

HSA

An tÚdarás Sláinte agus Sábháilteachta
Health and Safety Authority



Work-Related Stress A Guide for Employers



An tÚdarás Sláinte agus Sábháilteachta
Health and Safety Authority

Work-Related Stress A Guide for Employers

Our vision:

***Our Vision:
Healthy, safe and productive lives
and enterprises***

Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Defining Stress	5
3. Defining Work Related Stress (WRS)	6
4. Causes of WRS	7
5. Effects of WRS	9
6. European Approach	10
7. Role of Employer	11
8. Employee Duties and Involvement	12
9. Prevention of WRS	13
10. How to Approach WRS Systematically	14
11. Work Positive – Risk Assessment Tool for WRS	16
12. Conclusion	17
Appendix A – Case Study 1	18
Appendix B – Case Study 2	21

1. Introduction

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) is the state agency with responsibility for promoting health and safety at work in Ireland today.

The subject of this Guide is work related stress. We focus on ways to reduce its likelihood and its effects as well as ways to prevent short-term stress becoming a long-term problem.

The focus of the HSA approach is on *risk assessment and hazard reduction*. This approach is reflected in the HSA's Work Positive assessment tool, which aims at identifying potential risks, putting in place control measures and engaging with the workforce in a reasonable way to address hazards which can lead to workplace stress.

Queries on this issue come from employees, employers and representative bodies and relate to many aspects of dealing with workplace stress; but the main source is, employers who are looking for clarity on potential causes, suggested remedies and prevention strategies. Throughout this Guide, you will notice that the emphasis is on personal and relationship issues as the main source of stress for individuals.

While much of the stress we experience comes from our personal lives, sometimes, a person's stress-related condition, which may lead to ill-health and/or injury, can be caused by or made worse by work. Work also has the potential to be beneficial for people's mental health and well-being. For instance, being part of a team, achieving results, learning new skills and solving problems are all aspects of work which can add to people's sense of purpose and general life satisfaction.

Under health and safety law, all workplaces should have, a current, operational Safety Statement which outlines the hazards and risks in that workplace and control measures put in place to eliminate or reduce them. All employers should consider any workplace hazard where there is a reasonable probability that it could cause work related stress.

2. Defining Stress

Stress can be broadly defined as the negative reaction people have to aspects of their environment as they perceive it. Stress is therefore a response to a stimulus and involves a sense of an inability to cope. We each perceive, interpret, cope with and react to the world differently, but a stress reaction is an unpleasant state of anxiety.

Two things should be kept in mind: firstly, being stressed is a 'state' – and therefore not permanent in all but the most extreme cases; 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.

How we manage pressure is influenced by many factors, some past, some current; how we learned, how others behaved around us when we were young, what behaviours were rewarded and what punished. We all cope better when we have support and when we have resources such as time, equipment, know-how and control.

Causes of short-term stress include tough deadlines, having to carry out tasks we find very difficult, having to do many things at once, or having to act in difficult circumstances or under external pressures – for instance, when under extra emotional strain or feeling low or upset.

Stress generally comes from aspects of personal lives; bereavement is a major cause of stress, as is loss of any kind, including through divorce or separation. Other life events which are stress-inducing include being ill or illness of a partner or family member, unemployment, financial pressure, running a business and indebtedness.

Being stressed may not be articulated by everyone in the same way: for instance, although we all experience stress through loss, people will explain the experience differently, cope with it differently, acknowledge it differently and recover from it in many different ways.

There are healthy ways to overcome stress – good lifestyle, diet, social solidarity, meaningful work which can broaden our social ties – as well as unhealthy ways to react – such as over- or under-eating, excessive drinking, angry outbursts, defensiveness – which can lead to lack of quality sleep, decreased exercise and social isolation.

3. Defining Work Related Stress (WRS)

Work Related Stress (WRS) is stress caused or made worse by work. It simply refers to when a person perceives the work environment in such a way that his or her reaction involves feelings of an inability to cope. It may be caused by perceived/real 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, I-WHO, University of Nottingham, UK)

Audits for hazards leading to stress have become more and more commonly integrated into health and safety systems generally. This owes partly to the fact that stress also has implications for Human Resource Management (HR), sickness absence management and occupational health generally.

People behave differently when under pressure:

- Some people feel very threatened but keep it to themselves;
- Others behave in very aggressive ways, without acknowledging that their behaviour is caused by stress;
- Others react to the same issue in quite calm ways, feeling unthreatened and relaxed;
- Others who are highly aware of their moods report that they are not very stressed by the issue, but enjoy its challenge;
- Others have very low tolerance of any threats, and so find smaller, simpler demands made of them quite threatening and start feeling stressed as soon as these demands are made of them.

