

Psychological injuries—Frequently Asked Questions

Does WCB only accept cases of PTSD?

WCB-Alberta covers a variety of psychological injuries that are shown to have occurred at work, including PTSD.

Do you have to be a first responder to have a psychological injury claim accepted?

The Workers' Compensation Act covers all workers in Alberta in any covered occupation.

What is considered to be a psychological injury?

The Act defines a psychological injury as: “any psychological disorder or condition that meets the diagnostic criteria for a disease or condition that is described in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association.”

What is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)?

Often known by its acronym, DSM-5, this manual is used by health care professionals to diagnose and evaluate mental disorders. The DSM-5 is published by the American Psychiatric Association and is used throughout the Canadian health care system.

Does WCB always require a DSM diagnosis before they will accept a claim?

Yes. *The Act* requires that a worker is diagnosed with a psychological injury in order to accept the claim. The diagnosis can be from a family physician, psychologist, or other specialist such as a psychiatrist. However, if a worker is experiencing symptoms following a traumatic event at work, and needs help having their symptoms diagnosed, WCB can assist in arranging an assessment.

Will WCB presume the psychological injury happened at work?

If a worker is diagnosed with a psychological injury by a physician or psychologist, following exposure to a traumatic event at work, WCB will presume the diagnosis is a work-related injury unless the contrary is proven.

What does “unless the contrary is proven” mean?

The presumption that a worker’s psychological injury may be work related is “rebuttable,” meaning that there may be evidence that shows the injury was not caused by work. This may require WCB staff to gather additional information to ensure there is a reasonable cause and effect relationship between diagnosis and the work event(s).

When would the presumption not apply?

Typically, the presumption may be rebutted if there is evidence that the traumatic event(s) did not arise out of the course of employment (i.e., the incident was not work related); the worker was not directly involved or did not witness the traumatic event; and/or the worker’s psychological condition was caused by non-work events or personal stressors.

What does WCB consider to be a traumatic event?

A traumatic event can be a single or a series of work-related incidents that the worker directly experienced or witnessed, and their exposure to the incident(s) resulted in a psychological injury. A traumatic event(s) are:

- **specific, sudden, frightening or shocking and /or**
- **an actual or threatened death or serious injury to oneself or others or threat to one’s physical integrity.**

Examples can include events such as:

- a victim of a robbery or hostage-taking event; witnessing the death or severe injury of a co-worker; or providing assistance to victims of severe physical trauma or fatalities.
- workload or work-related interpersonal incidents that are excessive and unusual in comparison to the pressures and tensions experienced in normal employment.
- clear and confirmable harassing behaviour at the workplace where a worker has been subjected to threats of harm, violations of personal privacy, public shaming or baseless threats to his or her employment status.

Are there a certain number of traumatic incidents that I have to be exposed to before WCB will consider my claim?

A traumatic work event can involve a single incident (acute) or series of incidents (cumulative). The importance is not placed on the number of incidents, but on the impact of the incident(s) on the individual worker.

If my injury did not occur right away, but came about after many years of exposure, will WCB still consider my case?

There is no right or wrong reaction to traumatic events. Everyone will experience trauma differently. We will consider your case based on your individual circumstances.

For workers who are exposed to multiple events over the course of their employment, the presumptions will be considered even if the worker was able to tolerate past traumatic events.

For example, a first responder who has attended the scene of numerous emergencies/accidents, or a correctional worker exposed to a series of critical incidents while working in a correctional centre who develops a psychological injury as a result of the combined impact of those events.

How long will it take to decide if my claim is accepted?

It depends on the complexity of your claim and the availability of information. For example, in cases where there is an obvious and undeniable connection between the traumatic event and the worker's injury, the decisions regarding the acceptance of the claim can be made quickly. Complex cases, such as those involving many months or years of events, may take longer.

What information does WCB need to decide my claim?

Typically, we will gather information that will help clarify the diagnosis and confirm the injury is work related. Information needed may include: medical assessments including mental health assessments, information from your employer, job descriptions or statements from coworkers.

If we need additional information, our customer service staff will let you know what information they need and the reason(s) why.

What is the purpose of a mental health assessment?

Mental health assessments fulfil several functions in managing your WCB claim. First, the assessment confirms the diagnosis of a psychological injury. Second, the assessment can recommend needed treatment. Finally, an assessment can help to identify any work restrictions that should be taken into consideration when contemplating return to work.

I have recently been diagnosed with a work-related psychological injury, but also have a preexisting psychological condition. Will my pre-existing condition affect my current claim?

A pre-existing psychological condition does not affect your ability to receive WCB benefits for a work-related psychological injury.

I filed a WCB claim for a psychological injury and I'm already working with a psychologist. Do I have to switch to a WCB accredited provider?

If you have started treatment with a non-WCB accredited psychologist, we will make every effort to support this arrangement. However, if progress towards returning to work has not occurred within the first ten weeks, you may be required to move to a WCB-accredited psychologist. This will be arranged in consultation with you and your current provider.

Depending on your situation and unique treatment needs, you may be referred to a psychological injury program, which may involve a WCB-approved psychologist. Psychological injury programs include counselling, team-based therapy, exposure therapy and return-to-work (RTW) supports.

Where can I find more information about psychological injuries and the available supports?

www.wcb.ab.ca/treatment-and-recovery/get-treatment/psychological-injuries.html

