

# CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR WORKPLACE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT MUSCULOSKELETAL DISORDERS

## An EU-OSHA resource for workplaces

### Introduction to using conversation starters

Conversation starter scenarios are a resource to facilitate group discussions in the workplace or during vocational training. These conversation starters include scenarios that have been designed for use with workers who are involved in tasks that have the potential to cause musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), and their managers and supervisors, and scenarios that have been designed to support the need for prompt and effective communication between a worker and their manager about a musculoskeletal health problem. These scenarios can be used as a starting point to initiate a discussion, with suggested topics and introductory questions. They can be used in a discussion-style workshop or as an opener to a training session.

Larger groups could be divided into smaller groups, or pairs, to discuss each scenario, the topics for discussion and their points of view. The groups should then come back together to share their points of view. If the facilitator divides a larger group into smaller groups, each could be given the same scenario or they could be given different scenarios.

- The situations used are intended to highlight some of the challenges faced by workers and the importance of understanding company procedures relating to the prevention of MSDs, including which responsibilities lie with employers and which lie with workers.
- The situations can be tailored to reflect the needs of an organisation through the incorporation of its own policies and procedures relating to the prevention of MSDs.
- Through discussion, workers should feel better equipped and better informed to deal with situations in which judgement decisions are required.
- Through discussion, workers, managers and supervisors should recognise the importance of early symptom reporting in reducing the risk of workers developing MSDs and in supporting sustainable working lives.

Facilitators may also consider adapting the scenarios and questions to other jobs and work situations, maintaining the same approach.

### Conversation starter 3: Men's work, women's work and MSDs

In a fish processing factory, the men work in jobs involving tasks such as heavy lifting and driving forklift trucks. Their work involves moving about the factory and doing different kinds of tasks during the working day. The women work continuously on the production line, cleaning, filleting and packaging the fish, doing very repetitive work at a fast pace. There is little variety in their work.

#### What do you do?

##### Topics for discussion

- How could these differences in the ways men and women work affect their health?
- Is lifting work and repetitive work viewed in the same way in terms of the physical load and difficulty involved? If so, how could this influence the prevention of MSDs?
- What changes could be made to improve the working conditions of both women and men? How might this be good for the organisation?

- Do you recognise a similar situation in your workplace and, if so, how might it be affecting men's and women's health and safety? How would you go about raising awareness of the issues and ensuring that they are addressed?
- How might this benefit both workers and the organisation?

## Background information for the facilitator

Women and men are strongly segregated into different work sectors and different tasks even when they work in the same place. This affects their health and safety because they are exposed to different hazards and the work of men and women is viewed differently. In the fish factory, men may suffer back pain and injuries, which in the worst cases can be serious. Some of the women will develop painful conditions in their neck, shoulders, arms and hands from the production line work. The men's work is considered more physically demanding and more attention is paid to their health and safety, including training.

Therefore, it is important that equal attention is paid to the working conditions of the women on the production line. Another option would be to train men and women to do various tasks and rotate them between those tasks, for example training both men and women to drive the forklift trucks, or adapting the equipment used in lifting to enable women to do that work too, which would also have the benefit of making the work safer and easier for everyone.

In addition, the notion that men must be strong should be challenged and everyone should be encouraged to talk about any early symptoms of MSDs that they may have.

## Alternative activity using a video clip: 'The organisation makes a difference — why the work environment looks different for women and men'

Show the video clip from 1:36 to 4:57 (if possible, stop the video at 3:36). Present the topics for discussion set out above.

Follow-up: show the video clip from 4:57 to 6:30 (or from 3:36 to 6:30). Present the following topics for discussion:

- Do you recognise this situation in your workplace?
- What could be done to ensure that both men's and women's health, safety and well-being are given equal attention?

## Additional information and the video clip

- Swedish Work Environment Authority, 'The organisation makes a difference':  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xurUalBMa8Y&feature=youtu.be&list=PLEIRHW0U5qeN4qt2rgZ74OKVssxWBcji>
- EU-OSHA, 'Factsheet 43 — Including gender issues in risk assessment':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/43/view>

## Further information on MSDs

At the links below you will find resources from EU-OSHA providing straightforward information about MSDs and how to prevent them, which will help you to prepare the activities; the factsheets could also be used as handouts for participants:

- *Healthy workers, thriving companies — a practical guide to wellbeing at work: tackling psychosocial risks and musculoskeletal disorders in small businesses:*  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/healthy-workers-thriving-companies-practical-guide-wellbeing/view>
- 'Musculoskeletal disorders': <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/musculoskeletal-disorders>
- 'Factsheet 71 — Introduction to work-related musculoskeletal disorders':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/71/view>
- 'Factsheet 72 — Work-related neck and upper limb disorders':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/72/view>
- 'Factsheet 73 — Hazards and risks associated with manual handling of loads in the workplace': <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/73/view>
- 'Factsheet 87 — Workforce diversity and risk assessment: ensuring everyone is covered Summary of an Agency report: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/factsheets/87/view>
- 'E-fact 19 — Prevention of vibration risks in the construction sector':  
<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/e-facts/efact19/view>

## Further information on leadership and worker participation

- *Worker participation in occupational safety and health — a practical guide:*  
[https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/workers-participation-in-OSH\\_guide/view](https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/workers-participation-in-OSH_guide/view)
- *Management leadership in occupational safety and health — a practical guide:*  
[https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/management-leadership-in-OSH\\_guide/view](https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/management-leadership-in-OSH_guide/view)