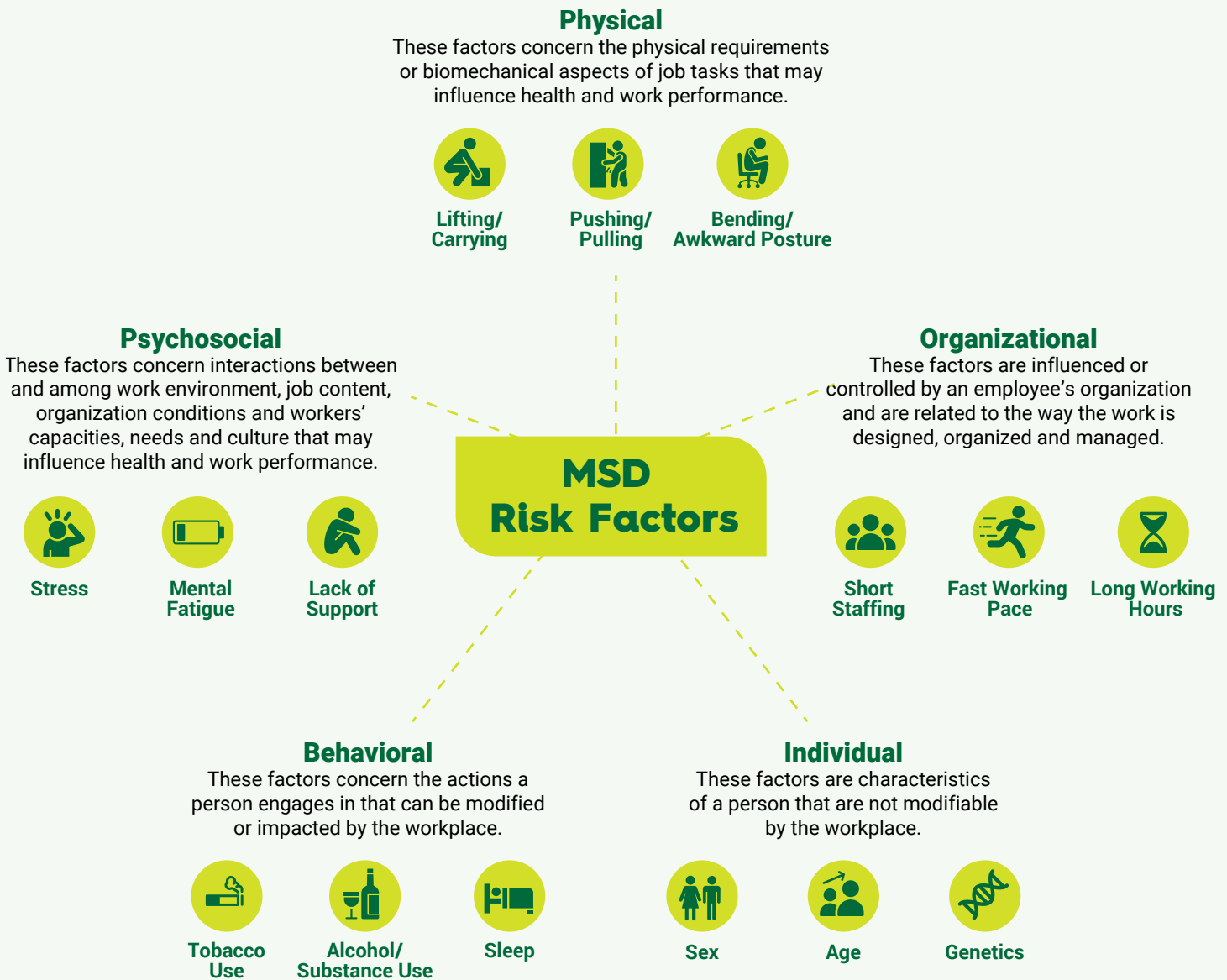# Insights on Non-Physical MSD Risk Factors

A holistic approach to musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) prevention and mitigation addresses non-physical risk factors alongside more commonly known physical risk factors.

