WorkSafe VICTORIA

Preventing work-related stress
for employees in the private sector

Work-related stress is a health and safety hazard that can have negative effects on you and the organisation you work in. Implementing measures to prevent work-related stress can benefit employees and the workplace by creating a safe and healthy working environment.

This document provides information for employees, to increase:

- awareness and understanding of work-related stress and its causes
- knowledge on how to eliminate or reduce work-related stress risks.

There are three information sheets in this series, one for employers (and all workplace parties), one for health and safety representatives (HSRs) and one for employees.

What is work-related stress?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines stress as "the reaction people may have when presented with demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope." The WHO states that "stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances but is often made worse when employees feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues and where they have little control over work or how they can cope with its demands and pressures". [1]

Causes of work-related stress

Work-related stress can arise from a number of interrelated factors. All factors present at the workplace should be considered. Some potential causes include:

- **Task design** eg fragmented or meaningless work; lack of variety

- **Work load and/or work pace** eg work overload or under load; high work rate or time pressure

- **Role in the organisation** eg role conflict or uncertainty – people unsure about what they are doing

- **Work context** eg hazardous work; dealing with difficult clients/customers

- **Work scheduling** eg shift working; unpredictable working hours; long working hours

- **Employment status** eg casual employment; contracting

- **Physical work environment and equipment** eg lack of space; excessive noise; poorly maintained equipment

- **Degree of control over work** eg lack of control over work methods and scheduling of work

- **Organisational function and culture** eg poor management of organisational change; poor communication within the workplace

- **Management of work** eg poor leadership; inadequate information, instruction and training

- **Relationships at work** eg bullying; interpersonal conflict; lack of social support

[1] World Health Organisation. 2004. *Work organisation and stress.* Protecting Workers' Health Series No 3.

State Government Victoria

More information about
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Effects of work-related stress

Prolonged or repeated exposure to work-related stress, or even a single serious occurrence can:

- adversely affect your mental, physical and emotional well-being
- reduce your capacity to perform at work.

Negative effects on your organisation can include:

- reduced productivity and work performance
- reduced job satisfaction and workplace morale
- increased absence due to sickness
- workplace injuries and illness
- increased staff turnover.

OHS law & work-related stress

Your employer is required under OHS law to provide and maintain a healthy and safe working environment, and systems of work to eliminate or control risks to the psychological health of employees and contractors.

Your employer must:

- provide such information, instruction, training and supervision as to enable you to work in a way that is safe and without risk to health
- monitor the health of employees and the conditions in the workplace
- consult you and your health and safety representative (HSR) on a range of OHS matters, including: hazard identification, risk assessment, when making decisions on how to control risks, when proposing workplace changes that may affect your health and safety.

Preventing work-related stress

A systematic approach called the risk management process is recommended for the prevention of work-related stress. Consultation is essential to each step of the risk management process. The ways that employees can be involved in the risk management process are shown below.

Step 1 – Identify potential work-related stress hazards (refer to potential causes of work-related stress on previous page)

- Participate in processes to gather information about work-related stress hazards.
- Report work-related stress hazards to your employer and HSR (if you have one) and encourage your colleagues to do the same.

Step 2 – Assess the work-related stress risks

Participate in the assessment by:

- indicating when, how often and over what period of time work-related stress risks occur
- describing how work-related stress could affect or harm your heath.

Step 3 – Control the work-related stress hazards and risks

- Contribute ideas on ways to control work-related stress hazards and risks in your workplace
- Join in the discussion about how actions to control risks can be implemented in your workplace.

Step 4 – Implement continuous improvement

- Co-operate with the measures that your employer puts in place to control work-related stress hazards and risks
- Report the effectiveness of those measures to your HSR and to management
- Contribute your ideas on how to improve effectiveness
- Report any new risks that the workplace or work changes may have generated.

More information about
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Reporting work-related stress issues

It is important that everyone in the workplace understands the procedures for reporting and addressing work-related stress. Your employer should provide instruction and training on the process and encourage reporting of work-related stress issues. Work-related stress can be reported to your HSR or directly to your employer.

When a report of work-related stress is made, your employer must determine the source/s and act to eliminate or reduce them so far as is reasonably practicable.

Resolving work-related stress issues

If your employer does not resolve stress issues, your HSR (if your work group has one) can:

- attempt to resolve the matter
- seek the assistance of any other person
- issue a provisional improvement notice (a formal notice to inform the employer there is a potential breach of the OHS Act) which can include directions on how to fix the problem.
- call the WorkSafe Advisory Service to arrange for an inspector to attend if the issue cannot be resolved through the issue resolution procedure.

If you do not have access to an HSR you can follow up your issues with management, your union or WorkSafe.

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Further information

Worksafe Advisory Service

Toll-free 1800 136 089
Email info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

worksafe.vic.gov.au

Relevant publications

Consultation on health and safety:
A handbook for workplaces (2007)

Employee representation.
A comprehensive guide to Part 7 of the Occupational Health
and Safety Act 2004 (2006)

Guide to the OHS Act 2004 (2005)

Other

OHS Reps @ Work website
www.ohsrep.org.au