It's not easy to establish the degree to which the work environment and factors outside of work contribute to an individual's stress level. Someone who is experiencing stressful life events may find that he or she is less able to cope with demands and deadlines at work, even though work is not the cause and had never been a problem before.

Workplaces which have good communications, respectful relations and healthy systems of work can help people recognise and manage the type of stress which may have more than one cause; such workplaces tend to get the best results in achieving a healthy and productive workforce.

4. Causes of WRS

There are differences in underlying causes and triggers of WRS for everyone. However, some workplace factors are more likely to lead to stress than others: badly designed shift work, poor communications, and poor or even non-existent systems for dealing with bullying and harassment can all increase levels of workplace stress.

Table 1 below sets out other potential causes. A person can experience WRS as a result of various factors, often with a number of factors occurring at the same time. Some of these are a matter of the individual's perception in the moment, so we cannot assume automatically that the problem is the responsibility or fault of a system.

Table 1: Contextual and content factors defining the hazard of WRS (from I-WHO, UK*)

CONTEXT TO WORK – Potential Hazardous Conditions	
Organisational culture	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 unclear.
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.
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 – Potential Hazardous Demands	
Work environment and 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/pace of work	Work overload or underload, lack of control, over pacing, high level of time pressures.
Work schedule	Poorly managed shift working, inflexible work schedules, unpredictable hours, long or unsocial hours.

* Institute of Work, Health & Organisations, University of Nottingham, UK

Checklist of potential causes of WRS for employees:

- Role at work: is it clear and integrated, or do people often have conflicting roles?
- Relationships at work: is there constant strain and disharmony, or even open aggressive behaviour between people at work?
- The hierarchies and leadership 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 they were machines?
- Training: are people properly and adequately trained for the jobs they actually do?
- Demands: do employees have much more work to do than they are capable of doing to the standard, or within the time, expected?

Some of the above factors can occur in any workplace, without leading to WRS; but when some are evident, and even more so when they occur simultaneously and are ongoing, there is a higher and increasing risk that one or more employees will begin to feel stressed.

5. Effects of WRS

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).

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 ongoing emotional issues can be reduced if there is support available; but they can be 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 behaviour. Often, others will notice these changes and comment on them before the person realises that the changes have become apparent in his or her behaviour. Sometimes, when stressed, the most noticeable change in behaviour is anger – many people react to the feeling with intermittent rage. Others react to the feeling with lower resilience, tearfulness and a tendency to become easily upset. Some may react by engaging in antisocial activities.

Gambling, heavy smoking and excessive eating or drinking may also be involved. In extreme cases, other phobic behaviours or compulsions can develop which will need longer-term professional intervention to remedy.

Irritability as a result of stress can create secondary problems such as the loss of social support. Scientific research has demonstrated that being stressed over a prolonged period of time is associated with medical conditions such as increased blood pressure and cardiovascular problems.

6. European Approach

The first results of the biggest workplace health and safety survey in Europe were released in mid-2010 by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). Entitled the *European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks* (ESENER), the research shows that four out of five European managers questioned expressed concern about work related stress and reveals that stress at work is perceived by many companies (79%) to be as important a problem as workplace accidents.

EU-OSHA's European survey, ESENER, 'explores the views of managers and workers' representatives on how health and safety risks are managed at their workplace, particularly the area of psychosocial risks. These risks, which are linked to the way work is designed, organised and managed, as well as to the economic and social context of work, result in an increased level of stress and can lead to serious deterioration of mental and physical health' (see Exec. Summary of European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks Managing safety and health at work, p11).

For more information on this survey, see www.osha.europa.eu (search ESENER).

Size of Organisation is not a Barrier to Effective Risk Management

Survey evidence also shows that many smaller companies are equally able to carry out in-house risk assessment without the need for external assistance. Although some may seek support in the form of expertise, guidance and tools to design and manage their risk management process effectively, the measure of success is how local managers and staff implement successful preventive measures and engage in positive practices.

To address these types of need, the HSA offers the Work Positive system, downloadable free from www.hsa.ie. This is a workplace wellbeing survey tool with preventive and remedial suggestions to tackle work related stress and associated issues. It can be completed on line for a small fee.

