Psychosocial risk in one minute

- The law covers mental health the same as physical health.
- Workload, bullying, fatigue and violence are health and safety risks.
- Fix the work, not the worker. Change how work is designed.
- In jobs that face the public, violence is a known risk. Plan for it with your staff.
- People think differently. Ask everyone what helps them work well.
- When someone isn't coping: ask, listen, and help them find support.
- Need to talk? Free call or text 1737, any time.

The field guides

1	Leading health and safety	8	Working at height
2	Trust and verify	9	**Psychosocial risk and mental health**
3	Shared duties	10	Work-related health
4	Worker voice	11	Hazardous substances
5	When things go wrong	12	Asbestos
6	Critical risks and critical controls	13	Machinery, plant and energy isolation
7	Vehicles, mobile plant and traffic	14	Remote, isolated and lone work

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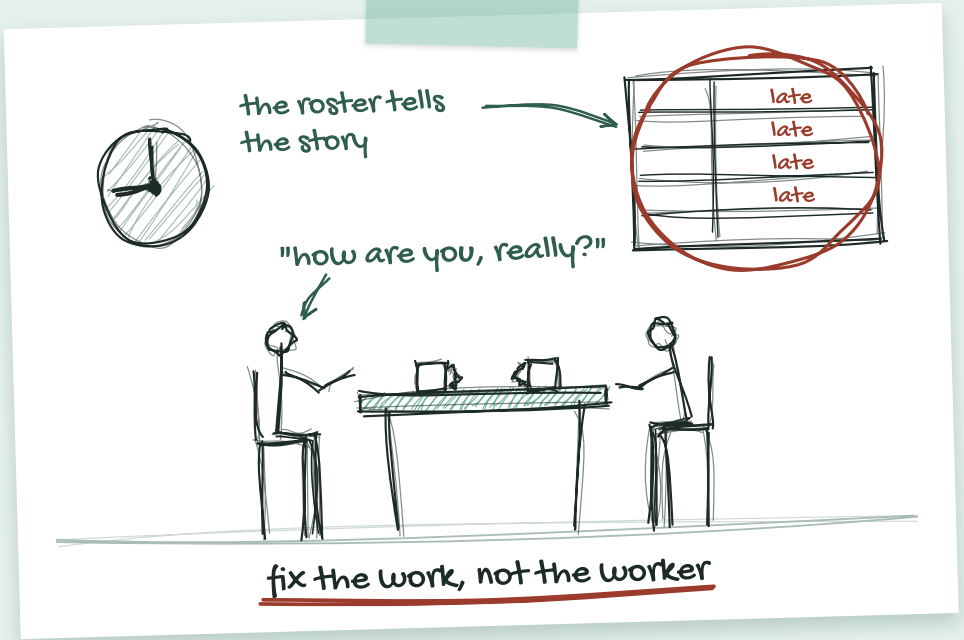
Field guide 9



Psychosocial risk and mental health

Managing workload, bullying, fatigue and violence as health risks, with the same care as physical hazards.

vimesconsulting.com
Field guide 9, edition 2.3
Published 27 October 2026

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For middle managers and senior leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand

Health and safety field guide 9
Edition 2.3
Published 27 October 2026

Before you start

An office in Ashburton

On 1 September 2014, a man came into the Work and Income office in Ashburton and shot staff. Two staff members died.

Clients could walk straight into the area where staff worked. The court later found that limiting that access was a practicable step.

What the story shows

You can't control what one person does on one day. You can design the work, and the workplace, so that staff are safer when it happens.

Why this guide starts here

The Act says "health means physical and mental health". Psychosocial hazards are parts of work that can cause psychological or physical harm. They include heavy workloads, bullying, fatigue and violence.

Most of this guide is about everyday pressures, not tragedies. But the same idea runs through it: look at the work, not just the person. Page 18 tells what the court decided.

If this brings up something hard for you: Need to talk? Free call or text **1737** any time, 24 hours a day, to talk with a trained counsellor.

Sources WorkSafe media release, Ministry of Social Development prosecution (6 December 2016); Ministry of Social Development chief executive's statement on the sentencing (2016); the Act, s 16; Health New Zealand, 1737 Need to talk?

Other guides that help

Psychosocial risk touches every guide in the series.

Guide	Read it for
1	Leading health and safety, and why the same task needs a different approach in different situations.
4	Worker voice. How to hear what people won't say in a meeting.
5	When things go wrong. What to do after a serious event.
6	Critical risks and critical controls, in full.
7	Vehicles and traffic, including driver fatigue.
14	Remote, isolated and lone work, for people who work on their own.

