

Preventing work-related stress for health and safety representatives (HSRs) in the private sector

Work-related stress is a health and safety hazard that can have negative effects on you, your designated work group and the organisation you work in. Preventing work-related stress can benefit individuals and the workplace by creating a safe and healthy working environment.

This document provides information for HSRs, 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 advises 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

Identifying the causes of stress in the workplace helps in the process of assessing and controlling the hazards and risks. Work-related stress can arise from a number of interrelated factors. All factors present at the workplace should be considered.

There is a range of potential causes of work-related stress including:

- **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.

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Effects of work-related stress

Work is generally considered to be beneficial to mental health. It can provide people with a sense of identity, opportunities to develop and use skills, form social relationships, and increase their feelings of self worth.

Prolonged or repeated exposure to work-related stress, or even a single serious occurrence can adversely affect an employee's mental, physical and emotional well-being and reduce their capacity to perform at work. Negative effects on an organisation can include: reduced productivity and work performance; reduced job satisfaction and workplace morale; increased sickness absence; workplace injuries and illness; and 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 as a 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 designated work groups (DWG) health and safety.

The HSR's role in stress prevention

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

Step 1 – Identify potential work-related stress hazards

- ☑ Represent work-related stress issues affecting members of your DWG with your employer
- ☑ Examine information and workplace summary data to help identify potential work-related stress hazards and risks for your DWG

Step 2 – Assess work-related stress risks

- ☑ Participate in consultation with your employer and DWG members to discuss
 - the circumstances when work-related stress hazards occur in your workplace
 - the frequency and duration of exposure
 - the potential harm for members of your DWG

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

- ☑ Represent your DWG's views on measures to eliminate or reduce any work-related stress risks.
- ☑ Contribute your DWG's views on how best to develop and implement an action plan to control the hazards identified

Step 4 – Implement continuous improvement

- ☑ Represent your DWG members in discussions about reviewing and continuously improving the measures needed to maintain the prevention of injury or illness from work-related stress

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Consulting on work-related stress

Consultation is essential to the four steps of the risk management process. The WorkSafe publication *Consultation on health and safety: A handbook for workplaces* (2007) provides practical information on the matters an employer must consult about, who needs to be consulted, what consultation involves, different ways consultation can occur and developing OHS procedures.

Reporting work-related stress issues

It is important that everyone in the workplace understands the procedures for reporting and addressing work-related stress issues. You should be provided with instruction and training in the process and encourage DWG members to report work-related stress issues to you.

Where work-related stress issues are reported, employers must determine the sources and act to eliminate or reduce them so far as is reasonably practicable.

Resolving work-related stress issues

It is important that workplace issue resolution procedures are used to help address work-related stress issues, in the same way that you use these procedures to resolve any other OHS matter. Where there is no agreed issue resolution procedure, then the 'Issue Resolution' part of the *Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2007* must be used (refer to the WorkSafe publication *Consultation on health and safety: A handbook for workplaces, and Information for Health and Safety Representatives: Consultation, Representation and Resolving Health and Safety Issues* (2006) for further information).

If, after consulting with your employer or their representative, you believe your employer has not acted to resolve the issue, as the elected HSR, you may issue a Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN). In this case you will need to cite the appropriate provision of the OHS Act that you believe has been contravened or is likely to be contravened. You may include directions on the measures to be taken to remedy the contravention.

Other options available to you in this situation include:

- seeking the assistance of any other person
- call the WorkSafe Advisory Service to arrange for an inspector to attend if the issue cannot be resolved through the issue resolution procedure.

Where to go for further advice

If you require further information or assistance, you can contact your Union, the OHS Reps website or the WorkSafe Advisory Service, who can talk you through the options about how you can pursue the issue.

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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)

*Information for Health and Safety Representatives: Consultation,
Representation and Resolving Health and Safety Issues* (2006)

Guide to the OHS Act 2004 (2005)

Summary of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004
(2006)

Preventing and responding to bullying at work (2009)

Fatigue prevention in the workplace (2008)

Other

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