

Xchanging Safety Sheet

Number 311

Stress

Legislative Requirements

Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004
Stresswise – Victorian WorkCover Authority

Workplace Stress

Workplace stress may be both good and bad, depending on its nature and extent.

'Good stress' (known as Eustress) can provide energy and motivation to meet challenges.

'Bad stress' (known as Distress) can occur when the amount and level of stress becomes disruptive.

Disruptive workplace stress can result in harmful physical and emotional responses to situations of conflict between high job demands and low control over these demands.

When a workers compensation claim for 'stress' is lodged, the term 'stress' is used to describe mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression that result from exposure to "bad stress". The *exposure* to "bad stress" may be a one off experience, or continued over time. An employee's *response* to the "bad stress" does not necessarily occur immediately after the exposure. In 2007-2008 there were 2,520 stress related compensation claims in Victoria (8.7% of claims). It is important to note that other claims may also be indirectly due to stress related issues, and existing claims can be longer in time off through the experience of stress.

Possible consequences of stress for the individual

Excessive stress can impact on the overall health of a person and possibly lead to:

- Increased metabolism affecting blood pressure, heartbeat and respiration
- Increased potential for illnesses such as diabetes, heart attacks and strokes
- Inability to concentrate during the day and to sleep properly at night
- Somatic symptoms such as dizziness and muscle tension
- Feelings of hopelessness, distress, anger & desire to harm self or others.

Possible consequences of stress for the workplace

- Increased absenteeism
- Increased sick leave
- Reduced productivity
- Reduced quality of work
- Compensation claims
- Poor morale
- Increased staff turnover
- Increased accidents
- Conflict
- Presenteeism (being present at work, but not being productive).

What might lead to employees experiencing stress in the workplace?

Category	Risk factor examples
Job Characteristics and the Nature of the Work	
Job Contents / Demands	High physical, mental or emotional demands
Work load	Work over load or under load
Work schedule	Shift work, long or unsocial hours
Job control	Low participation in decision making
Physical environment and equipment issues	Inadequate or faulty equipment, poor environmental conditions
Social and organisational context of work	
Organisational culture and function	Poor communication
Interpersonal relationships at work	Social or physical isolation, poor relationships with superiors, interpersonal conflict
Role in organisation	Role ambiguity, role conflict
Career development	Job insecurity, poor pay, under promotion or over promotion
Individual risk factors	
Individual differences	Coping styles, personality, hardiness
Home-work interface	Conflicting demands between home and work

From Dollard, 2001

How can employer's best prevent, minimise and manage stress in the workplace?

It is recommended that employers consider each of the risk factors listed in the above table to identify potential risk factors in their workplaces. Conduct an audit or screening for psychosocial hazards in the workplace. Assess and prioritize the risk of psychological illness for each hazard, in consultation with staff. Review available data and information (for example human resources data, workers compensation data etc.) that may reflect stress in the workplace.

Apply an integrated preventive approach:

- Put in place prevention strategies such as a stress policy and train middle managers to intervene where they identify stress in staff
- Ensure services are available, eg Employee Assistance programs, to assist staff to deal with unavoidable stress
- Develop services and assistance to ensure those employees who develop an illness as a result of exposure to workplace stress, and lodge Workers' Compensation claims, are guided back to work in a suitable and timely manner.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of risk factors should then occur regularly, and interventions modified, to meet the needs of your workplace.

Reference

Dollard, M.F. (2001). Work stress theory and interventions: From evidence to policy: A case study. NOHSC Symposium on the OHS implications of stress, pp 3-57.

Services Available

Xchanging can provide clients with advice concerning appropriate controls aimed at achieving injury prevention at your workplace. Please contact the OHS Consultants at risk.management@au.xchanging.com for further information.