The whole series

1 Leading health and safety · 2 Trust and verify · 3 Shared duties · 4 Worker voice · 5 When things go wrong · 6 Critical risks and critical controls · 7 Vehicles, mobile plant and traffic · 8 Working at height · **9 Psychosocial risk and mental health** · 10 Work-related health · 11 Hazardous substances · 12 Asbestos · 13 Machinery, plant and energy isolation · 14 Remote, isolated and lone work

Check it yourself

How this guide was checked

Every statement of law or fact in this guide was checked against a primary source before printing: the law itself, WorkSafe guidance, data and case reports, published research, or the support services themselves. Each check is recorded in a claims register, with the source and date checked. Statements that could not be checked were removed. Facts checked on 12, 22, 23 and 24 October 2026.

Law

1. Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, ss 16, 18, 22, 30, 36, 44, 48. legislation.govt.nz
2. Health and Safety at Work Amendment Act 2026 (became law on 9 July 2026): new ss 17(3) to (5), 22A, 25A, 25B and Schedule 1A.
3. Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992, s 6 (the old law, for the Ashburton case). Plain Language Act 2022, s 5.
4. Human Rights Act 1993, ss 21, 22, 29. Privacy Act 2020, s 22 (principle 11).

WorkSafe guidance and cases

5. Managing psychosocial risks at work: good practice guidelines (April 2025); Psychosocial risks for all New Zealand workers (updated 10 December 2024).
6. Supporting mentally healthy work (2020); Workplace bullying and harassment (2020); Preventing and responding to bullying at work (March 2017); Fatigue quick guide (2017); Understanding the changes to health and safety law (July 2026).
7. Media releases on the Ministry of Social Development prosecution (6 December 2016) and the Vining case (10 May 2018). Ministry of Social Development statement (6 December 2016).
8. Official Information Act reply on neurodivergence, and appendix 1 (13 January 2026).

Support, data and research

9. 1737.org.nz; Health New Zealand, 1737 Need to talk?; HealthEd and the Mental Health Foundation, Are you worried someone is thinking of suicide?
10. Snowden, D. J., and Boone, M. E. (2007). A leader's framework for decision making. Harvard Business Review, 85(11), 68 to 76. It called Clear 'Simple' and Confusion 'Disorder'.
11. Snowden, D., and Friends (2021). *Cynefin: Weaving sense-making into the fabric of our world*. Cognitive Edge, The Cynefin Co. The current situation names on page 19.
12. Doyle, N. (2020). Neurodiversity at work. *British Medical Bulletin*, 135(1), 108 to 125.
13. Stats NZ (2025), 2023 Household Disability Survey. Te Pou (2017), Te Reo Hāpai glossary.

About this guide

Who it is for

Senior leaders who set staffing, targets, budgets and the pace of change.

Middle managers who allocate work, set rosters, deal with conflict and notice when people are struggling.

How to use it

Read pages 2 to 7 at your own pace. Take pages 8 and 9 on a walk through your workplace. Pages 13 to 16 cover individual needs, including neurodivergence. Turn to page 17 when someone tells you they aren't coping. The pocket card is on page 24. Key words are explained on page 25.

Field guide 1 explains the ideas behind the series.

Finding your way

Before you start	2
The duty	5
Look and listen	7
What good looks like	10
The duty in court	18
Running the work	19
Questions and notes	22
Key words and sources	25

Reading these pages

A taped card with footprints: something to try at work

A small compass: the sentence or point after it is this guide's view

A pink box with a red edge: what changes from 1 April 2027

The foot strip: sources. Untinted tables, sketches and checklists are this guide's own

A hatched edge with a compass: this guide's own view

A tinted box: the law, WorkSafe guidance or court facts

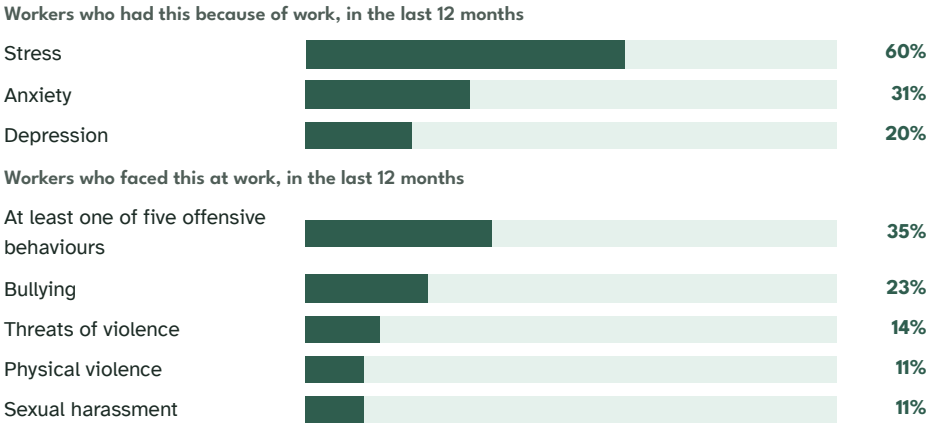
A dark box: this guide's lessons from a court case

