

Preventing work-related stress

for employers in the private sector

Work-related stress is a health and safety hazard with far-reaching implications for individuals and organisations alike. In Victoria around 2,500 workers each year suffer work-related stress injuries which result in WorkCover claims. The cost of work-related stress to employers, employees and the community is substantial.

This document provides information for employers, employees and health and safety representatives (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

¹ World Health Organisation. 2004. *Work organisation and stress*. Protecting Workers' Health Series No 3.

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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.

Some potential causes of work-related stress include:

Task design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A mismatch between qualifications/ experience and the demands of the job • Fragmented or meaningless work • Lack of variety 	Organisational function and culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor management of organisational change • Poor communication within the workplace • Rigid work practices – people unable to work out their own solutions to the day-to-day problems they encounter in the workplace • A non-supportive work culture where concerns and requests are dismissed
Work load or work pace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of control over work methods, pace/and rate • Work overload or under load • High work rate or time pressure 	Work schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift working – disruption to body processes • Inflexible work schedules • Unpredictable working hours • Long or unsociable working hours
Role in the organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role or task ambiguity or uncertainty – people are unsure about what they are doing • Role conflict • Responsibility beyond the individual's capacity to cope 	Management of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor leadership • Supervision arrangements • Performance management arrangements • Inadequate information, instruction and training
Work context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hazardous work • Poor communication on workplace issues • Dealing with difficult clients/customers • Violence or threat of violence 	Employment status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job insecurity • Career uncertainty or stagnation • Lack of reward, recognition, status, • Low social value of the work
Physical work environment and equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor workplace layout • Lack of space • Excessive noise • Inadequate equipment 	Relationships at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying and harassment • Poor relationships with co-workers and supervisors • Interpersonal conflict • Physical or social isolation • Lack of opportunity to be consulted • Lack of social support
Degree of control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low participation in decision-making • Lack of control over work methods and scheduling of work 		

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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 cause adverse health effects and reduce a person's capacity to perform at work. Work-related stress is a health and safety hazard that can have negative effects on both the individual and the organisation:

For the **individual**, negative effects can include:

- mental health: including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, difficulty with decision making, forgetfulness
- physical health: including headaches, indigestion, tiredness, slow reaction times, shortness of breath, musculoskeletal disorders and cardiovascular disease
- emotional health: including irritability, excess worrying, feelings of worthlessness, anxiety, defensiveness, anger and mood swings
- behavioural: including changes in performance, social withdrawal, impulsive behaviour, increased consumption of alcohol, nicotine or recreational drugs

Negative effects on the **organisation** can include:

- reduced productivity, performance or quality of service
- lower levels of job satisfaction and morale
- increases in absenteeism or sickness absence
- increase in conflict and impact on quality of relationships
- increase in injury, illness and lost time
- increased staff turnover.

Benefits of taking action to address work-related stress

Implementing measures to prevent work-related stress can benefit both individuals and the workplace by:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> creating a positive working environment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> increasing productivity
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> increasing job satisfaction and morale	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> establishing sound decision making processes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> decreasing staff turn-over rates	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> decreasing injury, illness and absenteeism
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> reducing accidents and incidents	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> improving customer/client satisfaction
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> improving communication	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> improving staff and customer loyalty

Such benefits can be achieved by implementing prevention measures that address the risk factors or causes of stress. Depending on the issues identified in the assessment process, you might consider:

- setting clear accountabilities and goals for staff
- planning workload to match potential demands
- ensuring that everyone understands their role in the organisation
- improving skills of managers and supervisors
- reviewing communication and consultation strategies
- providing positive feedback and encouragement for work well done

OHS law & work-related stress

Under OHS law employers are required 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. Employers must also provide such information, instruction, training and supervision as to enable employees to work in a way that is safe and without risk to their health. Employers must also monitor the health of employees and the conditions in the workplace.

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.

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Preventing work-related stress

A systematic approach called the risk management process is recommended for the prevention of work-related stress. This four step process is outlined below.

