

# Psychological safety:

## An essential constituent of continuous quality improvement

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**G**iven the complexity of the dispensing of medications, medication incidents are an inevitable part of pharmacy practice. In fact, it is estimated that as many as seven million medication incidents occur in Canadian community pharmacies each year. Quality improvement programs encourage the reporting and analysis of these incidents in an effort to improve learning and prevent recurrence. Unfortunately, reporting and discussing errors among healthcare practitioners is often avoided due to the fear of retribution from both fellow colleagues and management. Overcoming these barriers is necessary to create an environment of psychological safety. Psychological safety refers to the phenomenon where members of a team are comfortable taking interpersonal risks, such as reporting and discussing errors, without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career. In healthcare, where errors form the basis upon which improvements in processes are established, psychological safety sets the foundation in allowing organizations and individual practitioners to learn from errors. The effects of psychological safety can be expressed across three different levels: individual, group, and organizational (see Table 1).

### CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Development of psychological safety within the workplace promotes sharing of errors via upwards communication. This encourages staff to express concerns and share incidents not only among their peers, but also with executive staff members, resulting in potential for implementation of organization-wide changes and improvements.

To develop a work culture that embraces psychological safety, factors

Level	Description
Individual	A working environment where an individual feels psychologically safe elicits confidence, and therefore drives creativity, proactivity, and eagerness to share information with others. Employees are more likely to proactively engage in sharing information with their peers and create opportunity for generative discussion of improvement.
Group	Psychological safety at a group level is encompassed by team learning and continuing innovation developed through task conflict and group collaboration. The resulting supportive networks allow members to learn from shortcomings and incidents, and encourage innovative changes in existing processes to optimize outcomes in the future.
Organizational	Psychological safety at the organizational level involves building relationships between employer and employee, and the development of support networks within the organization. Management practices that promote a sense of psychological safety within the organization facilitate knowledge exchange between peers and create an environment where individuals feel safe taking interpersonal risks.

Table 1. Effects of Psychological Safety at the Individual, Group, and Organizational Levels

that influence employees' perception of the work environment must first be addressed. This includes improvement in key areas of interpersonal relationships, management behaviours, and organizational practices. Cumulatively, these factors enhance psychological safety and ensure that employees consistently feel comfortable with sharing any incidents that they encounter.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY REFERS TO THE PHENOMENON WHERE MEMBERS OF A TEAM ARE COMFORTABLE TAKING INTERPERSONAL RISKS, SUCH AS REPORTING AND DISCUSSING ERRORS, WITHOUT FEAR OF NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES TO SELF-IMAGE, STATUS, OR CAREER.**

#### Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relationships, and the social support and resources inherent within, promote psychological safety and contribute to team learning, performance, and innovation. Characteristics such as shared team rewards, formal team structures, and engagement in cross disciplinary work improve the strength of social networks and enhance psychological safety.

#### Management behaviours

Supportive and clarifying management processes are the most effective management styles in promoting psychological safety in the workplace. Management characteristics such as inclusiveness, support, trustworthiness, openness, and behavioural integrity strongly influence employee perceptions of psychological safety, which

heighten perceptions of psychological safety. Providing a supportive environment through access to mentoring and implementation of diversity practices promotes open discussion and willingness of staff to express concerns.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT (CQI)

Creating a psychologically safe environment in healthcare settings will be necessary for the success of any continuous quality improvement (CQI) initiatives. The incident reports collected not only help individual departments develop quality improvement initiatives, but also allow aggregate analysis for shared learning within the organization. Without psychological safety, healthcare practitioners will be less likely to report incidents, suggest new ideas, or seek assistance. Creating a positive team dynamic and ensuring management and regulatory support are essential to establishing a safe environment at the individual, group, and organizational levels. By working towards psychological safety, organizations and individual practitioners can better learn from incidents and improve patient/medication safety. ■

in turn, fosters beneficial outcomes such as team learning behavior, team performance, engagement in quality improvement work, and a reduction in errors.

#### Organizational practices

Supportive organizational practices are positively related to employee work outcomes such as organizational commitment and job performance as they

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