Priority dots (this guide's rating): one means watch, three means act today

In this guide, "the Act" means the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, "s" means section and "ss" means sections. A PCBU is a "person conducting a business or undertaking", usually an organisation. This guide gives general information. It is not legal or medical advice. Written to the plain language standard in the Plain Language Act 2022 (s 5).

How common it is

WorkSafe's surveys show that work-related stress, bullying and violence are common in New Zealand workplaces. The numbers come from surveys in 2020 and 2021.



Many employers have no plan

WorkSafe found that 43% of employers have no policy for managing bullying and harassment. 47% have no policy for responding to violent incidents.

Sources WorkSafe, Psychosocial risks for all New Zealand workers (updated 10 December 2024), drawing on WorkSafe's Workforce Segmentation and Insight surveys (2020 and 2021) and the New Zealand Psychosocial Survey 2021.

Key words

Word	What it means
Health	The Act says "health means physical and mental health". s 16
Psychosocial hazard	Something about work that may cause psychological or physical harm, such as heavy workloads, bullying, fatigue or violence.
Psychosocial risk	"The likelihood that a psychosocial hazard will cause harm."
Bullying	"Repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that can lead to physical or psychological harm."
Fatigue	"A state of physical and/or mental exhaustion."
Officer	A director, partner, or anyone else with significant influence over how the business is run, such as a chief executive. s 18
Reasonably practicable	What you can reasonably do at the time. You weigh how likely the harm is, how bad it could be, what you know, and what controls exist. Cost is weighed last. It rules a step out only if it is grossly disproportionate to the risk. s 22
Critical risk	From 1 April 2027, a risk the law lists, or one likely to cause death or a notifiable injury or illness. new s 22A
Neurodivergent	A brain that works differently from what is typical, as with ADHD, autism, dyslexia or dyspraxia. Neurodiversity is the natural range in how brains work.
Reasonable adjustment	A change to someone's work or workplace to help prevent harm.
EAP	An employee assistance programme: free, confidential counselling that some employers pay for.
1737	New Zealand's free call or text support line. A trained counsellor answers, any time, 24 hours a day.

Sources the Act, ss 16, 18, 22; WorkSafe, Managing psychosocial risks at work (April 2025), s 2, table 1 and glossary; Fatigue quick guide; the Amendment Act 2026, new s 22A; Health New Zealand, 1737 Need to talk?

Pocket card

Cut out and fold in half.

If someone isn't coping

1. Find a quiet moment.
2. Ask: "How are you doing, really?"
3. Listen. Don't rush to fix it.
4. Ask what would help, at work and outside.
5. Offer support: the EAP, 1737.
6. Agree when you'll talk again.

Immediate danger? Call 111.

Support, any time

- **Need to talk?** Free call or text 1737, 24 hours a day. A trained counsellor answers.
- **Our EAP:** ask your manager or HR for the number, and write it here.

Fix the work, not the worker.

Card text from page 17. Field guide 9, Vimes Consulting.

What the law asks

The main duty covers mental health in the same way as physical health. There are no separate psychosocial regulations. Psychosocial risk is "the likelihood that a psychosocial hazard will cause harm".

Rule	What it says
Health s 16	"Health means physical and mental health."
Hazard s 16	A hazard includes a person's behaviour that could cause death, injury or illness. This applies even when the behaviour comes from fatigue, drugs, alcohol or shock.
The main duty ss 30, 36	Keep workers safe and healthy so far as is reasonably practicable: what you can reasonably do at the time, once you weigh how likely the harm is, how bad it could be, what you know, and what controls exist (s 22). Remove the risk if you can. If you can't, reduce it.
Monitoring s 36(3)(g)	Monitor workers' health and workplace conditions to prevent injury or illness.

How WorkSafe approaches mental health

- WorkSafe expects PCBUs to "identify mental health risks and eliminate them from work so far as reasonably practicable".
- "We're unlikely to intervene in one-off cases." WorkSafe may act where a PCBU "has failed to manage significant work-related mental health risks".
- On bullying, WorkSafe looks at "business processes to manage the risks rather than determining whether or not somebody is a bully". The Employment Relations Authority "may be best placed" to deal with individual complaints.

