



Safer Workplace. Healthier Employees.

The Connection between Musculoskeletal
Health and a Best-in-Class Safety Culture



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Building a Best-in-Class Safety Culture

In business, safety and employee wellness are inextricably linked; however, most companies treat them separately. By taking a holistic approach to employee safety and wellness, companies can reduce the potential for injuries, improve return-to-work outcomes, and better manage overall medical costs while also enhancing company culture, employee confidence, productivity, and retention.

In a positive safety culture, nothing is more important than safe work under any circumstance. The objective for every day is to improve safety performance toward a goal of zero incidents. Traditionally, it is not uncommon for workers to feel pressured to take shortcuts or break safety rules to meet deadlines or production goals in a negative safety culture. Employees may accept pain as part of the job, fear losing their job if injured, or be concerned they can't afford time off without pay to seek treatment.

According to OSHA, the best workplace safety programs include four essential elements:

- Management commitment combined with employee involvement;
- A thorough analysis of the worksite;
- Hazard prevention and control; and
- Safety and health training.



Workplace safety programs with all four elements strengthen your organization's compliance with OSHA regulations while keeping workers healthy. An effective workplace safety program can motivate employees to adopt safer work practices and report minor musculoskeletal disorders before they worsen into debilitating injuries.

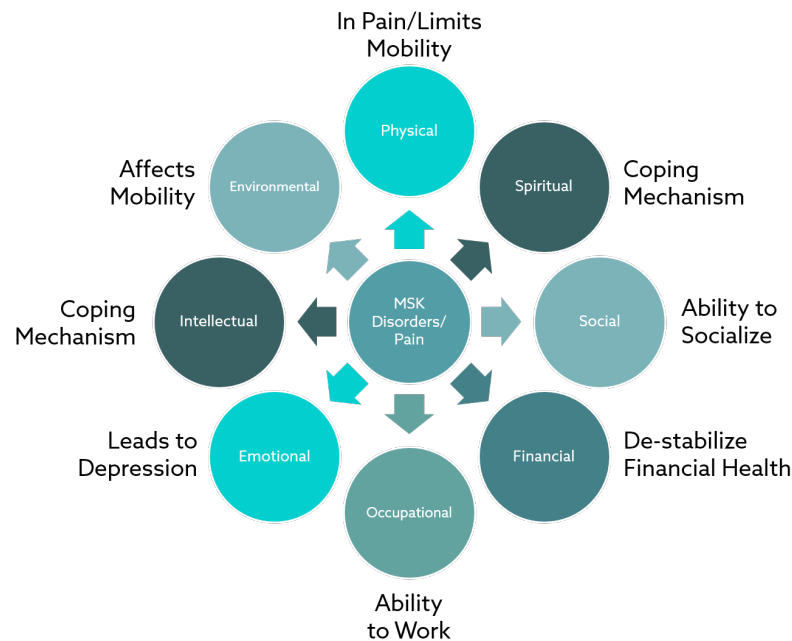
“Safety cultures consist of shared beliefs, practices, and attitudes that exist at an establishment. Culture is the atmosphere created by those beliefs, attitudes, etc., which shape our behavior.”

OSHA

The Importance of Musculoskeletal Health in Total Employee Health

Total employee wellness encompasses physical health, spiritual health, social health, financial health, occupational health, emotional health, intellectual health, and environmental health.

Muscle, cartilage, tendons, ligaments, joints, and other connective tissues, creates the musculoskeletal system. Musculoskeletal disorders are injuries or illnesses that affect the human body's movement. Good musculoskeletal health is more than the absence of a musculoskeletal condition. Good musculoskeletal health means that the muscles, joints, and bones work well together without pain.




7 Ways Poor Musculoskeletal Health Impacts Total Wellness



The connection between poor musculoskeletal health and total wellness is profound. Let's take a closer look.

- 1. Physical Health** - When employees have a musculoskeletal injury, it affects almost all aspects of their lives, including work and home, resulting in a reduced quality of life and increased dependence on others. As such, injuries severely affect an individual's life and make everyday activities that most of us take for granted, such as sitting at a desk, walking the dog, grocery shopping, making the bed, and lifting objects extremely difficult.
- 2. Social Health** - If someone is in constant pain, it affects their ability to participate in social activities. Humans depend on one another, and their wellbeing depends on a sense of belonging.
- 3. Occupational Health** - MSK injuries can affect mobility and dexterity, limiting a person's ability to work.
- 4. Financial Health** - If someone is unable to work, it severely limits their ability to generate an income and adds to emotional stress and worry.
- 5. Emotional Health** - Pain, limited mobility, and isolation can cause depression and anxiety. Constant worry about finances from missed work can also increase cortisol in the body, raising blood pressure and even magnify pain symptoms.
- 6. Environmental Health** - Restricted mobility limits a person's ability to navigate their environment, whether it is walking up a flight of stairs, walking in inclement weather, or having limited ability to walk a nature trail.
- 7. Intellectual Health and Spiritual Health** - These two aspects of overall wellness can act as coping mechanisms when an MSK disorder is severe.



When it comes to the workplace, MSK injuries are the largest single category of injuries and are responsible for almost 30 percent of all workers' compensation claims.

[Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)

According to the World Health Organization, musculoskeletal conditions are the leading contributor to disability worldwide, with low back pain being the single leading cause of disability.



MSK wellness is the foundation of total employee wellness and is a critical component of any safety program. Employers need to champion a safety culture that addresses musculoskeletal health and puts employees' wellbeing first—understanding that people do their best work when they feel healthy, safe, supported, and heard by leadership.

Supporting a Safe Employee Journey with an MSK Wellness Program

Safety protocols and MSK programs begin once a potential employee has received an offer of employment and is in effect during three phases of the employee journey – pre-employment, onboarding, and employment.



Pre-Employment

In cases where physical labor is involved, an offer of employment is likely contingent on the potential employee passing a post-offer employment test (POET). Each job has its own set of physical requirements, and POET ensures the candidate can physically perform the job according to the functional job description.



Onboarding

Once a candidate is hired, many firms implement a work conditioning program. Work condition begins with onboarding but may continue throughout their employment. Work conditioning prepares the body to be able to complete the tasks required at work. Physical therapists focus on improving an employee's strength, flexibility, and endurance for safely transitioning into a new job. This is especially important if the employee moves into a much more physically demanding job than their previous job.



Employment

Onsite clinics staffed by physical therapists, with advanced specialized training, can prevent and treat injuries. Clinics not staffed by physical therapists may still be able to prevent injuries; however, they cannot create therapy treatment plans for injured employees. In these cases, employees need to see a physical therapist offsite for a treatment plan that increases costs and reduces productivity when they leave the workplace for visits. Onsite physical therapists also have another critical role -- making rounds in the work environment. When not treating patients in the clinic, PTs proactively observe and engage with employees while performing their jobs. During safe work rounds, PTs are job coaching to ensure employees perform the physical aspects of the jobs correctly and are proactively evaluating ergonomics in real-time.

Post-injury testing helps ensure a safe transition to return to work through post-injury management. A post-injury management plan aligns the employee, provider, and supervisor with an open communications plan and sets expectations for light duty during the transition.



Benefits

The benefits of any MSK wellness program include:

- + Extend employee work-life
- + Reduce absenteeism
- + Presenteeism
- + Fewer injuries
- + A stronger safety culture
- + Improved employee morale
- + Increased productivity
- + Lower workers compensation and insurance claims
- + Improved compliance with OSHA regulations
- + Improved reputation for attracting new employees and retaining existing ones

The Role of Communication and Engagement in Employee Safety and MSK Programs

Safety culture refers to shared organizational values of mitigating risk. A positive safety culture exists when most people, from senior management to temporary workers within a company, place a high value on maintaining a safe workplace.

Communication plays a pivotal role in a positive safety culture. Employers need to recognize that merely publishing and enforcing a health and safety policy won't have a long-term effect on business. It is unlikely employees will remember the information after they read it the first time. There needs to be ongoing safety training throughout the organization and a clear understanding of why safety is vitally important.

Onsite MSK programs provide precisely that. They drive safety awareness with increased safety and risk prevention training through ongoing and proactive communication with employees about performing physical tasks correctly within their job. When physical therapists actively engage employees in the warehouse or on the manufacturing floor, they provide

corrective feedback and gain the employee's trust. Their presence and availability in work areas help foster mutual respect and team accountability through routine engagement with workers and other stakeholders.

Onsite PTs also proactively assess ergonomics to design or modify the work to eliminate discomfort and risk of injury due to work. Onsite PTs catch injuries early and often preventing injuries altogether. Engaging with employees to communicate early aches and pains is key to preventing MSK injuries. A well-trained PT can identify when an ache or pain is first aid versus an injury requiring early intervention treatment plans. Sometimes an employee is unsure of the severity of their discomfort or has a high pain tolerance. Being onsite enables the physical therapist to identify and expedite a treatment plan if prevention is not enough. This skill helps prevent surgeries, extended treatment plans, misdiagnosis. An early ache or pain that is prevented from becoming a disabling injury reduces the employee's time away from work, reduces stress on the employee, and improves their long-term health outlook.



WorkWell – Your Trusted Advisor for MSK Health

With 30 years of experience in developing and delivering musculoskeletal health programs, WorkWell has become a trusted safety partner to F500 firms. We are experts in preventing and treating sprains, strains, and back pain that involve muscle, nerves, joints, ligaments, and tendons, which can significantly impact employee health and overall total wellness.

Workplace injury prevention requires a systematic approach throughout the employee journey, beginning with functional job descriptions to post-offer employment testing and work readiness during onboarding. Work readiness continues throughout employment to ensure physical fitness to meet the requirements of the job. Onsite physical therapists continuously refine workplace ergonomics and provide job coaching that discusses best practices for body mechanics, lifting for movement, for positioning. Those are the things that are going to help in the long term prevent injuries from happening in the first place. And if injuries occur, onsite PTs can effectively treat injuries and test to ensure the employee is ready to get back to work.

WorkWell solutions provide a positive and consistent experience throughout the employee journey and are foundational elements in world-class safety programs.

For more information, visit <https://www.workwell.com> and follow WorkWell on [LinkedIn](#) , [FaceBook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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