EU-OSHA also provides a new Risk Assessment Tools Database, bringing together checklists, handbooks, brochures, questionnaires and interactive tools from across Europe, is available free from the EU-OSHA website, www.osha.europa.eu at http://osha.europa.eu/en/practical-solutions/risk-assessment-tools/index_html.

Further information is also being developed on that site regarding an Online interactive Risk Assessment tool (OiRA) which should encourage thousands of European SMEs across all sectors to carry out risk assessments.

7. Role of Employer

Each employer has an obligation to ensure that, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health of employees is not endangered in the course of their work.

The main issue here is the question of what is reasonable. Employers must ensure that the demands placed on employees while at work are reasonable. This is not just confined to the job the person does, but involves the person's entire role at work, from the moment the person enters the workplace to the moment he or she leaves. For instance, in our Case Study 2, at the end of this Guide, you will note that Eileen is competent at her job as retail assistant, but customer behaviour and demands made by new customers and new working hours rather than her core job function may be causing her undue stress. All of this is covered by the key term here 'in the course of employment'.

Therefore, in order to ensure the workplace has safeguards against unreasonable demands, employers should have preventive systems in place. The employer may have the best intentions, but his/her legal duty goes beyond intentions. This is why the HSA promotes the putting in place of risk assessments and control measures so that employers can be assured that their management systems ensure the demands placed on employees are reasonable.

It is recommended that companies diagnose first, by carrying out some form of risk assessment or audit, and then proceed to tailor their intervention to meet the needs highlighted by that process. All of the above should be in written record format.

8. Employee Duties and Involvement

Workers' Involvement is a Key Factor in Health and Safety Management

ESENER (*European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks*) findings indicate that workplaces with employee participation are much more likely to see successful health and safety measures implemented. This is particularly the case for smaller workplaces, where it is an important trigger for effective management of psychosocial risks.

It may be that some demands will make some people feel stressed, but they should, for their part, be able to adapt and learn to cope with any reasonable pressures. For each job and role, there are certain intrinsic skills and capabilities required, and employers have a right to assume that employees are capable of performing the jobs for which they were recruited.

Where employees feel a lack of competence for their work, there can be no automatic assumption that this points to a flaw in the job or the employment; it is important for the person to fit the job demands or to at least have a plan that assists them to bridge the gap between the job demands and their current capability. 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. Employees should show due care to protect their own mental health by the actions they take both inside and outside the workplace.

Stress which is constant and does not abate, but gets worse over time can lead to mental and physical health problems and illnesses. This is why it is in everyone's interest to prevent stress occurring and reduce its effects when it does occur.

9. Prevention of WRS

All employers are legally required to assess the working environment for systems and practices which lead to health and safety hazards, including stress, and to put in place preventive measures.

Policies and practices which benefit employee health can improve productivity. The perception that levels of stress are low is associated with low staff turnover, low levels of absenteeism and low rates of illness and injury. Organisations that are perceived to be 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.

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

For example, in Case Study 1, Mark's stress is caused by a number of factors which the risk assessment approach would identify and which general and specific support measures would target more effectively.

These approaches fit in to the risk management framework of health and safety systems which aims 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 to 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 the HSA's 'Work Positive' system (see www.hsa.ie);
- Assess the risks – prioritise them according to severity and likelihood of negative outcome; or
- Eliminate the risks – change the system so that the stressful aspect of work is eliminated;
- Contain the risks – limit the impact and/or reduce the number of causes of stress; or
- Protect from the risks – reduce the degree of exposure to the factors that cause stress; and
- Monitor the risks – continually review levels of stress in your organisation, 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 of control strategies include:

- Redesigning some aspect of the work environment. For example, designing a less crowded office space, rearranging the reception area, or altering equipment;
- Redesigning the task itself in some way. For example, by shortening production lines, improving teamwork, or decreasing or increasing responsibility;
- Providing support at various levels. For example, by training for line managers, better human resource management and providing access to occupational health staff;
- Providing balanced feedback on performance. For example, by introducing and offering training in performance management or other systems of feedback.

11. Work Positive – Risk Assessment Tool for WRS

An audit tool which was developed in partnership with the Health and Safety Executive in the UK and is used in the UK and Ireland is known as the Management Standards in the UK and in Ireland as Work Positive. This tool is a survey method of assessing employee perceptions of WRS in terms of what leads up to the experience and how these are managed at the workplace. Updated and upgraded in Ireland in 2011, the survey gives a well-being profile to participating organisations, identifying trends within certain sectors and industry types and providing a benchmark for Irish organisations in order to compare improvements year on year. It is available to download in paper format or to do anonymously on-line through our hosting partners accessed through the HSA website: www.hsa.ie/workpositive

The areas surveyed are:

- Demands;
- Control;
- Support;
- Relationships;
- Roles;
- Change.