Sources the Act, ss 16, 30, 36; WorkSafe, Supporting mentally healthy work (updated 21 September 2020); Workplace bullying and harassment (updated 28 October 2020); Managing psychosocial risks at work (April 2025).

Psychosocial risk in the new law

From 1 April 2027, the law treats critical risks differently from other risks. The Amendment Act became law on 9 July 2026.

Psychosocial hazards are not listed critical risks

New Schedule 1A lists specific hazards, such as asbestos and working at height. It does not list psychosocial hazards. The Amendment Act does not change the meaning of "health".

Some still meet the critical risk test

A hazard is also a critical risk if it is likely to cause death or a notifiable injury or illness (new s 22A). Fatigue in drivers and violence from the public can meet that test. Many stress and workload risks will not.

If you have fewer than 20 workers

You are a small PCBU if you have fewer than 20 workers. If numbers go up and down, you are small if you reasonably expect fewer than 20 in at least 9 months of the financial year (new s 17(3) to (5)). The main duties in ss 36 to 43 then apply only to critical risks, such as violence that is likely to cause death or a notifiable injury (new s 25A). Welfare facilities, notifying events and consulting workers still apply.

Getting ready

- [ ] Deal with critical risks first. Find the psychosocial hazards in your work that could kill or seriously injure someone, such as violence from the public or driver fatigue.
- [ ] Put those on your critical risk list, with named controls and an owner.
- [ ] Large PCBUs: keep managing workload, bullying and change as well.
- [ ] Small PCBUs: keep an eye on them anyway. They still cost you good people.

Sources Health and Safety at Work Amendment Act 2026 (became law on 9 July 2026): new ss 17(3) to (5), 22A, 25A, 25B and Schedule 1A; the Act, s 36(3)(e); WorkSafe, Understanding the changes to health and safety law (July 2026).

Field notes

Back of your pocket card

My critical risks here:	Who to call:

ideas for this page:

- what wears your team down most
- hours and leave this month
- something to pass up
- a concern to follow up, and when
- what you heard on the walk

→ write it down here

Take these to your next meeting

Senior leaders and officers

- [ ] Which psychosocial hazards are highest in our work?
- [ ] Are staffing and targets realistic?
- [ ] Do we have a bullying and harassment policy that people trust?
- [ ] Do we plan for violence from customers or the public?
- [ ] How do we check hours and fatigue?
- [ ] Which psychosocial risks could kill or seriously injure someone?
- [ ] How do we manage the health risks of major change?
- [ ] Do our training and procedures work for people who learn in different ways?
- [ ] As an officer, how do I check for myself that our violence and fatigue controls are provided and used? (s **44**)

Two measures a board can track: staff over the hours limit this month; threats or violence reported, and days to act on each.

Middle managers

- [ ] Who in my team is working the longest hours?
- [ ] Does everyone know what their job is?
- [ ] Is there conflict I have not dealt with?
- [ ] Who has faced a traumatic event recently?
- [ ] Does anyone work alone or with angry customers?
- [ ] What concerns have I not responded to yet?
- [ ] Does my team know about the EAP and 1737?
- [ ] Have I asked each person what helps them work well?

What would our people say is the hardest part of their work, and when did we last ask them?

Know the hazards

WorkSafe's guidelines group psychosocial hazards in three ways. Many workplaces have some of each.

Group	Examples from WorkSafe
Work design	Long hours. "Heavy or unmanageable workloads, especially with constant time pressure." Little say over how or when work is done. Unclear roles. Shift work without enough rest.
Social factors	Poor leadership. Bullying or harassment. Poorly managed change. Lack of support. Unfair treatment. Job insecurity.
Work environment	Working remotely or alone. Exposure to traumatic events, such as death or violence. High pressure to meet deadlines, targets or budgets.

WorkSafe says its list "is not a complete list".

Hazards combine

Risk is usually highest where hazards stack up. An example is a heavy workload, with little say over it, under a manager people don't trust.