MSD Risk Factors

Physical
These factors concern the physical requirements or biomechanical aspects of job tasks that may influence health and work performance.

- Lifting/Carrying
- Pushing/Pulling
- Bending/Awkward Posture

Psychosocial
These factors concern interactions between and among work environment, job content, organization conditions and workers' capacities, needs and culture that may influence health and work performance.

- Stress
- Mental Fatigue
- Lack of Support

Organizational
These factors are influenced or controlled by an employee's organization and are related to the way the work is designed, organized and managed.

- Short Staffing
- Fast Working Pace
- Long Working Hours

Behavioral
These factors concern the actions a person engages in that can be modified or impacted by the workplace.

- Tobacco Use
- Alcohol/Substance Use
- Sleep

Individual
These factors are characteristics of a person that are not modifiable by the workplace.

- Sex
- Age
- Genetics

The focus of employers for MSD risk mitigation should be on modifiable risk factors.

Ways to address non-physical risk factors:

Many connections have been found between non-physical risk factors and MSDs. Safety professionals should convey the importance of addressing non-physical risk factors and champion non-physical risk management across their organization.

At the organizational level, safety professionals can encourage several strategies to reduce psychosocial, organizational and behavioral risk factors at work and lessen MSD risk. Organizations should:

- Engage in risk identification that addresses tasks being completed, management styles, interpersonal relationships, work roles, career concerns and environmental conditions.

- Provide supervisor training aimed at addressing organizational issues such as justice, safety climate and personal treatment of employees.

- Incorporate measurement of non-physical risk factors in audits or other assessments.

- Ensure safety and health training is accurate, readily available and delivered by qualified instructors.

Safety professionals are responsible for conveying the importance of managing non-physical risk factors and championing this movement to get different levels of the organization involved in non-physical risk management. Below are some ways to engage employees across your organization.

Frontline workers

Risk management systems are not sufficient without buy-in and involvement of frontline workers. If frontline workers are not empowered to voice concerns, feel unsupported by management, or are experiencing job dissatisfaction or fatigue, it may be harder to create a safe working environment. As a safety professional, you can get frontline workers involved in the following ways:

Education:
Engage frontline workers in learning about the connection between non-physical risk factors and workplace safety.

Communication:
Empower frontline workers to voice their safety concerns as they relate to non-physical factors and be prepared to act on those concerns.

Decision making:
Take a participative approach by involving frontline workers in decision making about their working conditions. Employees are more likely to adhere to protocols if they have a hand in determining them and perceive they have control over aspects of their work.

Supervisors/mid-management

Supervisors play an important role in enacting safety across teams and employees. Ensuring adequate training, equipment, policies and working environments often falls on mid-management. As a safety professional, you can get supervisors involved in the following ways:

Transparency:

Support communication and knowledge sharing between supervisors and workers. Enact a communication system for frontline workers to clearly and safely communicate non-physical risk factors.

Observation:

Just as frontline workers can see the risks in their day-to-day jobs, supervisors should be able to identify risks, including non-physical risks, across their teams. Train managers in how to identify non-physical risk factors.

Facilitation:

Be a champion for proper MSD intervention implementation at your site or on your team. Work with leadership, safety professionals and direct reports to encourage the incorporation of non-physical risk factor mitigation into existing MSD prevention efforts.

Upper management/senior leadership

For these risks to be addressed at an organizational level, leadership buy-in is needed. Safety professionals need to be able to make a case for why non-physical risk management is in the best interest of the company so that leadership will be open to enacting larger, policy-level changes.

Return on investment:

Workers who are safe, from both physical and non-physical risk, show increases in productivity, morale and attendance. Non-physical risk management is good for both individuals and the bottom line.

Workplace culture:

Leadership can help to set the tone for a workplace's culture, inclusive of safety culture and psychological safety. Fostering a culture of support, transparent communication and listening to employees is beneficial for many reasons, including lessening the chances of MSDs.

Non-biased feedback:

Make it a priority to gather feedback from employees. Enact validated measurement tools designed to measure non-physical risk factors. Risks cannot be mitigated and addressed if their presence and severity are unknown.