Health and Safety Authority

HEALTH AND SAFETY AUTHORITY

work-related

stress

a guide for employers

STRESS
prevention at work

WORK-RELATED STRESS -
A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS

The Health and Safety Authority is the state agency given responsibility for promoting healthy and safe work in Ireland today. Our remit includes encouraging activities which actively promote improvements in safe behaviours at work as well as generating campaigns and projects to actively promote healthier outcomes for employees. We are also charged with identifying healthier and safer systems of work generally.

We also use our powers of enforcement through the legislation underpinning our existence, the 2005 Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act but for certain workplace issues, such as stress, our primary focus is on giving up-to-date, reliable information which you can use to improve your workplace.

All workplaces should have, under health and safety law, a current, operational Safety Statement, which outlines the hazards and risks in that workplace and control measures put in place to contain, eliminate or reduce them. Where work-related stress has been identified, or should be identified, control systems must be put in place which are reasonable and effective. A control measure can be a piece of equipment in the case of machine operation activities, but generally, a control measure where stress is concerned will mainly involve procedures. An effective 'return to work policy', the offer of short term assistance or support in the form of counselling or even improved training and development activities, where possible, might be control measures where work-related stress has been identified and acknowledged.

This booklet is guidance for employers to explain the basic concept of stress, to outline what current researchers in the field have learnt about the causes, the costs and the remedies and give some Case Studies which are practical for those who are in charge of enterprises to use for their policy and process development. Work-related stress (or workplace stress) will be referred to for the remainder of this guidance booklet as WRS

What is Stress?

Stress can be broadly defined as the negative reactions people have to aspects of their environment. Stress is therefore mainly interpreted by each of us differently. As it is a feeling, and as our emotions are involved, it is not something entirely

definable or describable. However, we all recognize the unpleasant, usually anxiety-related state, when we think of the term 'stress' as applying to us. Two aspects should be kept in mind. The first is that begin in a state of stress is a 'state' – and therefore not permanent, but passing. Secondly, when we are stressed, or under the influence of stress, we are less likely to behave in the rational way we do when we are calm. Thus, we need to be prepared, in advance, for stress, as it takes over when it becomes too burdensome to manage and can leave us less likely to use our coping and resilience powers to overcome it.

We do not always label our feelings, or even acknowledge them and this can make treatment difficult. Times when most people feel stressed are when trying to reach a difficult deadline or deadlines, having to carry out something we find very difficult, having to do many things at once, or having to do things under extremely difficult circumstances under when we are under extra emotional strain or feeling less able to cope with life's challenges.

For most of us, stress mainly comes from our personal lives; bereavement is a huge stressor (cause of stress) for most people, as is loss of any kind, through death or separation. The feeling of being stressed may not be articulated by everyone in the same way, however. So although we all experience stress through loss, people explain it differently, cope differently, acknowledge it differently and 'get over' it in many different ways. We have different resilience levels, we have learnt different ways to cope, some of these will be healthy and others may be dysfunctional or unhealthy coping patterns (such as excessive drinking/smoking/staying in bed/angry outbursts/blaming others/self harming etc)

What is Work-Related Stress (WRS)?

WRS is stress which is caused or made worse by working. It simply refers to those reactions due to pressures/deadlines/threats/anxieties within the working environment.

'Stress occurs when an individual perceives an imbalance between the demands placed on them on the one hand, and their ability to cope on the other. It often occurs in situations characterised by low levels of control and support.' (Professor Tom Cox, Institute of Work, Health and Organisations)

Because everyone engages with work differently, they will view threats and

pressures from work differently. Similarly, we each articulate how we react to these threats differently.

- Some people will feel very threatened but will keep it to themselves
- Others may behave in very stressful ways, including aggressive behaviour but not acknowledge their behaviour is due to stress
- Others react to the same issue in quite calm ways, feel unthreatened and relaxed
- Others still are highly aware of their moods, so report that they are not very stressed by the issue, but enjoy its challenge.
- Others have very low tolerances for any threats, so find smaller, simpler demands made of them quite threatening and start feeling stressed as soon as these demands are made of them.

What is the employer's role in WRS?

Each employer has an obligation to ensure that, as far as is reasonably practicable, the employees he or she employs are not endangered by working for them.

The main issue here is the reasonable-ness one. Employers must ensure that the demands placed on employees while at work are reasonable. This is not confined to the pure job the person does, but the role they have at work, from when they enter the workplace to when they leave. The term 'in the course of employment' is crucial here.

In order to ensure the workplace has a safeguard against unreasonable demands, therefore, employers should have some systems in place. The employer may have the best intentions, but his/her legal duty goes beyond intentions. This is why we promote putting in place risk assessments and control measures so that employers can be assured that, through their management systems, the demands placed on employees are reasonable and employees know how to cope with these demands.

What are the duties on employees?