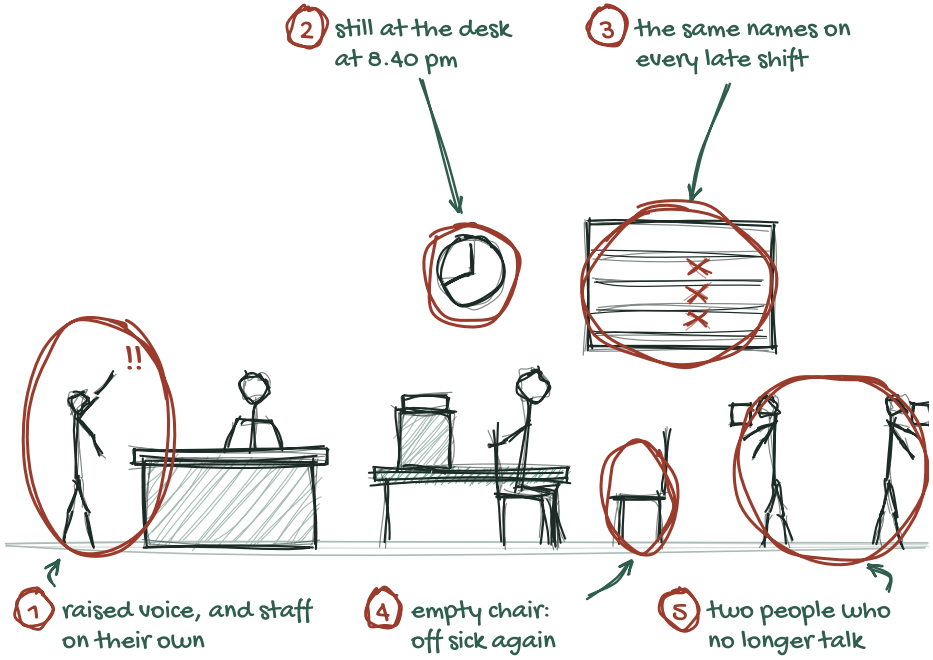
Ask your team

Show this table at a team meeting. Ask which three hazards are strongest in your work, and which one you could change first. People often agree faster than you expect.

Sources WorkSafe (April 2025), Managing psychosocial risks at work: good practice guidelines, table 1. The guidelines are guidance, not an approved code of practice.

What to look and listen for

Psychosocial hazards rarely announce themselves. They show in small things you can see and hear on an ordinary day.



The numbers match the table on the next page. The same signs turn up on a factory floor, a ward or a building site.

Psychosocial risk day to day

It is Friday, 4.30 pm. Two people are off sick, a deadline has just landed, and someone you trust says quietly, "I can't keep doing this." What you do next tells your team what matters here.

Every week

- [ ] Check hours, rosters and leave for signs of overload.
- [ ] Ask your team what is getting in the way of their work.
- [ ] Make sure people know who to go to with a concern.

When something comes up

- [ ] Respond to concerns the same day, even if only to say what happens next.
- [ ] Deal with poor behaviour early, before it becomes a pattern.
- [ ] Make sure people get support after a traumatic event.

Pass it up

- [ ] Report workload problems that need more people, money or time.
- [ ] Tell senior leaders when change is causing harm.

You are part of the control

WorkSafe lists "poor leadership" as a psychosocial hazard. So how you plan work and respond to people is one of the controls.

Signs worth a closer look

These signs usually show in data and behaviour before anyone complains.

What you might see or hear	What to do	Priority
Threats, or several complaints about one person.	Act now. Separate people if needed. Get advice.	●●●
More incidents at the counter, or fewer being reported.	Ask staff what is happening. Review layout and staffing.	●●●
Overtime and leave balances rising. "It's just a busy patch."	Check workload against staffing. Set a date for it to end.	●●○
Rumours and quiet meetings during change.	Talk to the team. Share what you can, early.	●●○
Sick leave and turnover rising in one team.	Look at the work in that team.	●●○
Someone who used to speak up has gone quiet.	Ask them, privately, how things are (page 17).	●●○

The roster test

Pull last month's rosters and timesheets. Mark the five people with the most hours. Then have a quiet word with each of them this week.

Five things to notice

	What you see or hear	Why it matters, and what to do	Priority
1	A raised voice at the counter, and staff on their own.	In jobs that face the public, violence is a known risk. Check staffing, layout and how staff call for help (page 11).	●●●
2	Someone still at their desk long after hours, night after night.	A heavy workload with constant time pressure is a hazard. Ask what is taking the time. Check workload against staffing.	●●○
3	The same names on every late shift.	Fatigue builds up. Spread the load. Set limits on hours and breaks between shifts (page 12).	●●○
4	Sick leave rising in one team.	Look at the work in that team, not just the people in it.	●●○
5	Two people who no longer talk.	Conflict left alone can turn into bullying. Talk to each person early, separately.	●●○

Try it this week

Walk through your workplace with this page, once at the start of a shift and once at the end. Then ask three people: "What part of your work wears you down most?" If you hear the same answer three times, that is your hazard.

Fix the work, not the worker

WorkSafe's guidelines use the same steps as for physical hazards. "Make sure you involve your workers and their representatives in this process."

