

Stress and psychosocial trauma

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The experience of stress occurs when the demands and pressures that an individual encounters are not matched by her or his ability to cope with those demands and pressures. In this sense, workplace stress is different from high demands and pressure, although the terms are often used interchangeably in everyday language.

Thus, a certain amount pressure can be good for performance and may be necessary to keep employees active and motivated. However, when these demands are inadequately managed and become excessive, they can then lead to the potentially harmful experience of stress.

Excessive workplace stress can be costly both to employees and their employers. As well as causing significant health problems for the individuals affected, it can be detrimental to staff performance and lead to compensation claims. It also accounts for a substantial part of staff absence.

The origins of workplace stress are often found in management practices and styles and in work design, as well as the physical nature of working environments. Thus, while awareness raising and training are important interventions for managing workplace stress, they must be supported by appropriate HR policies and practices. These might include early intervention techniques, such as monitoring stress and sickness absence, or may focus on improving the organisation's capacity to react appropriately and promptly to problems of employee stress.

Through the development of policies and interventions, a supportive environment can be created in which stress can be managed effectively and raised as an issue in the confidence that it will be dealt with equitably.

Why tackle stress?

Stress can adversely affect employee performance, lead to ill-health and be costly to employers. The HSE estimates that work-related stress accounts for over one-third of all instances of ill-health at work. Stress can adversely affect employee performance, lead to ill-health and be costly to employers. The HSE estimates that work-related stress accounts for over one-third of all instances of ill-health at work.

A number of organisational effects have been associated with stress, including poor attendance and productivity, increased turnover, and reduced job satisfaction and commitment.

In addition, by managing stress in the workplace effectively, employers reduce the risk of compensation claims by ensuring compliance with elements of both the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

The causes of stress

The causes of stress will vary between different organisational settings. Understanding the causes of stress will require an analysis of the specific work-related problems within any given context.

Research has identified many aspects of work to be associated with the experience of stress, including management practices and physical and psychosocial factors of work design and context. Physical factors include excessive noise, extreme temperatures or vibrations. Psychosocial factors include an individual's

role in an organisation, their workload and the quality of their relationships with colleagues. Stress is also more likely to arise when an individual has little control over their work and the environment and events that surround it, and inadequate support in coping with them.

What employers can do to tackle stress: prevention

A range of preventive techniques can be used to address the causes of work-related stress. These include changing some aspect of the design, management or organisation of work through organisational development, work re-design or training activities. Effective preventive measures must be evidence-based and targeted to deal with the specific problems that have been identified. This requires a thorough assessment of work-related stressors in an organisation or department.

Research by IES for the HSE has been used to help develop the HSE's stress management standards. These identify six key characteristics of the workplace that, if managed well, contribute to the effective management of workplace stress. These standards can be used as the basis to identify potential workplace causes of stress, plan stress-related interventions, and monitor their impact. The standards cover:

- demands – employees feel that they are able to cope with the demands of their job
- control – employees feel they are able to have a say in the way they do their work
- support – employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors
- relationships – employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, eg bullying at work
- role – employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities
- change – employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change.

For each of the standards above, systems can also be put in place to respond to individual concerns.

IES has also conducted research into the use of stress audits in the workplace. An IES review of workplace stress audits looked at issues involved in measuring

workplace stress, the potential benefits and pitfalls of assessing stress, the products that are available, the implications of conducting stress audits and the next steps to take after conducting one. The research suggests that stress audits should form part of a wider management strategy for targeting stress in the workplace, and that a successful strategy may include:

- the development and communication of a stress policy
- the promotion of work-life balance; training in stress awareness and coping strategies for managers and employees
- access to services for employees who are experiencing difficulties because of stress
- the provision of a well-structured rehabilitation process for employees who are returning to work after long-term stress-related illness.

Organisations can also act to reduce both the risk of traumatic incidents occurring in the

workplace and the effects on the employees concerned. IES has conducted research looking at practices used by organisations, and found that organisations recognised the importance of educating and preparing staff as much as possible, in terms of what to expect if an incident occurred. This was considered to potentially lessen the impact of an incident should one occur, and enhancing individual coping skills that could protect the employee from further psychological damage.