In the 42 item questionnaire, employees ‘rate’ their work environment and by inputting their scores on to an Excel analysis package, a profile of a department, a work unit or the entire organisation is developed, giving colour coded scores in each of the areas. Employees also answers five World Health Organisation (WHO) approved well-being questions, and a further two questions indicating their ideal resolution of any such hazard at their place of work.

This gives a snapshot – or profile – of the employees’ perceptions of the different potential environmental hazards at that place of work at that point in time, as well as their own coping/resilience patterns.

Identifying individual coping strength and general mental well-being at work adds to the employee motivation to do the audit – the employer does not receive the individual employee results, which remain confidential.

The tool is a very cost effective, time-efficient starting point for managing WRS. The University of Ulster is our development partner in the survey tool administration.

Each employee should be guaranteed anonymity in participating in the survey as anonymity promotes an honesty which facilitates getting useful information about the perception of the environment at work.

12. Conclusion

Research continues to show that our satisfaction with various aspects of work, especially workplace relations and communication at work, is very much related to how work makes us feel, and this is even more so than how much we get paid or what we believe our career prospects to be.

In turn, how we feel when at work and how we feel about our work influences how we engage with that work, how productive we are and how convivial we are in our working relationships within a department, a team or a larger work group. While addressing work related stress can be challenging, it can also be a vehicle for positive change, for better and more productive relationships at work and for increased creativity and productivity.

The employer should also act reasonably. If the new Sales Director is not applying fair and just procedures to Mark and his team relative to other teams, why not? A remedy should be found and fair procedures put in place.

Are there any supports available to Mark:

- Through line management?
- Through other 'bought-in' systems?
- Through EAPs?
- Through colleagues?

The employee-employer communication is crucial to ensure that the employer

- Is informed of the stress by the employee;
- Is given indications within the workplace as to its causes;
- Can be satisfied that the cause is or is not work related;
- Can be satisfied that the cause is or is not unacceptable (unreasonable/reasonable).

Risk Assessment

The employer wants Mark to perform to his best, so he or she should do whatever is reasonable to assist him so that stress is not hampering his work performance and his mental health. If the employer, after considering the case, concludes that Mark's workload is excessive and the direction Mark is getting is not helpful, he or she should ensure that the workload is changed, the stress monitored and Mark supported. A brief record of the unfolding of events should be made.

If the employer's concludes after assessment that, although Mark is stressed, the reasons are not to be found in the work system, but in Mark's ability or his personal issues, the employer should act in a reasonable manner to help Mark improve his performance and realise that his targets are no higher than other teams so that Mark's perception of unfairness can be shifted.

Employee Duties

If a person is finding a role stressful, he or she has a duty to consider if the work system is unreasonable or if his or her skills or abilities do not match the job role, or if other outside issues are influencing him or her, or if his or her knowledge or skills or attitude are causal factors.

Solutions

Good communication and face-to-face discussion with an emphasis on clarity can often reduce stressful situations without any other intervention. Bad relationships are often at the core of such workplace issues and facilitated meetings and ongoing improved communications can ease many tensions which lie at the core of stress cases.

Appendix B – Case Study 2

Background

Eileen had been working in the local shop for eight years and getting along well with her boss, Liam (the owner manager), and the two part-time employees who work occasional shifts as well as the students who work at weekends. She has enjoyed her job for the most part, but lately has started dreading coming in to work, especially on her Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening shifts. She starts worrying on Mondays, in anticipation of the evening shifts and spends Sunday calming down after the experience. She feels nervous much of the time and is very agitated in her dealings with customers and colleagues because of the stress. Eileen believes the shop should close at 7pm, as it used to do, but Liam insists on opening till 10pm now, and the new hours are what Eileen believes are the cause of her stress levels. She's thinking of handing in her notice as it's all getting too much for her to bear and her family are concerned.

What does this outline tell us?

Eileen's story has a number of typical aspects:

1. A change has occurred in the workplace which directly affects her.
The change in opening and closing times doesn't only mean a change of hours, but also a change in clientele (potential hazards).
2. Eileen doesn't say what the stressor is but identifies a 'problem', which is often the case.
3. Liam, her employer, cannot know what the stressor actually is unless told of it.
4. There is a general lack of insight into what's causing the stress reaction and even from reading the above paragraph, an outsider would not pinpoint the real cause. This is often the case where mental health and emotional wellbeing is concerned and adds considerably to the difficulties managing stress at work.
5. The coping ability of Eileen is deteriorating through lack of communication and consultation on the real cause of the stress.

