

Psychological Safety

One-Minute Guide

Psychological safety is a critical, but often overlooked, factor in safeguarding and high-risk work. Psychological safety means people feel comfortable to think out loud, share concerns, and explore uncertainty without fear.

Working with people who have complex needs and high-risk situations can be emotionally heavy or draining at times. Psychological safety supports safe decision-making, learning, and better outcomes. When it is present, people are more likely to slow down, test assumptions and notice when something does not feel right. When it is absent, practice can become defensive, overly procedural or risk-averse, even among experienced and committed professionals.

Psychological safety is not an individual trait or a matter of personal resilience. It is shaped by organisational culture, leadership behaviours, supervision, and how mistakes, challenge and uncertainty are responded to.

Do Not Assume Coping Equals Psychological Safety

A common mistake is to assume that someone who appears calm, capable or experienced is psychologically safe. Many people continue to function outwardly while carrying significant emotional and cognitive load. Others may stay silent because they believe uncertainty will be seen as a weakness, or that raising concerns will lead to blame or scrutiny.

If someone is quiet, it may be a sign they don't yet feel safe enough to share what's on their mind. A lack of concerns raised does not mean people feel safe to speak. In some environments, "coping" becomes the expected norm, and stress, anxiety or moral discomfort are quietly normalised as part of the job. This can apply to paid staff, volunteers and peer supporters alike.

Psychological Safety and Safe Decision-Making

Psychological safety directly affects how decisions are made. When people feel safe, they are more likely to explore issues such as mental capacity or consent, weigh proportionality, and challenge optimistic or pessimistic bias. They can say, *"I'm not sure," "I need to think this through,"* or *"Something doesn't sit right"*, all signs of good safeguarding practice.

When psychological safety is low, decision-making often becomes rigid or superficial. Complex situations are framed as straightforward, risks may be minimised or exaggerated, and important factors such as coercion, cumulative harm or impact may not be fully explored. This increases the likelihood of missed opportunities and poorer outcomes.

Psychologically safe environments balance high support with high challenge. People are encouraged to take responsibility for decisions, while also being supported to question, reflect and be challenged without fear of blame. This balance helps prevent both defensive practice and unhelpful risk-taking.

Structural Barriers

Psychological safety is not experienced equally by everyone. People's different identities and lived experiences can affect how safe they feel. Racism, discrimination or subtle everyday biases can make speaking up harder.

Leaders, supervisors and coordinators need to be alert to whose voices are heard, whose concerns are minimised, and whether reflective spaces allow honest conversations about identity, bias and lived experience. Inclusive practice is a core part of psychological safety.

Be Curious

Early signs are gently prompts to check in, slow down, and create space for someone to share what they may be carrying. These signs may appear in supervision, team meetings, reflective discussions or informal check-ins.

For example, someone may present complex situations as "obvious" or "straightforward," rely heavily on policy language, or avoid discussing uncertainty. Repeated high-risk decisions without reflection can indicate narrowed thinking rather than confidence.

Emotional signals may include detachment, flatness, heightened defensiveness or a strong desire to close situations quickly. Reflective spaces that focus only on tasks, performance or throughput, with little room for thinking or feeling, can unintentionally reinforce the message that uncertainty is not welcome.

What Psychologically Safe Supervision Looks Like

Psychologically safe supervision and support make space for both thinking and feeling. They recognise that safeguarding and high-risk decisions are rarely clear-cut and that uncertainty is part of ethical practice. Leaders and supervisors should model curiosity, explore how decisions were reached, and acknowledge the emotional and moral load of the work.

Trauma-informed supervision is one way that organisations can actively support psychological safety. It recognises the emotional impact of the work and creates space to process this safely, reducing burnout and supporting better judgement.

Psychological safety is not about lowering standards or avoiding challenge. It is about making it safe to think well, to learn, and to raise concerns early, before risk escalates.

Key Messages

- **Psychological safety is a safeguarding issue, not a personal resilience issue.**
- **When it is absent, people may find it harder to think clearly or explore options and learning opportunities may be missed.**
- **Creating psychologically safe environments is a shared responsibility of organisations, leaders, managers, volunteers and safeguarding systems.**