What employers can do to tackle stress: timely response

Any serious attempt to manage workplace stress should aim to enhance the ability of individuals and the organisation to recognise and respond to problems as they arise. This can be achieved through the development of appropriate management systems and responses, and the training of employees and managers in stress awareness. Specific practices include:

- training for managers, to increase their awareness of the causes and effects of stress, to recognise signs of stress in employees, and make them more aware of the impact of their own management style
- training for individuals in recognising and responding to signs of stress, eg time management training
- changing the organisational culture and individuals' attitudes towards stress so that individuals feel able to report problems to their line manager

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- introducing policies and procedures to ensure that stress-related problems are monitored and responded to, eg stress audits, or stress management policy.

Employees may suffer work-related stress following a traumatic incident such as an accident or assault. IES research identified practices used by organisations following an incident, aimed at minimising the risk of employees being adversely affected. The research identified the use of techniques intended to allow employees the opportunity to discuss the incident and make sense of what had happened, as well as providing an opportunity to offer reassurance and support.

What employers can do to tackle stress: treatment and rehabilitation

Another important ingredient of effective stress management is the treatment and rehabilitation of employees already experiencing stress-related ill-health. Interventions include the provision of:

- internal or external counselling services
- Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), which can provide counselling and support for a wide range of problems
- support services for staff returning to work after absence due to stress.

For these rehabilitation strategies to work effectively, it is considered important that:

- employees and managers are aware of the services and know how to access them
- any service providers are appropriately qualified and guarantee confidentiality
- in being referred to a service provider, an individual's problems are thoroughly assessed and the appropriate treatment given
- feedback should allow the organisation to identify policies or practices that are contributing to stress so that they can take appropriate action.

Effective rehabilitation practices

IES research has identified the most effective forms and aspects of rehabilitation practices in relation to employees who have been absent from work due to stress-related ill-health. Examples of best practice were drawn from case study organisations, alongside a description of the reasons for the development of those practices. Best practice identified included:

- early contact with the employee – the purpose of this contact should be to offer general support rather than discuss any specific interventions or treatments
- early health assessment – experts consider that by two weeks, it should be possible to tell whether the individual will recover spontaneously, and by four weeks an intervention should start with referral for a health assessment
- quality of the health assessment – an accurate assessment of the problem, the situation, and the individual's needs
- development of an agreed rehabilitation plan with employee involvement
- flexible return-to-work options
- work adaptations and adjustments
- existence of a written policy or set of guidelines
- overseeing the rehabilitation process – rehabilitation may involve a number of stakeholders and their efforts must be effectively coordinated and consistent
- stress and rehabilitation awareness in line managers – developing the awareness of line managers to the signs and symptoms of stress, and their awareness of rehabilitation policies and the range of options available to them to manage situations
- monitoring sickness absence patterns – this may include early intervention when a case of 'stress' is identified and the monitoring of any problem areas or departments.

In addition to the above, the way in which good practice approaches are implemented and managed may be key to effective rehabilitation following stress-related illness:

- recognising the symptoms of work-related stress – employees and managers may require more assistance in recognising the signs and symptoms of stress than for other occupational illnesses
- early intervention – there is no general period of recovery or prognosis for work-related stress and an organisation's reaction to the situation can influence the prognosis
- accurate assessment – there is likely to be far more variety for work-related stress than some other occupational illnesses and so an accurate assessment of the problem, the situation and the individual's needs are key

- the provision of a non-stressful environment on returning to work – the employee can cope with the demands placed on them and has some control over the situation
- recognition that the causes of stress can change over time and that the return-to-work process may need reviewing on a more regular basis than for other occupational illnesses
- more flexibility – recovery from stress-related illness is likely to be less predictable than from other occupational illnesses and both timescales and duties may need to be more flexible and reviewed more regularly.

Contact

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About IES

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- decide what they want HR to achieve
- identify what high performing HR people are like
- design and deliver bespoke development programmes for HR people
- evaluate how they are progressing against their goals.