

Creating Psychologically Healthy Work Environments – Physical Spaces

Morgan Marshall, MScOT Student, University of Alberta

Psychological Health and Safety in the Occupational Therapy Workplace

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This presentation aims to highlight the importance of physical spaces when creating a psychologically healthy work environment. Two components of physical spaces, the physical environment and the protection of physical safety, will be examined in depth.

The physical work environment has a direct and an indirect effect on our health, well-being and work performance (Ruohomäki, Lahtinen & Reijula, 2015). The physical work environment is composed of:

- structure,
- furniture,
- products,
- chemicals,
- materials and
- production processes (Ruohomäki et al., 2015).

Thayer, et al (2010) conducted a study that measured the physiological stress response of workers that were exposed to two distinctive office settings that had **differences in lighting, air quality, noise and privacy**. This study concluded that an increased stress response and a decreased psychological health resulted from poor lighting, poor air quality, a noisy work environment and a lack of privacy (Thayer et al., 2010). Further research identified that **ventilation, thermal comfort, acoustic quality, cleanliness, furnishing, ergonomics, accessibility, and access to windows**, are all important components in a psychologically healthy work environment (Thayer et al., 2010). It is important to strive towards a healthy workplace because stress at work has been associated with cardiovascular morbidity, substantial economic consequences and increased absenteeism of the workers (Ruohomäki et al., 2015). An increase in worker turnover, decreased commitment to the employer, decreased worker job satisfaction and decreased worker productivity have also been associated with a decreased psychological health (Ruohomäki et al., 2015).

Along with physical spaces, the **protection of physical safety** is critical when creating a psychologically healthy workplace. Guarding Minds @ Work (2012) defines the protection of physical safety as management taking the appropriate actions to protect the physical safety of their employees. These appropriate actions include policies to protect employee's physical safety, training in safety protocols, and a rapid response to any physical accidents or hazardous situations (Guarding Minds @ Work, 2012). The protection of physical safety is vital because research indicates that employee's who perceive their workplace as protective of physical safety, will feel more secure and engaged at work (Guarding Minds @ Work, 2012). It has also been found that employee's who have a high level of confidence in their workplace's safety protection, experience decreased rates of psychological distress (Guarding Minds @ Work, 2012).

Physical spaces have an immense impact on psychological health. It is imperative to ensure that the physical environment follows the recommended guidelines, maximizing the psychological benefits. A psychologically healthy workplace involves many factors, with physical spaces being only one small component. Once the physical environment has been improved, it is important to consider the additional factors that contribute to a psychologically healthy workplace. Focusing on all the aspects of a psychologically healthy workplace will ensure productive and engaged workers, as well as a holistically healthy environment.

RESOURCES

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