Step	What WorkSafe says to do
Identify	Ask workers what hazards they see. Look at incident records, workload data and complaints.
Assess	Consider how often, how long and how intensely people are exposed, and how bad the harm could be.
Control	Remove the risk where reasonably practicable. If you can't, reduce it.
Review	"Monitor and regularly review your control measures in consultation with your workers."

Why the work comes first

The strongest controls change how work is designed. Examples are realistic staffing, clear roles and limits on hours. Resilience training and support services help people cope, but they don't remove the hazard.

Leaders set the conditions

WorkSafe says "leaders play an important role in managing psychosocial risks". Officers, such as directors, partners and chief executives (s 18), "cannot solely rely on others" to manage these risks.

Sources WorkSafe (April 2025), Managing psychosocial risks at work: good practice guidelines.

When the work changes

Psychosocial risk needs a different approach depending on what is happening. Field guide 1 explains why. Most of it sits in Complex, because people and pressures interact.

What is happening	How to manage it
Roster limits, minimum breaks, a known complaints process Clear	Apply the rules every time. Check they hold in practice.
Designing a new roster or a new front counter Complicated	Use expert advice and workload data. Test the design with the people who will use it.
Team culture, morale, and how people respond to pressure Complex	Try small changes. Listen to workers. Watch what happens and adjust.
A violent incident, a death, or a serious bullying crisis Chaotic	Make people safe. Get support in. Then report and learn (field guide 5).
A complaint passed between HR and health and safety Confusion	Agree one owner. Treat it as a health and safety risk.

Clear to Complex: the busy season never ends

Extra hours were meant to be short term. Months later they are normal, and nobody decided that.

Complicated to Complex: the restructure

The change plan looks sound on paper. Then uncertainty and job fears spread faster than the plan.

Sources The situation names in colour come from the Cynefin framework (Snowden and Boone, 2007, who called Clear "Simple" and Confusion "Disorder"; current names from Snowden and Friends, 2021).

Ashburton: what the court found

After the shootings, WorkSafe investigated the safety systems of the Ministry of Social Development (MSD). It said MSD should have taken six practicable steps.

#	The steps WorkSafe said were missing
1	Stop clients having physically unrestricted access to staff work areas.
2	Train employees and contractors to respond to emergencies.
3	Adopt a zero-tolerance policy, and build a positive security culture.
4	Introduce client risk profiling.
5	Plan how to manage clients, based on each client's risk.
6	Improve incident investigation and data analysis.

The outcome

MSD pleaded guilty to one charge under the old law, the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 (s 6). The court ruled that step 1 was proven. In December 2016 the judge convicted MSD. She found its systems "were weaker than those of other service-oriented government agencies with a similar client base".

The law does not allow a government department to be fined, so no money changed hands. The judge said that, if she could have fined MSD, she would have set the fine at $16,000. WorkSafe noted that MSD had made significant changes since 2014.

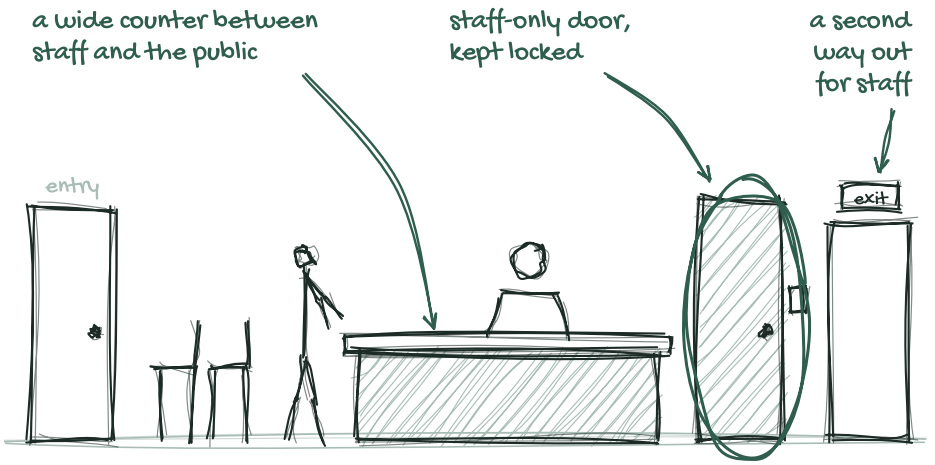
The lesson for leaders

Nobody can predict the day. But in jobs that face the public, violence is predictable. The controls are ordinary ones: layout, training, a plan for each high-risk client, and learning from every incident.

Sources WorkSafe media release, Ministry of Social Development prosecution (6 December 2016), including its note on the Crown Organisations (Criminal Liability) Act 2002.