It may be that some demands will make some people feel stressed, but they should, for their part, learn to cope with these reasonable pressures and develop ways of adapting to the demands of the work. For each job and role, there are

certain intrinsic skills and capabilities required; it is important for the person to fit the job demands. When this is the case, there should be no WRS problem as employees will deal with short-term stress by developing and learning strategies to ensure they do not feel stressed over the long term. A short term passing feeling of being stressed is not at issue here, as we all feel stressed at some stage with everyday demands coming from home or work issues; however, stress which is constant, doesn't abate and gets worse over time can lead to mental and physical health problems, illnesses and collapse.

Are there obligations on parties outside the Safety. Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005?

Yes. There are also obligations on employers and employees in Common Law in terms of a duty of care to protect others from avoidable harm as well as legal obligations under Industrial Relations legislation. A recent Labour Court recommendation held that 'work-related stress is recognised as a health and safety issue and employers have an obligation to deal with instances of its occurrence which may be brought to their attention'.

Also, personal injury cases, citing injury due to WRS have been the subject of case law in the Irish courts. Employers who place unreasonable demands on employees and do nothing reasonable to assist them when informed of their WRS have been held responsible and held liable to pay compensation.

There is no set prescription of what each employer should do or what methods should be applied across industry generally. Each enterprise should do what is reasonable, related to their own systems, hazard identification and knowledge at that time.

What are the costs of WRS for organisations?

Work Related Stress has the potential to have a great financial impact on business. The total cost of stress-related illnesses across the European Union, according to the most recent survey, is €13 billion. This is made up of re-training costs, sickness pay, accident and/or illness insurance payouts and recruitment costs.

What are the main, accepted causes of WRS?

There are differences in underlying causes and triggers for everyone. However, some workplace factors are more likely to lead to stress, such as badly designed shift work, poor communications, bullying and harrassment.

Table One: Stressful Characteristics of Work

(Professor Tom Cox et al.)

Category	Conditions defining hazard
CONTEXT TO WORK	
Organisational culture and function	Poor communication, low levels of support for problem solving and personal development, lack of definition of organisational objectives.
Role in organisation	Role ambiguity and role conflict, responsibility for people.
Career development	Career stagnation and uncertainty, under or over promotion, poor pay, job insecurity, low social value to work.
Decision latitude / Control	Low participation in decision making, lack of control over work (control, particularly in the form of participation, is also a context and wider organisational issue).
Interpersonal relationships at work	Social or physical isolation, poor relationships with superiors, interpersonal conflict, lack of social support.
Home-work interface	Conflicting demands of work and home, low support at home, dual career problems.
CONTENT OF WORK	
Work environment and work equipment	Problems regarding the reliability, availability, suitability and maintenance or repair of both equipment and facilities.
Task design	Lack of variety or short work cycles, fragmented or meaningless work, underuse of skills, high uncertainty.
Workload / workpace	Work overload or underload, lack of control over pacing, high levels of time pressure.
Work schedule	Shift working, inflexible work schedules, unpredictable hours, long or unsocial hours.

A person could experience work-related stress as a result of various factors, usually a number of factors occurring at the same time. These include:

• Role at work – is it clear and is it integrated, or do I have

conflicting roles often?

• Relationships at work – is there constant strain and disharmony, or even open aggressive behavior between people at work?

• The hierarchies and leaderships at work – are effective and fair management practices in place, supported by positive leadership?

• Control – do people have some control over some aspects of what they do each day, or are they totally controlled, as though machines?

• Training - are people properly and adequately trained for the jobs they actually do?

• Demands – do employees have much more work to do they they are capable of doing to the standard expected?

Some of the above factors, alone, can occur in any workplace, without leading to WRS, but when some, occurring together even more so, are not dealt with and are on-going, there is a higher and growing risk than one or more employees will begin feeling stressed.

What are the effects of WRS?

The effects of stress differ from individual to individual.
Many factors influence the individual and his/her interpretation of 'threat', response to threat and recuperation after a threatening experience. Different personality styles, gender difference, age, context, family history, emotional state, understanding of self and general social awareness will all influence each person's stress levels.

Negative reactions/anxieties and on-going emotional issues can be reduced if there is support available and aggravated if there are other outside circumstances which also put a strain on the individual.

The experience of stress can radically alter a person's behavior. Often, others will notice these changes, and comment that he of she is not the person they used to be. Often, when stressed, the most noticeable change in behaviour is anger – many people react to the feeling with anger. Others react to the feeling with lower resilience, tearfulness and proneness to being upset. Others react by engaging in antisocial activities, gambling, heavy smoking, eating or drinking may be involved.

In extreme cases, other phobic behaviours or compulsions can develop which need longer term professional intervention to remedy.

Being stressed changes the way a person feels, thinks and behaves and therefore will also produce physical changes.

Usually, the effects of stress can be categorised as follows:

- Mental (how the mind works)

- Physical (how the body works)

- Behavioural (the things we do)

- Cognitive (the way we think and concentrate)

A person will often experience the effects of stress in a number of ways. When you are stressed, you are less likely to eat well, get adequate sleep, take exercise and relax. You can also experience irritability, reduced attention span and memory impairment. Irritability due to stress can create secondary problems such as the loss of social support. Being stressed over a prolonged period of time has been associated with increased blood pressure and cardiovascular problems.

