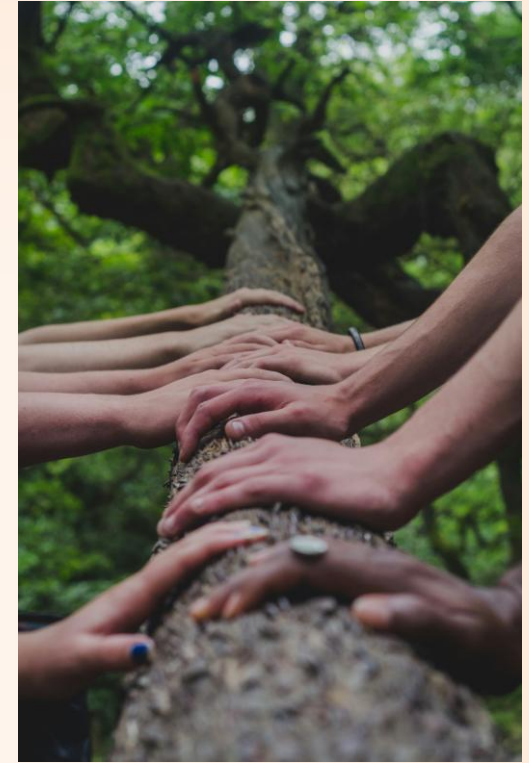
Suggested scenarios:

- Withdrawn faller
- Overwhelmed new supervisor
- Worker returning after traumatic incident



Key Takeaways

- ✓ **Mental Health is a Core Safety System**
- ✓ **Leaders Create Supportive Cultures**
- ✓ **Early Conversations Matter**
- ✓ **Support Doesn't Require Expertise**
- ✓ **Self Care Cannot Be Overlooked**



Keep in mind and plan –

May is Mental Health Awareness Month!



Questions & Discussion





Thank you!

Practical, people-first HR solutions for complex workplaces