Violence from the public

In jobs that face the public, violence is a known risk. WorkSafe expects "companies and government agencies who deal directly with the public" to "assess the risks of violence".



- WorkSafe "urges employers to actively involve staff in the analysis process".
- Limiting public access to staff areas may be sensible after you assess the risk. WorkSafe says it is not a blanket requirement.
- Plan for it: staffing, layout, a way to call for help, training, and support after an incident.

Ask the people at the counter

They know which days, times and situations go wrong. Ask them first, act on what they say, and tell them what you did.

Sources WorkSafe media release, Ministry of Social Development prosecution (6 December 2016).

Bullying and fatigue

Bullying

WorkSafe defines bullying as "repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that can lead to physical or psychological harm".

- [ ] Have a clear policy, and more than one way to raise a concern.
- [ ] Act early, even when the facts are unclear.
- [ ] Look for causes in the work, such as overload or unclear roles.

Fatigue

WorkSafe says "fatigue is a state of physical and/or mental exhaustion". Causes include work schedules, night work, shift work, sleep disruption, and physical and mental demands.

- [ ] Set limits on hours and minimum breaks between shifts.
- [ ] Watch for long travel at the end of a long shift.
- [ ] Check that the limits hold in your busiest weeks, not just on paper.

A fatigue case under the current law

A tractor driver for Micheal Vining Contracting crashed at 2.45 am, driving home after a 16.75-hour day, and died. He had worked 197.25 hours in two weeks. The company's own document rated fatigue a high hazard, but it "had not been reviewed or implemented". The company was convicted under ss 36(1)(a) and 48, fined $10,000 and ordered to pay $80,000 reparation.

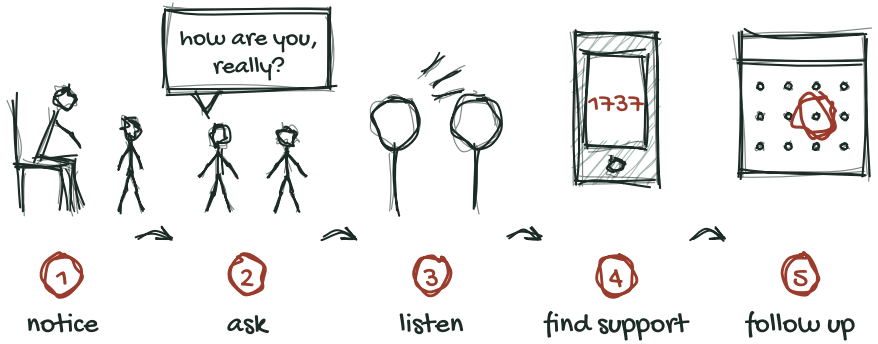
Hours are data

Rosters, timesheets and leave records show fatigue and overload before anyone is hurt. Someone has to look at them, every month.

Sources WorkSafe (April 2025), Managing psychosocial risks at work, glossary; Preventing and responding to bullying at work (March 2017); Fatigue quick guide (updated October 2017); WorkSafe media release (10 May 2018) on the Vining case.

If someone tells you they aren't coping

Many managers dread this moment. You don't have to fix it. Your job is to listen, and help them find support.



Ask: "You don't seem yourself lately. How are you doing, really?"

Listen: "Thanks for telling me. Take your time." Don't rush to solve it.

Ask what would help: "Is anything at work making this harder? What would help most right now?"

Offer support: "We have an EAP, an employee assistance programme. It's free and confidential." "You can also call or text 1737, any time."

Follow up: "Can we talk again on Thursday?" Keep what they tell you private, unless someone's safety is at risk.

If you think they might harm themselves

Ask them directly. "Asking about suicide in a supportive way will not put the thought in their head." If they are in immediate danger, call 111. Then look after yourself too: 1737 is there for you as well.

Sources Health New Zealand, 1737 Need to talk?; 1737.org.nz; HealthEd and the Mental Health Foundation, Are you worried someone is thinking of suicide?

Ask what helps

Research finds people are often reluctant to tell an employer about a need in advance, because they fear unfair treatment. So the need may only come up after something goes wrong.

Ask everyone: "What helps you do your best work here?"

Ask about the setting: "Is anything making work harder, like noise, light, or how instructions come?"

Ask how they like to learn: "Do you like instructions written down, shown to you, or talked through?"

Agree one or two changes: "Let's try that for two weeks and see how it goes."

Follow up on a set day: "How's it going? Should we change anything?"

No diagnosis needed

Nobody should have to share a diagnosis to get a sensible change. Focus on what helps the person do the work well and safely.

Use the words they use

People describe themselves in different ways. Some say "autistic person", others "person with autism". Follow their lead.

