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# Living Through a Toxic Workplace: A Qualitative Study on the Psychological Hazards of Mental Health Issues in Malaysia

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## Abstract

Mental health issues (MHI) are internal health conditions affecting a person's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and behaviours. MHI sufferers have an increased risk of psychosocial hazards like depression, suicide, and physical health issues, affecting their working and personal relationships and imposing substantial economic costs on individuals, society, and the nation. A toxic workplace is where behaviours like bullying, discrimination, or office politics are embedded in the culture, generating extreme stress and anxiety among employees. It is characterised by low psychological safety, poor communication, and management approaches that punish, humiliate, or overlook undesirable behaviour. Exposure to a toxic workplace can exacerbate MHI since employees endure high levels of stress and emotional damage. As work-related MHI is rising globally, it is critical to explore this issue to ensure the problem is better managed and minimise the effects on the community. This study, employing a qualitative design, explored the lived experiences of those who

face work-related MHI due to a toxic work environment to capture the depth and complexity of their experiences. Nineteen participants and six caregivers were purposively selected. Data collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews between October 2021 and June 2022 were analysed thematically. Four major themes emerged: Physiological Symptoms & Psychological Harm; Lack of Supportive Employer Attitudes; Stigma and Suppressed Disclosure; and Coping through Social and Spiritual Support. The findings highlight the profound influence of organisational culture and leadership behaviour on employees' psychological well-being. There is an urgent need for workplace mental health policies, guidelines and interventions that are empathetic, culturally sensitive, and inclusive of spiritual dimensions to foster a supportive and healing work environment. The workforce's well-being remains vital, with employees expressing a strong preference for firms that genuinely appreciate their mental and emotional health. © 2026, Qualitative Research Association of Malaysia (QRAM). All rights reserved.

## Author keywords

Coping strategies; employer responsibility; Malaysia; mental health; psychological injury; qualitative research; stigma; toxic workplace

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