

# Managing Stress in the Workplace

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# The nature of stress

Stress is a pressure that is exerted on something, for example, a piece of metal, which causes the object to respond—the metal, for instance, may bend. The events that cause stress are known as ‘stressors’.

The term ‘stress’ is also used to describe the individual’s response to pressure. The response can be psychological and/or behavioural. How the individual responds to the stressor will depend on their personality, their perceptions, and their past experience. Some stress is necessary in that it assists us in achieving both work and personal goals. However, too much stress can make those goals harder to achieve.

People respond differently to stress. Some people function well under significant stress while others do not.

A worker’s ability to cope with increasing workplace stress is also affected by the amount of stress they are subjected to from stressors outside of the workplace. Trouble at home may reduce their ability to cope with pressure at work.

How well a person will cope with occupational stress will depend on

- the extent to which they feel threatened by the stressor
- the actions they know they can take to reduce the impact of the stressor
- their expectations as to how they will be able to cope with the stressor.

# Workers compensation

The cost to society of occupational stress is significant. The number of workers compensation claims being made is increasing and the cost of them to our economy, not just in compensation, but also in lost productivity, is considerable. Many employers are now also taking positive action to prevent occupational stress and the high costs it can occur.

Under some *Work Health Acts*, workers suffering a medical condition resulting from occupational stress **may** be entitled to workers compensation benefits.

The astute manager can relate workers compensation data to information about accidents, staff turnover, absenteeism, sick leave, morale and industrial unrest, to develop a picture of the physical and mental health of their organisation. The management of occupational stress should be a process that identifies the causes of workplace stress and eliminates or controls them.

# Reduced productivity

In addition to the up-front cost of workers compensation, stress may cause productivity losses through

- poor worker performance
- increased absenteeism
- diverted administrative and management time
- poor morale
- increased staff turnover.

# Common workplace stressors

Examples of possible causes of stress are as follows.

## Threats

Threats, such as

- risk of harm caused by working in unsafe conditions
- the possibility of dismissal
- the rate of change
- the uncertainty of change
- poor interpersonal relationships with supervisors or co-workers
- harassment from others
- discrimination.

## Pressure

Pressure to

- meet unreasonable deadlines
- adopt new technology
- adapt to certain management styles
- accept new goals and targets
- comply with unreasonable proposals
- accept and act upon performance feedback

## Frustration

Frustration from

- poor workplace communication and consultation
- lack of acknowledgment in the workplace that a stressor exists
- lack of acknowledgment of the individual's achievements

- being passed over for promotion
- not being suited for, or properly trained for a job.

## **Major stress**

Major stress can be caused by

- personal loss, such as the death of a loved one or the end of a relationship
- threat of physical danger
- a major industrial accident
- loss of job.

# The individual's response to workplace stress

What may be significant in one person's mind may not be in another. It is often difficult for an employee to choose a rational response and they may internalise the stress. This could result in physiological, emotional and/or behavioural responses that are recognised as symptoms of stress. Examples of these include:

## Physiological change

- Increased blood pressure
- Tiredness
- Stomach ulcers
- Digestive disorders such as indigestion, constipation or diarrhoea
- Weight loss or gain
- Headaches

## Emotional Change

- Increased tension
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Frustration
- Feelings of emptiness

## Behavioural change

- Over/under eating
- Misuse of alcohol and other drugs
- Interpersonal difficulties
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Aggressive or passive behaviour
- Workplace conflict
- Absenteeism



# Occupational stress management

Signs of occupational stress are an indication of problems with management systems, which should be seen as an opportunity for workplace performance and productivity improvement. The management of occupational stress should involve a process of

- identifying and assessing the actual and potential risks
- developing management strategies to eliminate or control these risks
- learning to understand our own responses to stressful situations and those of our colleagues.

As a result of implementing a stress management program, which ideally forms part of an overall safety management program, there may be an opportunity to

- reduce the incidence of other workplace injuries
- reduce workers compensation insurance premiums
- reduce absenteeism
- reduce workplace conflict
- improve workplace communication
- improve customer service
- improve workload and other resource management issues
- improve staff commitment and morale.

# The key steps in developing and implementing an occupational stress management program

## Step one – gain management commitment

This is a vital component necessary for the success of the program. Demonstrated commitment by management will ensure that supervisors and workers perceive the program as important. The people initiating the program can gain management commitment by

- having a clear understanding of the reason for and value of the program
- providing senior managers with a written proposal which sets out the reasons for and benefits of the program
- being available to discuss with key managers, the risks to the organisation if the program is not implemented and the opportunities which may arise if the program is implemented
- gaining the early ongoing support of the occupational health and safety manager and/or the human resource manager for the program.

## Step two – define the expectations of the program

A committee or team should be established to oversee the program. This would be a suitable job for the occupational health and safety committee if the workplace has one.

Together, members of the group should agree on a number of objectives for the program, which may include

- reducing occupational stress
- reducing workers compensation claims of occupational stress
- improving staff wellbeing and improving productivity.

### Step three – develop a plan

It is important that a plan be developed to communicate to staff and others, the steps the organisation plans to take in order to achieve its objectives. The details of the plan could include the following headings.

- Background to the development of the program
- Aims and objectives
- Expected outcomes
- Allocation of resources
- Project management
- Consultation
- Roles of management and workers
- Program activities
- Program timeframe
- Evaluation.

