



# Supporting Mental Health in First Responders:

## Accommodation Strategies for Job Expectations

[SaskFirstRespondersMentalHealth.ca](http://SaskFirstRespondersMentalHealth.ca)

*Content adapted with permission from "Supporting Mental Health in First Responders:  
Accommodation Strategies for Job Expectations," prepared by BC First Responders' Mental Health.*

# Introduction

The following information has been reproduced with some minor adaptations from guidance issued by Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, an initiative of the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace. This resource and the accompanying document *Supporting Employee Success — A Tool to Plan Accommodations that Support Success at Work* are available at [workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/managing-workplace-issues/accommodation-strategies](http://workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/managing-workplace-issues/accommodation-strategies).

## Accommodation strategies

Helping employees who have a disability remain productive is the objective of accommodation. Developing sustainable solutions is more likely to happen by engaging employees in committing to what will work for them.

Before implementing any accommodation plan, ensure that the employee is engaged in the discussion to explore solutions that will effectively support their success at work. An accommodation plan must address the specific workplace issues that impact the employee’s ability to perform the job. The strategies that follow are only offered as suggestions for discussion and are not legal advice. You may have additional obligations to provide reasonable accommodation under relevant human rights or other legislation.

It is recommended that you also consider using *Supporting Employee Success — A Tool to Plan Accommodations that Support Success at Work*. This free resource can help you clarify job expectations, identify employee abilities, and develop accommodations when mental health is a factor.

In the table below is a list of common job expectations that may or may not be applicable for a particular employee. Employers can disregard those expectations that they feel are not of concern. In the right-hand column are suggested accommodations that may help to ensure an employee can remain productive in the workplace.

Job expectation	Accommodation strategies
<b>Adaptability and flexibility</b> Ability to work effectively in the midst of change or rigid constraints; adapts to changing needs, conditions, and work responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Flexibility around hours of work</li><li>• Flexibility around deadlines</li><li>• Flexibility around the time of day that tasks are completed</li></ul>

## Job expectation

### Attention to detail

The ability to perform work tasks that require attention to detail or concentration on detailed information

## Accommodation strategies

- Removal of any non-essential functions of the job
- Break large tasks into a series of smaller tasks
- Provide more time to attend to work requiring attention to detail
- Permit short breaks when concentration declines
- Give instructions and assignments in writing
- Create a quality control checklist that includes each step of a task to be completed
- Exchange tasks with other employees to maintain the balance of work while capitalizing on the strengths of each employee

### Decision making

The ability to work effectively when analyzing problems, organizing information, resolving issues, or generating solutions

- Identify the areas where an error in judgment could create difficulty
- Create checklists to guide judgment in routine tasks
- Allow more time for work requiring attention to detail
- Create a list of areas where decisions should be discussed
- Address areas where judgments must be discussed

### Degree of self-supervision

The ability to work effectively without supervision

- Create detailed task lists and timelines
- Have frequent check-in opportunities
- Discuss priorities and direction for dealing with conflict among priorities
- Organize outcome measurements by task, day, week, and month
- Have a list of alternate supervisors to contact when necessary

### Degree of supervisor responsibility

The ability to work effectively in the role of supervisor, respecting organizational values and policies while meeting objectives

- A list of specific behaviours that can assist in effective supervision of others
- Discuss supervisory behaviours that may be interpreted by others as problematic
- Develop strategies to deal with stress in the workplace
- Have a mentor to call about challenging situations
- Identify particularly challenging work relationships and brainstorm alternative responses to these individuals
- Reduce or remove supervisory responsibilities

## Job expectation

### Exposure to confrontational situations

Ability to work effectively when confronted by an individual or when encountering confrontational situations requiring the employee to take action. The confrontation may be in person or over the telephone. The employee may be encountering an individual whose behaviour is argumentative, verbally or physically aggressive or abusive, insistent, hostile, loud, threatening, or disruptive.

### Exposure to distractions

The ability to work effectively in the presence of visual, auditory, or other distractions

## Accommodation strategies

- Review policies and practices related to confrontational situations in the workplace
- Educate employees on potential confrontational situations and recommended responses
- Provide simulation training on confrontational situations to which employees are exposed
- Provide or increase support for the employee in situations that are potentially confrontational
- Exchange tasks with other employees to maintain the balance of work while capitalizing on the strengths of each employee
- Allow more frequent breaks

- Provide a quieter work space with fewer distractions
- Permit the use of headphones to listen to calming sounds or music
- Permit wearing of earplugs to reduce noise distraction
- Where possible, include natural lighting in the work area
- Encourage less clutter in the work area
- Ask employees to minimize use of scents if this has been identified as a medical issue
- Consider modifications that reduce exposure to specific stimuli
- Consider requests for some or all of the work to be done at home

## Job expectation

### Exposure to emotionally stressful situations

Ability to work effectively in emotionally stressful situations or when exposed to emotionally distressed individuals in person, over the telephone, or via other communication channels such as Twitter, Facebook, etc.