Eileen needs to assess her own perspective – why does the late opening cause her stress?

Liam is not aware of Eileen's feelings and specifically her anxiety. He may well know that she is unhappy with the new opening hours, but may not know of the stress reaction she is experiencing.

This often occurs, and can make the situation harder to remedy. The employer needs to ensure that it is possible and easy and safe for the employee to raise the issue in the first place. If raising stress concerns are seen as a weakness, the employee can rightly claim the employer and the prevailing culture prevented such disclosure.

If employees are merely dissatisfied with aspects of their job, these are not health and safety matters.

What should Eileen do?

If it is the case that Eileen is suffering ongoing and persistent stress from the change in her working hours, she has to ensure that Liam is aware of the fact. Employer's duties are dependent upon them being made fully aware of the employee's stress and its perceived causes.

What should Liam do?

Upon being informed of the employee's stress, Liam should make his own assessment of the demands complained of. Where Eileen is concerned:

- Are the changed opening hours adding a new demand to Eileen's workload?
- If so, what are these new demands?
- Is Eileen trained to carry out these new demands?
- Is training required?
- Are the new conditions generating safety concerns?
- Are there adequate measures in place to address safety concerns?

Is the correct hazard control method in place to eliminate the hazard or to reduce it to acceptable levels or to protect from its effects? Is a system of monitoring in place?

Acting Reasonably

The employer should also act reasonably: if the new hours in themselves are the cause of the stress, could the evening shifts be redistributed? This might make for a more satisfied employee, and the more satisfied the employee, the better the performance that will result. If the issue is the safety concern, the employer is obliged to carry out a risk assessment and identify hazards. For instance, are hazards possible because of threatening customers, robbery, inadequate lighting or other cash-related safety concerns?

Are there any supports available to the employer:

- Through representative bodies?
- Through advice from other retail outlets regarding security issues for staff?
- Through engineering solutions – alarms, panic buttons, cameras?
- Through using the skill-sets of other staff members/colleagues by staff rotation or by having two staff on during identified ‘risk’ times?

Good open communication is important in all stress cases. The employer and employee should discuss:

- What is the meaning of a case of WRS in an employee?
- What the employee believes are the causes of WRS within the workplace?
- How these are work related?
- What remedial measures are reasonably practical to take and if taken would they eliminate or reduce the stress for the employee?
- What monitoring is needed to ensure ongoing control mechanisms remain in place?
- What records should be kept?
- Is there an efficient and effective risk assessment process with associated monitoring?

Liam works closely with Eileen and doesn't want her to be stressed by work. He wants Eileen to perform to her best and so will do whatever is reasonable in line with business needs to assist her in overcoming her stress so that it does not hamper her work performance or her mental health.

In consultation, both conclude that the issue for Eileen is fear of violence and/or the fear of the threat of violence, or some fear related to threatening customer behaviour; that situation should be assessed – is her fear reasonable? If not, is there evidence of that? If it is, is her situation addressed, changed and monitored and is she offered support. A brief record should be kept of the unfolding of events.

If Liam assesses that Eileen's stress is not caused by the work system, but by Eileen's dislike for personal reasons of working a 4 to 10 shift, the issue can best be dealt with through focusing on performance enhancement and open communication.

Points to Note

If a person is finding a role stressful, he or she has a duty to consider if the work system is unreasonable or if his or her skills or abilities do not match the job role, or if other outside issues are influencing him or her, or if his or her knowledge or skills or attitude are causal factors.

Solutions

Good communication and face-to-face discussions with an emphasis on clarity can often reduce stressful situations without any other intervention. Bad relationships are often at the core of such workplace issues and facilitated meetings and ongoing improved communications can ease many tensions which lie at the core of stress cases.

Further Information and Guidance:

Visit our website at www.hsa.ie, telephone our contact centre on **0818 289 389** or email contactus@hsa.ie

Use BeSMART, our free online risk assessment tool at www.besmart.ie

Check out our range of free online courses at www.hslearning.ie



An tÚdarás Sláinte agus Síbháilteachta
Health and Safety Authority

Work-Related Stress A Guide for Employers

*Our Vision:
Healthy, safe and
productive lives
and enterprises*

**Health and Safety
Authority**

Tel. 0818 289 389

International
Callers
00353 1 6147000

www.hsa.ie