

# STOP for SAFETY

## Work-related stress

Work-related stress describes the physical, mental and emotional reactions of workers who perceive that their work demands exceed their abilities and/or their available time, help or support to do the work. It occurs when they perceive they are not coping in situations where it is important to them that they cope.

A worker's response to workplace stress may be positive or negative for worker wellbeing, depending on a number of factors. Most people adjust to the variations of stress during the short term, but if it becomes excessive and long-lasting it can lead to mental and physical ill-health.

### Legal obligations

Work-related stress leading to illness, injury and weakened organisational performance can come from many sources, both work and non-work.

Business operators have a legal duty to do what is reasonably practicable to eliminate or minimise risk to health and safety, where health is both physical and psychological. This obligation therefore extends to protecting workers from the risk of harm from stressors at work.

### Risk factors for occupational stress

The key to reducing the effects of occupational stress is to understand what organisational, environmental and individual characteristics may lead to stress.

#### Organisational

There are many types of organisational stressors or risk factors that might lead to workers experiencing stress and sustaining psychological and/or physical ill-health. These risk factors are outlined in more detail in *Tip Sheet 4 - Risk factors for occupational stress*.

#### Environmental

Environmental stressors include noise, temperature and humidity, lighting, vibration, air quality and unguarded plant or equipment. These factors can influence a worker's comfort and performance and might contribute to stress.

#### Individual

People respond to stressors at work in different ways. Worker well-being can benefit from a combination of challenging work, a supportive atmosphere and adequate resources.

## **Outcomes of exposure to work-related stress**

Short-lived or infrequent exposure to low-level stressors is unlikely to lead to harm, in fact it can result in improved performance. However, when stressful situations go unresolved, they can result in physiological and/or psychological changes and illness. For example:

- **Physical** - headaches, indigestion, tiredness, slow reactions, shortness of breath
- **Mental** - difficulty in decision-making, forgetfulness
- **Emotional** - irritability, excess worrying, feeling of worthlessness, anxiety, defensiveness, anger, mood swings
- **Behavioural** - diminished performance, withdrawal or impulsive behaviours, increase in alcohol and nicotine consumption.

Common longer-term health issues linked to stress include cardiovascular disease, immune deficiency disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, psychiatric/psychological illness and musculoskeletal disorders.

## **Effects on organisational performance**

Increased stress levels of workers in an organisation can lead to diminished organisational performance including:

- reduced productivity and efficiency
- a decline in job satisfaction, morale and cohesion
- increases in absenteeism and sickness absence
- a higher level of staff turnover
- an increase in accidents and injuries
- a higher level of conflict or a decline in the quality of relationships
- reduced client satisfaction
- increased health care expenditure and workers compensation claims.

Above and beyond legal obligations and the direct financial and human costs, the effects of work-related stress on an organisation's performance provide good reason to reduce exposure to workplace stressors.

## **Resources**

### **Work-related stress tip sheets**

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland publishes 12 work-related stress solutions tips sheets to assist employers in managing the risk factors that might lead to psychological and/or physical injury in the workplace.

The tip sheets provide organisations with practical solutions and controls to each of the eight work-related stress risk factors - work demands, level of control, support, role clarity and role conflict, relationships, recognition and reward, managing change and organisational justice, and provide an overview of the occupational stress risk management process. They are an excellent, practical tool to assist in the prevention and management of psychosocial risks in the workplace. <http://www.deir.qld.gov.au/workplace/subjects/stress/index.htm>.

### **Work Health and Safety Act 2011**

<http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/CURRENT/W/WorkHSA11.pdf>

### **Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011**

<http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/SLS/2011/11SL240.pdf>