Psychological safety

Maternity and Children Quality Improvement Collaborative (MCQIC) Safety Culture Webinar Series

The Scottish Patient Safety Programme (SPSP) is a national quality improvement programme that aims to improve the safety and reliability of care and reduce harm. SPSP supports improvements in safety across a wide range of care settings including maternity, neonatal and paediatric services.

The MCQIC focuses on improving outcomes for babies, children, mothers and families. We work collaboratively with the maternity, neonatal and paediatric units within 14 NHS boards across Scotland to help deliver safe care through quality improvement methodology.

The Essentials of Safe Care (EoSC) are a key element of the SPSP's work. This is a practical package of evidence-based guidance and support that enables Scotland's health and social care system to deliver safe care. It aims to accelerate sharing of learning and improvement work through a range of engagement and learning opportunities.

Our driver diagram outlines key elements that support our aim of delivering safe care to every person, within every setting, every time.

In spring 2022 MCQIC held a series of webinars focusing on the EoSC primary driver of **leadership** to promote a **culture of safety at all levels**. This summary provides an overview of the webinar focusing on **psychological safety**. A recording of this webinar can be accessed on our website.

Essentials of Safe Care: Driver Diagram		
Aim	**Primary drivers**	**Secondary drivers**
To enable the delivery of Safe Care for every person within every system every time	Person centred systems and behaviours are embedded and support safety for everyone	Structures and process that enable safe, person centred care
		Inclusion and involvement
		Workforce capacity and capability
	Safe communications within and between teams	Skills: appropriate language, format and content
		Practice: use of standardised tools for communications
		Critical Situations: management of communications in different situations
	Leadership to promote a culture of safety at all levels	**Psychological safety**
		Staff wellbeing
		Systems for learning
	Safe consistent clinical and care processes across health and social care settings	Reliable implementation of standard infection prevention and control precautions
		Safe staffing

What is psychological safety, why does it matter and how can you achieve it in a workplace environment?

Professor Suzette Woodward, Professional and Clinical Advisor in Patient Safety, Visiting Professor of Patient Safety, Imperial College London

What is psychological safety?

> *"A culture in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves"*
>
> **Amy Edmonson, The Fearless Organisation**

Unlike what most people think, psychological safety is more than having a workplace culture which allows people to speak up about wrongdoing, it is more nuanced.

It is important to understand that literally any factor which makes us different including gender, sexuality, ethnic minority, status or banding means that we are treated differently. This in turn can make it much harder for some people to speak up. Psychological safety is about embracing people's differences and valuing them.

It is easier to show what we mean by psychological safety when we contrast between what it is versus what is not.

Psychology safety is:	Psychological safety is not:
• a common purpose	• using power or fear to motivate people
• a shared belief	• just being nice - you can have challenging discussions
• ability to talk to each other across professions	• a license to whine
• clarity of objectives and expectations, or	• oversharing, or
• a culture of appreciation, acknowledging.	• a guarantee that all your ideas will be applauded.

What are some of the factors which get in the way of psychological safety?

Factors can include:

- the way in which we speak: our tone, language and communication

- using acronyms: you can silence people if they do not feel comfortable saying they do not understand the language used

- talking down to others, insulting, belittling, rudeness, incivility and bullying

- non-verbal insults such as eye rolling or smirking

- interrupting, excluding and ignoring, or

- paying little attention and showing no interest in opinions.

We are living in a blame culture climate which does not support psychological safety. For example, it is common for people to blame themselves when things go wrong. We can also blame others in both direct and more subtle ways. These behaviours are linked with shame and guilt, and imply that an error is a choice. Nobody choses to make a mistake, they happen because of very human factors or because of how particular systems are built. This type of thinking silences people because it is often easier to blame a person than a process. It shifts accountability from the system to the individual.

The pandemic had a negative effect on psychological safety. Examples of negative impacts are listed below.

- Increased bullying for people of different gender, ethnicity or race and age.

- Changed the way in which we communicate and how our work environments are structured.

- More one on one communication occurs in isolation. This means that people can be ruder than they need to be.

- Lines between work and home are blurred.

- Employees and employers act in a much more casual way than they normally would.

What is psychological safety, why does it matter and how can you achieve it in a workplace environment?

Psychological safety matters and can significantly improve workplace cultures and environments

This is not anecdotal and is instead backed by a large study carried out at Google. Project Aristotle looked at 5-years' worth of data across 250 teams trying to answer the question of "what makes some groups work well together while others fail?" Overall, highly successful teams reported the following five factors to be important for them.

1. Psychological safety.

2. Dependability: people can count on each other to get things done.

3. Structure and clarity: team members have clear goals, roles and plans.

4. Meaning of work: the work is personally meaningful and important for all members of the team.

5. Impact of work: team believes that work matters and creates change.

Start by measuring psychological safety within your team! When you are performing this initial measurement you are also:

- surfacing any issues that are impacting psychological safety,

- educating people about what psychological safety is,

- making psychological safety safe to talk about, and

- most importantly of all, making explicit and encouraging positive behaviours that increase psychological safety!

"Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard."

How to achieve psychological safety within a team?

Timothy Clark's book provides a useful framework of four stages through which teams can adapt and progress in order to set up a psychologically safe working environment.

1. Inclusion safety	2. Learner safety	3. Contributor safety	4. Challenger safety
Members feel safe to belong to the team. They are comfortable being present, do not feel excluded, and feel like they are wanted and appreciated.	Members are able to learn through asking questions. Team members here may be able to experiment, make (and admit) small mistakes, and ask for help.	Members feel safe to contribute their own ideas, without fear of embarrassment or ridicule. This is a more challenging state, because volunteering your own ideas can increase the psychosocial vulnerability of team members.	Members can question others' (including those in authority) ideas or suggest significant changes to ideas, plans, or ways of working.

Further information

You can watch the webinar on our webpages.

View our presentation slides used on the day.

Our reading list accompanies the webinar.

Read more about Essentials of Safe Care on our website.
Case studies on the systems for learning, staff wellbeing and psychological safety series are now available on our website.

Find us on twitter at @mcqicspsp, #spspmcqic and #spsp247

The National Wellbeing Hub provides support to those who work in health and social care.

www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org

You can read and download this document from our website.
We are happy to consider requests for other languages or formats.
Please contact our Equality and Diversity Advisor on 0141 225 6999 or email his.
contactpublicinvolvement@nhs.scot