Employers must consult employees and must involve health and safety representatives (HSRs) 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 step in the risk management process and each workplace party (managers, HSRs and employees) has an important role. How those roles can be performed is outlined in the diagram.

Step 1 – Identify potential work-related stress hazards

Managers	HSRs	Employees
Monitor and examine information and workplace summary data to help identify potential work-related stress hazards and risks	<p>Represent work-related stress issues affecting members of your designated work group (DWG) with your employer.</p> <p>Examine information and workplace summary data to help identify potential work-related stress hazards and risks for your DWG.</p>	<p>Participate in processes that gather information about work-related stress hazards</p> <p>Report work-related stress hazards to your employer and HSR and encourage your colleagues to do the same</p>

Step 2 – Assess work-related stress risks

Managers	HSRs	Employees
<p>Consult employees and HSRs to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the circumstances where work-related stress hazards occur the frequency and duration of exposure to hazards the potential harm to employees 	<p>Participate in consultation with your employer and members of your DWG to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 	<p>Participate in the assessment by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> indicating when, how often and over what period of time work-related stress risks occur describing how work-related stress could affect or harm your health

Step 3 – Control work-related stress risks

Managers	HSRs	Employees
<p>Consult employees and their HSRs to decide on measures to eliminate or reduce any work-related stress risks.</p> <p>Develop an action plan with improvement targets to show how risk control measures will be implemented, resourced and monitored in your organisation.</p>	<p>Represent your DWG's views on measures to eliminate or reduce any work-related stress risks.</p> <p>Contribute your DWG's views to the development and implementation of the action plan to control work-related stress risks.</p>	<p>Contribute ideas on ways to control work-related stress hazards and risks in your workplace</p> <p>Join in the discussion about how actions to control risks can be implemented in your workplace</p>

Step 4 – Implement continuous improvement

Managers	HSRs	Employees
<p>In consultation with your employees and their HSRs, review and evaluate the measures implemented to prevent work-related stress.</p> <p>Consult employees and HSRs prior to implementing any future work changes.</p>	<p>Represent your DWG members in discussions to review and evaluate the measures implemented to prevent work-related stress</p>	<p>Co-operate with the measures that your employer puts in place to control work-related stress</p> <p>Contribute your ideas on how to improve the effectiveness of work-related stress prevention measures</p> <p>Report on the effectiveness of the measures implemented</p> <p>Report any new work-related stress risks</p>

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Reporting work-related stress

It is important that everyone in the workplace understands the procedures for reporting and addressing work-related stress. Employers should provide instruction and training on the process and encourage the reporting of work-related stress issues.

When a report of work-related stress is made, the employer must determine the source/s and act to eliminate or reduce them so far as is reasonably practicable.

Resolving work-related stress issues

All workplaces should follow procedures for resolving OHS matters, including work-related stress. Workplaces with agreed issue resolution procedures should use these to address work-related stress prevention in the same way that these are used 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 *Consultation on health and safety – a handbook for workplaces*).

Where it has not been possible to resolve an issue through the issue resolution process, HSRs may issue a provisional improvement notice (PIN) after consulting with the employer, citing the appropriate provision of the OHS Act or Regulation that they believe has been contravened or is likely to be contravened.

Integrating work-related stress prevention into your business

To be most effective, work-related stress prevention should be an integral part of business operations. This can be demonstrated by:

- ☑ senior management commitment
- ☑ communication and understanding of work-related stress prevention
- ☑ integration into workplace OHS representation, consultation and issue resolution processes and systems
- ☑ allocation of appropriate resources

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Further information

Contact the WorkSafe Advisory Service, your union or employer association for information and advice on work-related stress.

Worksafe Advisory Service

Toll-free 1800 136 089

Email info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

worksafe.vic.gov.au

Relevant publications

Guide to the OHS Act 2004 (2005)

*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)

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

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

Preventing and responding to bullying at work (2009)

Fatigue prevention in the workplace (2008)