### Step four – identify the hazards — stressors

The purpose of this step is to gather information about occupational stress in the organisation. The actions that could be undertaken include

- examining unplanned absence rates to identify if some groups or individuals within the organisation have higher absenteeism than others
- recognising and recording conflict measures, such as grievance procedures, workplace harassment claims, equity management programs, performance management programs and industrial action to identify if issue which contribute to occupational stress are also showing up in other indicators
- examining occupational health and safety incident reports and staff reporting of stress or related illness
- examining the organisations' workers compensation claims to identify which individuals or group/s or workers are making accepted stress claims and the reasons for their claims
- interviewing the supervisors of claimants to identify what could have been done to prevent the absence from the workplace or to minimise the length of absence
- examining employee assistance scheme (EAS) or staff counsellor data to identify staff action to manage stress

- conducting a worker opinion survey to obtain qualitative feedback from staff
- conducting interviews with focus groups and managers to obtain qualitative feedback on issues, such as the organisation's management of change

The data collected could then be arranged into a brief report which describes how the organisation currently manages staff who experience a stress response and summarises the information gained from

- workers compensation claims
- supervisor interviews
- worker opinion survey
- focus group interviews.

Look for patterns and highlight any in the report. Such patterns may include the identification of common issues related to stress by workers, EAS reports, surveys and interviews.

Prepare an organisational history that includes a timeline—as a graph or table—demonstrating the occurrence of

- unplanned absences
- EAS referrals
- workers compensation claims
- grievances and workplace harassment complaints.

### **Step five – assess the risk**

At this stage, the organisation needs to assess the likelihood of the identified stressors actually causing harm. By assessing their risk level, the organisation gains an indication of which causes of stress it should control and of those, the priority it should give to controlling them.

If the organisation already has control measures in place to control some of the identified stressors, their presence and effectiveness should also be considered at this point.

To determine the level or severity of the risk, the organisation needs to consider the following:

### **Outcomes**

For each identified stressor, consider the worst likely outcome from exposure, e.g. fatality, major injury, minor injury or no injury. A major injury is defined as the person having five or more days away from work. The term 'injury' includes harm caused to mental health.

### **Likelihood**

For each identified stressor, consider the likelihood of harm occurring if a worker is exposed to it. This could range from 'very likely' to 'highly unlikely'.

### **Exposure**

For each identified stressor, consider how many workers are exposed to it. This aspect is very important when the organisation considers settings its priorities for introducing controls.

The risk assessment below can be used to help assess the risk of all workplace hazards, including stressors.

Outcome	Likelihood			
	Very likely	Likely	Unlikely	Highly unlikely
Fatality	High	High	High	Medium
Major injuries	High	High	Medium	Medium
Minor injuries	High	Medium	Medium	Low
Negligible injuries	Medium	Medium	Low	Low

## **Step six – control the risk**

Good stressor controls are changes that reduce the risk of causing harm. Based on the stressors identified and the risks they pose to workers, managers should consider implementing some or all of the following common controls.

- Nurture a workplace environment that demonstrates to staff that management genuinely cares about their wellbeing and that their personal and professional lives are not artificially separated.
- Establish effective formal and informal communication within the organisation to ensure that managers, supervisors and workers have a clear understanding of all workplace issues and processes.
- Clearly define priorities so that workers can avoid wasting time.

- Clearly define roles so that people know who is responsible for various workplace activities and understand decision-making latitude.
- Ensure there is adequate staffing to avoid either under- or overstaffing problems.
- Provide skill development activities to enable staff to become competent with new systems and technology.
- Provide adequate resources to avoid the frustration that arises when workers are required to achieve goals with inadequate supplies, machinery and other resources.
- Establish human resource management systems to support effective proactive management. Components of such systems should include performance management programs, equity management plans, occupational health and safety plans, grievance resolution processes, as well as discipline and inability to perform procedures.
- Implement a conflict and grievances resolution process that includes mechanisms for employees to give feedback to their managers, which will help to relieve a build-up of resentment or frustration.
- Establish ways for managers and supervisors to gain skills in the use of human resource management systems.
- Establish ways for workers with legitimate concerns about safety or productivity to be heard.
- Implement a change management process so that when major changes are planned, workers are properly consulted with, informed and prepared through retraining.

*(Illustration hidden due to copyright)*

- Develop a critical incident plan if your organisation is such that workers may experience a major traumatic incident. Preparation should include staff training and access to a counselling service experienced in post-trauma debriefing and counselling.
- Encourage social and sporting activity within the workplace, where staff from all levels can get to know each other and develop positive relationships. This can reduce the incidence of misunderstandings during work.
- Provide meal-break facilities and a place where employees can go during their break to sit quietly, relax and unwind.

# Early intervention is the key to effective stress management

Once a manager becomes aware that a worker is exhibiting signs of stress, they should take urgent action to address the issue. How a stress situation is managed will influence the length of a worker's absence and any consequent costs. Most of the costs associated with a workers compensation claim for occupational stress are related to time off work and rehabilitation services.

If no effort is made to intervene early and resolve issues, especially if the worker takes time off, the case may be difficult to resolve.

Early intervention can include conflict resolution, mediation, changes to workload or counselling from an Employee Assistance Scheme. But most importantly, the effective manager will need to try and understand why a particular employee is responding to a certain stressor in a way that is causing harm. It will be the manager's response to the employees stress response that will be a critical factor in successfully resolving the problem.

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