### Overlapping tasks

The ability to perform and/or monitor more than one task or function at a time, and to judge when tasks or functions require attention; involves the ability to prioritize tasks and manage time effectively

### Problem solving and analysis

The ability to work effectively at solving problems and analysing situations and information

## Accommodation strategies

- Discuss the best way to provide instructions and feedback when in emotionally stressful situations at work
  - Address the best way to personally cope in emotionally stressful situations at work and how to provide or increase support in situations that are emotionally stressful
  - Provide genuine praise and positive reinforcement during the work week
  - Allow for reasonable time off to attend counselling sessions or medical appointments
  - Allow reasonable phone calls to access necessary emotional support during the workday
  - Provide supportive employment services or a work coach
  - Request more frequent breaks
- Modify workplace processes to focus on one task at a time, if practical
  - Provide clear, specific, and measurable expectations for all tasks
  - Create a list of all tasks to review to help establish priorities
  - Consider opportunities to improve efficiency on specific tasks
  - Provide training on time management skills
  - Consider job-sharing arrangements
  - Remove any non-essential functions of the job
  - Help the employee develop a schedule that indicates the amount of time to spend on required tasks each week and review against the actual time spent
- Create a decision tree template to assist with problem solving or analytical thinking
  - Set up a list of situations that would indicate the need to reach out for assistance in analysis or problem solving
  - Have regular check-ins during the decision making process

## Job expectation

### Recall

The ability to recall and retrieve, on demand, information that has been previously learned

### Time pressures

The ability to complete tasks within a given time period, the ability to work quickly when required, and/or the ability to manage time effectively so that all tasks are completed on time and at an acceptable level of quality

## Accommodation strategies

- Permit the use of recording devices to provide playback of information discussed at meetings
  - Allow the use of digital organizers or handwritten notes as ongoing to-do lists, marking off items as they are completed
  - Provide instructions and assignments in writing to help provide clarity and improved ability for recall
  - Set up regular reminders of upcoming milestones, appointments, events, or deadlines
  - Arrange regular meetings between supervisor and employee to set priorities and keep work on track
  - Provide retraining and/or reorientation
  - Use individualized training approaches — such as increased learning time, reading materials in advance, or applied learning — to help improve comprehension and retention
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- Review assigned tasks to establish a reasonable amount of time required for completion, and ensure that all parts of the process are included
  - Develop a process that establishes and monitors timelines for the completion of assigned tasks
  - Establish regular times to check in with the employee throughout more complex tasks or projects
  - Clearly define priorities
  - Where possible, avoid assigning tight deadlines; where tight deadlines cannot be avoided, provide sufficient resources to effectively meet that deadline
  - Facilitate clear communication and collaboration to ensure timely completion of each team member's responsibility within a project
  - Discuss the best way to give feedback during times of pressure

## Job expectation

### Working relationships

The ability to work well with others in cooperation and collaboration — this may include team projects, shared job duties, and social interactions with management and co-workers

## Accommodation strategies

- Define requirements and limitations for an acceptable working relationship and how employees will be held accountable for this type of behaviour
- Outline clear and measurable expectations for respect in the workplace for all employees
- Define how success will be measured (e.g., no critical comments in team meetings, no outbursts)
- Provide training to all staff on building a socially supportive workplace
- Provide training for managers and supervisors to increase their capacity to model effective communication in the workplace
- Develop processes and strategies to deal effectively with conflict
- Provide open and honest feedback
- Allow employees the option of not attending work-related social functions
- Consider resources that can help develop the ability to engage more effectively with others in the workplace

### Addiction

- Avoid organizing work-related networking activities that include alcohol, gambling, or other common addictions
- Consider offering only non-alcoholic beverages at work-related events

### Potential for crisis

If there is potential for an employee to experience a crisis at work involving severe anxiety, flashbacks or emotional breakdown, work with the employee to develop a plan for how you are to respond and who you should call.

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