

## Getting Started With **TOTAL WORKER HEALTH**

By Justin Molocznik

**Worker safety and worker well-being are intimately intertwined. If this fact was not apparent to organizations before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now. Just think how critical it was (and still is) to understand the activities and health of employees outside of the workplace and their impact within the workplace.**

**The understanding of this** relationship and how it can impact an individual (and vice versa) has expanded the definition of safety and health in the workplace. In addition, the responsibility and accountability of organizations and safety professionals alike have grown to encompass a more holistic understanding of a safe and healthy work environment. But while the pandemic may have been the catalyst to a bigger audience on these changes, the discussion has been taking place for several decades, and the concepts and tools available are plentiful. This is what we understand as Total Worker Health.

Total Worker Health (TWH), as conceived by NIOSH and the CDC, is defined as “policies, programs and practices that integrate protection from work-related safety and health hazards with promotion of injury- and illness-prevention efforts to advance worker well-being” (CDC, 2020).

The TWH approach offers a holistic model for improving workforce safety, health and well-being. It does so through an integrated approach that prioritizes safety while simultaneously engaging in other workplace efforts (e.g., healthy work design, employee training and development, injury and illness prevention efforts) to advance the overall well-being of workers. (CDC, 2020)

My interpretation and practice of this approach is to look beyond the traditional set of causal factors to workplace incidents, injuries and illnesses and expand our understanding of how all aspects of work and life can impact an employee’s safety and health. A great example of this is the manifestation of stress and distraction at work for an employee who, for instance, is a caregiver to a loved one at home but has limited or unprotected access to time off to fill that role.

I recently spoke with an expert colleague of mine, Katia Costa-Black, about



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how OSH professionals can apply TWH principles. As the Senior Manager for Education and Partnerships at Oregon Institute of Occupational Health Sciences, Costa-Black is leading the TWH education and outreach portfolio and has a unique perspective on this approach and how it is applied. During our conversation, she described a holistic approach to worker safety and well-being that incorporates collaboration within organizations to address recognized workplace hazards and creates efficiencies at the same time.

What is great about Costa-Black’s perspective is that it recognizes that the entire organization has responsibility and accountability as stakeholders in employee safety and well-being. She says, “It’s the function of the whole system including the business system.

Organization-wide you’re thinking about the business’s goals and the organization in alignment with the idea of improving and advancing health and safety and well-being” (K. Costa-Black, personal communication, Nov. 13, 2023).

As professionals in the business of the safety and health of workers, it is easy to justify why buy-in and collaboration are needed across an organization. But to those who are not in our industry, this importance can easily be drawn from the recognition that work (along with economic stability, education access and living environment, among other factors) is a social determinant of health. Where one works and the conditions of that work can have a profound impact on a person’s health. Because of this, it is critical to identify all the relationships in the workplace related to experiencing an injury or illness.

Costa-Black gives an example related to understanding the relationships between physical and psychosocial hazards (e.g., stress, strain, interpersonal conflicts). “Consider just the occurrence of musculoskeletal disorders. We know that there is an interplay between psychosocial hazards and physical hazards,” she says. “We spend a lot of time addressing physical hazards with engineering ergonomics and redesigning workplaces. But we don’t look at eliminating existing psychosocial hazards with as much attention. This might lead to workers experiencing chronic pain related to musculoskeletal disorder and even work disability. With Total Worker Health, we have an opportunity to be more proactive in a preventive approach, to look into these hazards in a more holistic way and understand all risks that are impacting the health of workers” (K. Costa-Black, personal communication, Nov. 13, 2023).

Many safety professionals recognize that activities and interventions conceived in the TWH approach have also been the approach of effectively safe and healthy organizations for some time. The first step to incorporating such an approach is learning what your

organization is already doing in this arena and work from there. Costa-Black believes that OSH professionals are in a unique position in this evaluation. “Everybody (in an organization) has a role to play in advocating for Total Worker Health, but I think OSH professionals are in a really good position to do a lot of the work around understanding workplace hazards that are affecting the workplace of today and utilizing the framework of Total Worker Health to think beyond regulatory compliance, by providing the opportunity to understand the physical and psychosocial environment in a more human-centered, inclusive perspective” (K. Costa-Black, personal communication, Nov. 13, 2023).

Costa-Black believes you have the insight to understand a greater depth of workplace hazards, but where do you start? I recommend beginning your journey with the document, “Fundamentals of Total Worker Health Approaches” (NIOSH, 2016) and the CDC Worksite Health ScoreCard, which helps employers assess what health promotion

strategies they have in place and what gaps may exist (CDC, n.d.). Again, you and your organization are likely already doing some of the work prescribed in a TWH approach. The challenge is to supplement what you are doing with best practices and interventions outlined in this approach.

It can be an overwhelming task to evaluate your safety programs and organizations with a critical eye to worker well-being. It can also be incredibly rewarding to the workforce to take this time and start making the changes that positively impact them. Recognize, however, that we work and live in a different environment than we did 20 years ago. Knowing this, we must adapt to the demands of an evolving and accountable workplace where the advantages of supporting the wellness of our employees, both physically and psychologically,

equate to a return on investment for everyone involved. **PSJ**

## References

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## Cite this article

Moloczniak, J. (2024, Jan.). Getting started with Total Worker Health. *Professional Safety*, 69(1), 46-47.

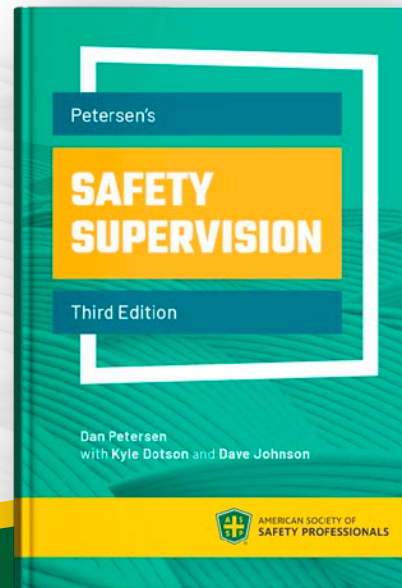
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