



An overview on work-related stress

Stress is a term used generally and is associated with many domains in life. Work-related stress is recognised as a major challenge to the health of both employees and organisations globally.

According to the World Health Organization's definition, work-related stress is "the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope."

Employees may respond positively or negatively to the various psychological risk factors in a work environment. Whilst people are generally able to adjust to short-term work-related stress and are able to continue performing their normal work duties, stress that develops into a long-term issue may affect a person's psychological and physical health.

Legal obligations associated with work-related stress

As work-related stress can lead to illness and injury, employers have a legal obligation to minimise employees' exposure to psychological risk factors that can increase work-related stress.

The Occupational Health and Safety Act 1984 imposes a legal duty on employers to do what is reasonably practicable to eliminate or minimise risk to employee health and safety. This duty extends to protection from potential harm and risk factors associated with work related stress.

Risk factors for work-related stress

When reducing the effect of work-related stress, it is important to

understand that risk factors can be divided into three categories:

- Organisational
- Environmental
- Individual

Organisational risk factors

Some organisational risk factors which Figure 1 displays the types of organisational risk factors people can be exposed to, which may lead to work-related stress and sustained physical or psychological effects.

Environmental/physical risk factors

Physical, chemical hazards risk factors can influence employees' comfort and performance within the work environment and contribute to stress. Types of environmental risk factors include:

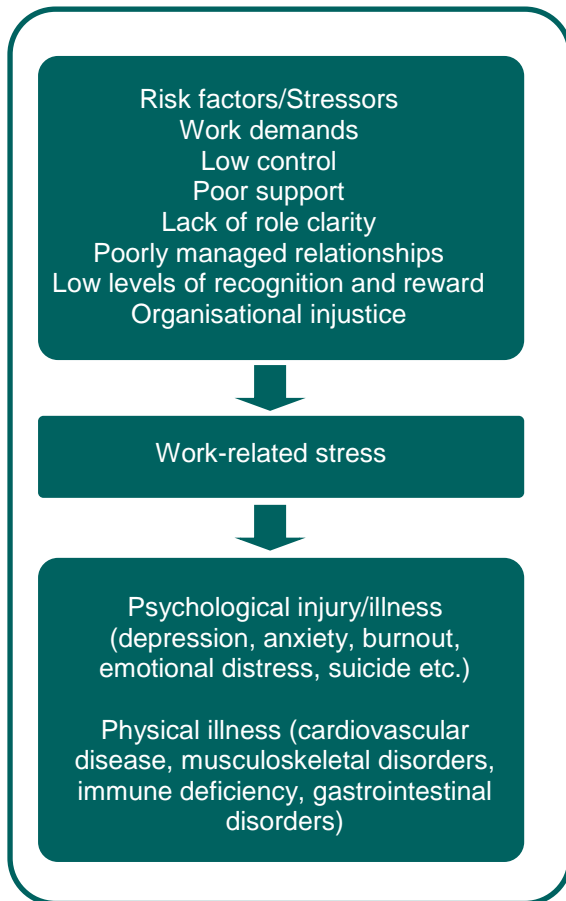
- Noise
- Temperature and humidity
- Lighting
- Vibration
- Air quality
- Unguarded plant and equipment

Individual risk factors

All people respond to psychological risk factors differently and this can, in part, be related (or contributed) to by physiological and/or personality factors which are external to the work environment.

Individual difference does not reduce employers' legal duty and responsibility to minimise exposure to occupational risk factors.

Figure 1. Model displaying the relationship between risk factors, work-related stress and psychological injury / illness.



Outcomes of exposure to work-related stress

Short-term exposure to stress can result in improved performance; it is rather long-term or unresolved work-related stress that can have physiological and/or psychological effects on employees. This can occur in the following four ways:

- **Physical:** i.e. headaches, poor sleep, indigestion, tiredness, slow reactions and shortness of breath
- **Emotional:** i.e. irritability, excess worrying, feeling of worthlessness, anxiety, defensiveness, anger and mood swings
- **Cognitive (thinking):** i.e. difficulty with decision making and forgetfulness
- **Behavioural:** i.e. diminished work performance, withdrawal behaviours, impulsive behaviours, an increase in alcohol and nicotine consumption.

Possible effects of work-related stress on organisational performance

As employees' stress levels increase, beyond an optimised level, organisational performance can be diminished and be measured by the following:

- A reduction in productivity and efficiency
- A decline in job satisfaction, morale and cohesion
- An increase in absenteeism and sickness absence
- An increase in employee turnover
- An increase in accidents and injuries
- An increase in conflict and a decline in quality of relationships
- A reduction in client satisfaction
- Increased health care expenditure and workers' compensation claims.

For more information contact WorkSafe on 1300 307 877.

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