

More information about

Preventing work-related stress

Information for employers in the public sector

What is the problem?

Following musculoskeletal disorders, work-related stress is the second most common compensated illness/injury in Australia. In Victoria, work-related stress, particularly in the public sector, has in recent times presented a growing percentage of workers' compensation claims.¹

What is work-related stress?

The World Health Organization (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.'²

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

While challenge at work can be beneficial, work-related stress is a health and safety hazard that can have negative impacts on:

- mental health: such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety
- physical health: such as musculoskeletal disorders and cardiovascular disease
- work performance: such as incidents and injuries, and
- social relationships: such as increased irritability leading to social isolation, anxiety and depression.

What causes work-related stress?

Potential sources of work-related stress arising largely from the work environment include the:

- workplace social environment: such as the organisational culture and function, interpersonal relationships, role in the organisation, career development, status and pay, and competing home and work requirements
- physical work environment and equipment used in the workplace: such as workplace layout, space and noise
- systems of work: such as job content or the demands of work, workload or work pace, work schedule or working hours, participation in decision making and control over work and the systems for communication in the workplace
- management of work: such as supervision, instruction, information and training.

What is Stresswise?

The WorkSafe publication *Stresswise – Preventing work-related stress: A guide for employers in the public sector (Stresswise)* was developed by WorkSafe Victoria in conjunction with public sector employers and unions. It provides WorkSafe Victoria's advice on the causes and prevention of work-related stress, and outlines an OHS risk management approach to prevent risks to health from work-related stress.

¹ *Stressing the point*. WorkSafe Victoria. 2006.

² *Work organisation and stress. Protecting Workers' Health Series No. 3*. World Health Organization. 2004.

What does OHS law require?

Employer duties

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) law places responsibilities on employers and on employees.

Employers are required under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* to provide and maintain a safe working environment and systems of work to control risks to the psychological health of employees and contractors. The Act also requires employers to consult about health and safety matters so far as is reasonably practicable with employees who are (or are likely to be) directly affected. Where employees are represented by an elected health and safety representative (HSR), employers must involve the HSR in consultation, with or without the involvement of the employees directly.

In addition, employers must provide such information, instruction, training and supervision as is necessary to enable all employees to do their work in a way that is safe and without risk to health. Employers must also monitor the health of employees and the conditions in the workplace.

Employee duties

Employees are required to take reasonable care of their own health and safety while at work, and take reasonable care that their acts or omissions do not adversely affect their own or others' health and safety. Employees are also required to cooperate with any action taken by the employer to comply with OHS law and to not intentionally or recklessly interfere with or misuse anything provided at the workplace in the interests of health, safety or welfare.

Consultation

The WorkSafe publication *Consultation on health and safety: A handbook for workplaces* 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 procedures for consulting on health and safety matters and OHS procedures.

If designated work groups (DWGs) have HSRs, you must involve the HSR in any consultation that affects, or is likely to affect, the health and safety of members of the DWG.

How is work-related stress best prevented?

A systematic approach involving a combination of organisational and individual actions is recommended for the prevention and management of stress in the workplace. This involves a combination of:

- proactively preventing psychological illness and injury
- identifying and supporting at risk workgroups and/or staff who may be experiencing work-related stress, and
- ensuring injured employees receive the assistance they need to return to a safe and healthy working environment.

Employers must consult employees (and must involve HSRs where they exist) on a range of OHS matters, including hazard identification and risk assessment, when making decisions on how to control risks and when proposing workplace changes that may affect employees' health and safety. Consultation is essential to each of the four steps in the *Stresswise* process:

- **Step 1 – Identifying potential work-related stress hazards** – this may involve jointly examining information and workplace summary data to help identify potential work-related stress hazards and risks in the workplace.
Note: See information about privacy issues on page 4.
- **Step 2 – Determining work-related stress risks** involves consulting with employees and their HSRs to discuss the circumstances when stress hazards occur, the frequency and duration of exposure to stress hazards and risks, and the physical, psychological and/or behavioural precursors to the harm experienced by the employees.
- **Step 3 – Controlling work-related stress hazards and risks** is about consulting with employees and their HSRs in order to decide on measures to eliminate or reduce any risks to their health and may require an action plan where risk control measures need to be implemented and supported or resourced at different levels in your organisation.
- **Step 4 – Implementing continuous improvement, trialling and evaluating** is about reviewing and continuously improving measures needed to maintain the prevention of injury or illness from work-related stress over time, in consultation with your employees and their HSRs.

The control of stress risks must include eliminating or reducing risks so far as reasonably practicable. Managers should act to address issues within their delegated level of authority and refer those matters they cannot address to more senior managers for action.

The following **example** looks at one specific aspect – increased work pressure relating to staffing levels – and demonstrates some ways in which controlling risks could involve:

- the workgroup deciding to:
 - clarify work goals and individual roles through agreed, active and ongoing dialogue involving employees, their HSR and managers
 - raise workload issues before or as they occur so that the manager can act to address them
 - give earlier notice of leave requirements
- the manager deciding to:
 - give earlier notice of leave approvals and decisions about staffing during holidays
 - provide flexibility in working hours to accommodate the other commitments of staff
 - support employees in doing their job through actively listening to issues and acting on them in a timely manner
 - monitor staffing levels to identify periods of high workload
 - modify workloads to match work priority with staffing levels
 - seek management commitment to provide resources to match the need
- in consultation with the HSR, arranging a meeting with regional and senior management and developing an **action plan** that prioritises, schedules and allocates responsibility for the implementation of actions.

This could result in:

- regional management deciding to:
 - identify spare capacity and up-skill staff in other areas to assist staffing shortages
 - establish a resource pool of experienced staff who are available for work
- senior management deciding to:
 - implement a system of working arrangements to provide resources to match the need across the organisation
 - support the skilling of staff to improve workforce flexibility and create career development opportunities.

Reporting work-related stress hazards and risks

It is important that HSRs and employees understand workplace procedures for reporting stress issues. You can achieve this by providing instruction and training in the process, and encouraging the reporting of stress hazards and risks.

Where stress hazards and risks are reported, it is the employer's duty to determine the sources of stress in the workplace and act to eliminate or reduce them so far as is reasonably practicable.

Monitoring health and conditions

Senior management could:

- introduce or review an organisation-wide survey
- regularly examine workplace records to monitor stress and other issues that may be affecting the health of employees.

Resolving work-related stress issues

It is important that the agreed workplace issue resolution procedures are used to help address work-related stress issues, in the same way that these procedures are used to resolve any other OHS matter. Should you not have an 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* for further information).

Where it has not been possible to resolve an issue through the issue resolution procedure, HSRs may issue a provisional improvement notice (PIN) after consulting with you, citing the appropriate provision of the OHS Act or Regulation that they believe has been contravened or is likely to be contravened. Similarly, you may also contact the WorkSafe Advisory Service for information or assistance.

Further Information

WorkSafe Advisory Service

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

Relevant WorkSafe Publications

*Stresswise – Preventing work-related stress:
A guide for employers in the public sector: April 2007*

*Consultation on health and safety –
A handbook for workplaces: June 2007*

Stressing the point: April 2006

Privacy Issues

Privacy and confidentiality of personal information must be protected. Personal information is information whether true or not about an identifiable individual. It should not be possible to identify an individual from workplace records, survey data or workplace consultation, therefore grouped information is recommended to protect the identity of individuals. Only persons authorised to handle personal information should summarise, aggregate or de-identify personal information.