Keep it private

What someone tells you about their health or a disability is personal information. Don't share it unless they agree, or sharing is needed to prevent a serious threat to someone's life or health (Privacy Act 2020, s 22, principle 11).

Sources Doyle, N. (2020), Neurodiversity at work, British Medical Bulletin 135(1), on disclosure; Privacy Act 2020, s 22, information privacy principle 11(1)(c) and (f).

Different minds at work

People think, sense, learn and communicate in different ways.

What the words mean

Neurodiversity means the natural range in how people's brains work. A **neurodivergent** person's brain works differently from what is typical. Research on work often focuses on four groups: ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and dyspraxia (also called DCD), which affects movement and coordination.

15 to 20%

A researcher's estimate of how many people are neurodivergent. It allows for people who were never diagnosed.

17%

of people in New Zealand households were disabled in 2023, Stats NZ found. That is about 851,000 people.

A word from te reo Māori

One te reo Māori word for autism is *takiwātanga*. Keri Opai, who created it, translates it as "his or her own time and space". He chose it because, in his experience, autistic people often have their own timing and pace.

Other needs, the same idea

WorkSafe says "not all workers face the same hazards or level of risk, even if they have similar roles or work in the same place". New workers, people working in a second language, and people living with an illness or injury may need something different too.

Start with the work, not a label

You don't need to know who is neurodivergent. Clear instructions, fewer surprises and a quieter place to think help many people, whatever their reason.

Sources Doyle, N. (2020), Neurodiversity at work, British Medical Bulletin 135(1); Stats NZ, 2023 Household Disability Survey (released 27 February 2025); Te Pou, Te Reo Hāpai glossary (2017); WorkSafe (April 2025), Managing psychosocial risks at work, s 3.2.

Individual needs and the law

WorkSafe has no guidance written just for neurodivergent workers. But health and safety, human rights and privacy laws all apply.

Rule	What it says
Training **the Act, s 36(3)(f)**	Give the information, training, instruction or supervision "necessary to protect all persons" from risks from the work.
Disability **Human Rights Act 1993, s 21(1)(h)**	Disability is defined widely. It includes "intellectual or psychological disability or impairment". Get advice on whether it covers a particular person.
Treating people fairly **Human Rights Act 1993, ss 22, 29(1)(a)**	You must not refuse work, offer worse terms or dismiss someone because of disability. One exception: the person needs support that "it is not reasonable to expect the employer to provide".
Safety concerns **Human Rights Act 1993, s 29(1)(b), (2)**	A risk of harm can be a reason to treat someone differently. But not if you could, "without unreasonable disruption, take reasonable measures to reduce the risk to a normal level".

What WorkSafe says

"What may feel manageable for one person could be overwhelming for another." If a worker has specific needs because of a disability, injury or illness, "you should consider making reasonable adjustments to their work or work environment to help prevent harm."

In January 2026, WorkSafe said it "does not currently offer ADHD or neurodivergence specific guidance". It added that its "psychosocial risk materials can be adapted to support neurodiverse workers".

Sources the Act, s 36(3)(f); Human Rights Act 1993, ss 21(1)(h), 22(1), 29(1) and (2); WorkSafe (April 2025), Managing psychosocial risks at work, ss 3.2 and 6.1; WorkSafe, reply to an Official Information Act request and its appendix 1 (13 January 2026), published on fyi.org.nz.

Make spaces that work for more people

Offer these changes to everyone, as a normal part of the job. Then nobody has to explain themselves to get one.

What to look at	Changes that often help
Noise, light and crowds	A quiet room, or a desk away from foot traffic. Noise-cancelling headphones for desk work. Fewer distractions.
Instructions and procedures	Write them down, talk them through and show them. One step at a time. A checklist for critical steps.
Change and surprises	Give notice of changes to rosters, sites or teams. Say what is staying the same.
Time and planning	Clear priorities, deadlines in writing, flexible hours where the work allows, and short regular check-ins.
Meetings	Send the agenda first. Let people add questions in writing afterwards.

Research on which changes work best is still limited. One review found that the evidence "broadly supports" making adjustments, and that more study is needed.

Check a change doesn't add a risk

Headphones can stop someone hearing an alarm or a reversing vehicle. Where that matters, add a flashing light or agree a buddy for emergencies. Tell people before you test the alarm.

Walk it with fresh eyes

Where is it loud, bright or crowded? Which instructions are only ever spoken? Ask your team, then pick one place to fix first.

Sources Doyle, N. (2020), Neurodiversity at work, British Medical Bulletin 135(1), table 4 and the section on adjustments.