

Stress Management

► **Work-related Stress is the main threat to the mental well-being of employees in today's hectic work life.**

Pressures

Work-related stress (WRS) can be defined as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'. WRS exists where an employee feels they cannot cope with what is being demanded of them. This is very different from the beneficial effects of reasonable pressure and challenge (which can be stimulating). If WRS is prolonged or intense it can lead to ill health e.g. heart disease; backpain; nervous breakdown; depression, etc. It has been estimated by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2000) that around one-third of employees in the European Union suffer from WRS.

Who might be harmed?

WRS is a symptom of organisational failure and not an individual weakness. It can affect you or any of your employees regardless of age, status, gender, ethnicity or disability. At certain times, you or your staff may be especially vulnerable e.g. when returning from a stress-related absence or when having suffered a recent bereavement, etc. There are seven main risk factors:

1. *Culture* – of the organisation (e.g. excessive hours culture) and how WRS is dealt with.
2. *Demands* – such as excessive workload and exposure to physical hazards (e.g. noise).
3. *Control* – how much control the person has over the way in which they work. (e.g. speed)
4. *Relationships* – interpersonal issues e.g. bullying, harassment, discrimination, etc.
5. *Change* – how change is implemented and communicated, and employees supported throughout the process.
6. *Role* – clear definition of roles without conflicting demands.
7. *Support* – this will include mentoring, training and meeting an individual's particular needs.

Evaluating the risk

There is a legal duty to assess and control risk. You can start by asking employees if any part of their job causes too much pressure and discussing with them the seven factors above. The HSE's publications '5 steps to risk assessment' and 'Work-related stress' booklets can also be used (see references) and competent advice can be sought.

Reducing the risk

In order of priority, risk control measures should be adopted as follows:

- Avoid risks (e.g. protect employees from violence)
- Combat risks at source (e.g. organise work sensibly and give people clear roles)
- Adapt work to the individual (e.g. workplace design and work methods)
- Prevention policy (e.g. define how you will use control measures to combat stress)
- Communicate effectively (e.g. ensure employees understand what is expected of them)

What you should do:

- Find out the real reasons behind the WRS (encourage employees to report problems)
- Eliminate situations that cause WRS or change the work so that it suits you and your employees better (employees need to discuss what would make them happier at work with their employer)
- Colleagues should support one another if they are experiencing WRS

What can you do outside of work?

To help protect or improve your general health, you might consider:

- eating healthily;
- not smoking; not drinking too much alcohol; not having too much caffeine, etc;
- being physically active;
- learning relaxation techniques; and
- talking to family, friends, your GP or a counsellor about your concerns

Practical tips:

- Make time for rest, relaxation and exercise
- Compile a list of tasks, in order of importance
- Ask for help early, before problems build up

See also 'OSH', 'Work Community' and 'Violence at Work'

References

- *5 steps to risk assessment*, INDG163 (REV1), HSE (2000), HSE Books, Sudbury
- *Tackling work-related stress: A managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being*, HSG218, HSE (2001), HSE Books
- *Tackling work-related stress: A guide for employees*, INDG341, HSE (2001), HSE Books
- *Work-related stress – a short guide*, INDG281 (REV1), HSE (2001), HSE Books

This Info Card is based on the above HSE Work-related Stress publications