PREVENTION OF WORK-RELATED STRESS

There is a general legal requirement for employers to assess the working environment for systems and practices which lead to health and safety hazards – including stress - and to put in place preventative measures.

Policies which benefit employee health can improve productivity. Low levels of perceived stress are associated with low staff turnover, low levels of absenteeism and low rates of injury. Organisations that are perceived as healthy tend to have clear policies and active methods of dealing with people which encourage:

• Respect for the dignity of each employee

• Regular feedback and recognition of performance

• Clear goals for employees in line with organisational goals

• Employee input into decision-making and career progression

• Consistent and fair management actions.

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS AT WORK

There are three main types of stress management interventions used in organisations – Primary, Secondary and Tertiary.

• **Primary Interventions (Prevention)** This approach looks at the issue of stress 'at source', in order to prevent it occurring. It usually involves some form of organisation-wide change in the system of work, be it the design of how things are done, what is done and/or who does what.

• **Secondary Interventions (Management)** This approach focuses on the employee throughout his or her period with the organisation. It includes aspects of work such as training for the job, training in aspects of health and safety generally, support in terms of providing adequate management of the

social and technical aspects of an employee's working life. This good management practice has a role both in preventing stress and helping stressed employees to recover.

- **Tertiary Interventions (Minimisation)** This focuses on the provision of counselling and employee assistance programmes or outsourced support services in order to assist employees who feel a need for extra support, other than that contained in the human resource function.

A combination of all three, is generally advisable, rather than focusing solely on any one to the exclusion of all others.

These approaches fit in to the risk management framework of health and safety systems, aiming as it does to identify and eliminate the causes of stress, as far as is reasonably practicable. Risk management is a structured step-by-step problem solving approach involving participation and consultation. It helps identify and focus on the real issues causing stress.

This involves an assessment of 'where we are now' as an organisation and where we need to go.

These steps are as follows:

- Identify the hazards (causes of stress) – what are the aspects of your organisation that have the potential to cause stress. A current methodology for doing this is called 'Work Positive' (see www.hsa.ie)

- Assess the risks – prioritise them according to severity and likelihood of negative outcome.

- Eliminate the risks – change the system so that the stressful aspect of work is eliminated.

- Contain the risks – limit the impact of and/or reduce the number of causes of stress.

- Protect from the risks – reduce the degree of exposure to the factors that cause it.

- Monitor the risks – on-going review of levels of stress in your organization, through exit interviews, re-entry audits, absence data and support and monitoring systems..

Control strategies are methods that can be used to reduce the incidence of stress. Examples include:

- Re-designing some aspect of the work environment (e.g. a less crowded office space, re-arranging the reception area, altering equipment)

- Re-designing the task itself in some way (e.g. shortening Production lines, improving teamwork, decreasing responsibility)

- Providing support at various levels (e.g. training for line managers, more human resource staff, access to occupational health staff)

- Providing feedback on performance (e.g. introduction of and training in performance management or other systems of feedback)

CONCLUSION

Research continues to show that our satisfaction at work is very much related to how work makes us feel, even more than how much we get paid, or what our career prospects are. While addressing Work Related Stress can be challenging, it can also be a vehicle for positive change, better, more productive relationships at work and increased creativity and productivity. Therefore addressing Work Related Stress is in everyone's interest.

CASE STUDIES

For more up to date cases of organizational intervention see our website under Occupational Health – Stress - Workpositive 2008 – 2009 Case Studies.

Stress reduction interventions (From: Research on Work-Related Stress – European Agency of Safety and Health at Work, 2000 (pp 115 -116))

Employees working in 25 outpatient clinics at hospitals in the UK reported that not having a clear role in the organisation and experiencing regular conflict between different aspects of their roles were causes of stress. A programme was initiated to deal with this. Clinic supervisors were given training in response to this finding, particularly about participation in decision-making. The number of staff meetings was also increased. The effects of this intervention were evaluated against a number of measures and, after six months, significant improvements in the level of role ambiguity and conflict were found.

The First American Bankcorp of Nashville, Tennessee (150 banks in all) experienced problematic high turnover rates, sickness absence and low productivity. The intervention involved setting up 'action teams' from each area of operations, and training them in identifying and solving problems, with employees rotated on and off the teams. Turnover was cut by 25%.

Other organisational interventions reported include holding a stress management workshop to clarify what work stress as opposed to general stress involves. Then an audit of employees to identify the source of workplace stressors was carried out, a 'stress reduction committee' to prioritise and review the identified stressors was set up. Following this, the committee planned a series of interventions over a specified time-frame, to be audited annually, recognising that the process and how it is managed is as important as the content.

WORK POSITIVE

'Work Positive,' Prioritising Organisational Stress is an audit tool or survey for employees. It contains the Management Standards' approach pioneered by the Health and Safety Executive in the UK. It is a user-friendly process and is downloadable from the HSA website, where more information is contained.

www.hsa.ie Workplace Contact Unit: 1890 289 389

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