Risk factors for work-related stress

Risk factors for work-related stress are aspects of work that are associated with psychiatric, psychological and/or physical injury or illness.

The eight risk factors for work-related stress are interrelated so it is best not to consider them in isolation. There is a greater risk of work-related stress when a number of these stressors or risk factors act in combination.

The following eight risk factors have been identified as being associated with work-related stress related ill health.

1. Work demands

Everyone has a given capacity for work and if a person's capacity is exceeded the person may experience work-related stress.

Some common work demands that may increase stress include:

- time pressure including inadequate time and resources to complete jobs satisfactorily, working too hard or too fast and difficult targets.

- high mental task demands such as work that requires high-level decision making or prolonged periods of concentration.

- work that is monotonous and dull or does not utilise a worker's range of skills or previous training.

- high emotional task demands, including work that is emotionally disturbing or requires high emotional involvement.

- working long hours or overtime, working through breaks or taking work home.

- shift rosters that are unpredictable and/or affect amount and quality of sleep, or make it difficult to balance work and family life.

Refer to Tip Sheet 5 – Work demands.

2. Low levels of control

The risk factor of 'control' refers to how much influence a person has in how they meet their task demands and how they perform their work in general (also known as autonomy). Unnecessary levels of supervision and surveillance, excessive responsibility but little authority or decision making and little or no say in how work is done may all lead to a stress response.

A person's tasks should ideally be meaningful, varied and allow for an appropriate degree of autonomy. It is possible for everyone in a business or undertaking (not just those in senior positions), to feel they have input into their work simply by the communication and consultation strategies that are utilised in the work team.

Refer to Tip Sheet 6 – Levels of control.

3. Poor support from supervisors and/or co-workers

This important risk factor covers aspects such as whether workers feel they are given constructive feedback, whether they can talk to their supervisor and peers about work problems, whether their supervisor helps fix work problems, whether peers help out when things are tough and whether it is possible to talk to, and form relationships with, work colleagues. The way workers are supported is key to reducing or moderating work-related stress. For instance, support may be provided through practical assistance in performing tasks or through the provision of information. It can also come in the form of emotional support, which refers to non-tangible assistance such as talking over a problem with a worker, providing positive feedback/encouragement or informally congratulating a member of a team for a job well done.

WORK SAFE HOME SAFE

Support provided by peers and supervisors can 'cushion' the stress responses people might otherwise experience where their jobs are demanding and they feel that they are not in control. This gives them greater coping resources in times of high work demand.

Refer to Tip Sheet 7 – Support from supervisor and/or co-workers.

4. Lack of role clarity

Role confusion arises when workers do not have clarity regarding their work objectives and key accountabilities, their co-workers' expectations of them and the overall scope and responsibilities of their job. A wide range of situations can create confusion, for instance beginning a new job or starting in a new PCBU, a transfer, a new supervisor or manager or a change in the structure of a work unit.

Role conflict occurs when a worker is required to perform a role that conflicts with their values or when they are torn between incompatible job demands. The greater the role conflict, the higher the likelihood of a worker experiencing work-related stress.

The risk of work-related stress can be reduced by ensuring workers understand their role within the PCBU and that expectations placed on them do not conflict, where this is possible.

Refer to Tip Sheet 8 – Role clarity and role conflict.

5. Poorly managed relationships

Colleagues can be important sources of support but they can also be potential sources of stress. Relationships with bosses, peers and subordinates can positively or negatively affect the way a worker feels and it is likely that wherever groups of people work together, some conflict will arise from time to time. This is normal and in some cases can provide positive impetus for innovation and growth. Conflict becomes a risk factor however, where it remains unresolved or becomes particularly intense. This may include prolonged friction and anger between colleagues, strained relationships or bullying. It is important that proactive steps be taken by the individuals and/or by management to resolve conflict early.

Refer to Tip Sheet 9 – Managing relationships.

6. Low levels of recognition and reward

Rewarding workers' efforts and recognising individual and team contributions and achievements within the PCBU is important when trying to minimise the risk of work-related stress. Appraisal and recognition can be achieved through tangible rewards or through feedback on task performance and providing opportunities for the development of skills.

Worker recognition is a communication tool that reinforces and rewards the actions and behaviours you most want people to repeat. Providing worker recognition by saying 'thank you' encourages more of the same actions and thinking. Workers who feel appreciated are more positive about themselves and their ability to contribute.

Refer to Tip Sheet 10 – Recognition and reward.

7. Poorly managed change

This risk factor refers to how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the PCBU. Change can be related to alterations in individual work conditions such as a change of role or shift roster or the introduction of new technology, or can be related to work-team or organisational level changes such as mergers, acquisitions, restructures or downsizing. Poor management of this process can lead to workers feeling anxious and uncertain about aspects of their work or employment status. Communicating what the PCBU wants to achieve through the change and involving and supporting workers throughout the process is crucial.

Refer to Tip Sheet 11 – Managing change.

8. Organisational justice

Organisational justice refers to perceptions of fairness about work procedures and how they are enacted. Procedural fairness generally relates to how procedures are implemented within the PCBU. For example, procedures are regarded as fair when they are unbiased, consistently applied, use accurate information and are open to appeal processes.

Relational fairness refers to the degree of dignity and respect afforded to a worker during a process. It is important for PCBUs to promote a positive and fair working environment, with the experience of injustice being potentially harmful to both the individual and the PCBU.

Refer to Tip Sheet 12 – Organisational justice.

This tip sheet is one of 12 that refer to work-related stress. For more detail, go to workcover.nsw.gov.au

1. Overview of work-related stress

2. A risk management approach to work-related stress

3. Implementing a work-related stress risk management process

4. Risk factors for work-related stress

5. Work demands and work-related stress

6. Levels of control and work-related stress

7. Support from supervisors and/or co-workers regarding work-related stress

8. Role clarity, role conflict and work-related stress

9. Managing relationships and work-related stress

10. Recognition and reward – minimising work-related stress

11. Managing change and work-related stress

12. Organisational justice and work-related stress

This document was developed by Workplace Health & Safety QLD, Department of Justice and Attorney General worksafe.qld.gov.au