

Work-related stress

Work-related stress is a growing problem around the world that affects not only the health and well-being of employees, but also the productivity of organisations. Work-related stress arises where work demands of various types and combinations exceed the person's capacity and capability to cope. Work-related stress is the second most common compensated illness/injury in Australia, after musculoskeletal disorders.

Work-related stress can be caused by various events. For example, a person might feel under pressure if the demands of their job (such as hours or responsibilities) are greater than they can comfortably manage. Other sources of work-related stress include conflict with co-workers or bosses, constant change, and threats to job security, such as potential redundancy.

In Australia, more than \$133.9 million was paid in benefits to workers who had made claims related to workplace stress during the 2004/2005 tax year. According to the National Health and Safety Commission, work-related stress accounts for the longest stretches of absenteeism.

What one person may perceive as stressful, however, another may view as challenging. Whether a person experiences work-related stress depends on the job, the person's psychological make-up, and other factors (such as personal life and general health).

Symptoms of work-related stress

The signs or symptoms of work-related stress can be physical, psychological and behavioural.

Physical symptoms include:

- Fatigue
- Muscular tension
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Sleeping difficulties, such as insomnia
- Gastrointestinal upsets, such as diarrhoea or constipation
- Dermatological disorders.

Psychological symptoms include:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Discouragement
- Irritability
- Pessimism
- Feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to cope
- Cognitive difficulties, such as a reduced ability to concentrate or make decisions.

Behavioural symptoms include:

- An increase in sick days or absenteeism
- Aggression
- Diminished creativity and initiative
- A drop in work performance
- Problems with interpersonal relationships
- Mood swings and irritability

- Lower tolerance of frustration and impatience
- Disinterest
- Isolation.

What are the main work-related stressors?

All the following issues have been identified as potential stressors at workplaces. A risk management approach will identify which ones exist in your own workplace and what causes them. They include:

- Organisation culture
- Bad management practices
- Job content and demands
- Physical work environment
- Relationships at work
- Change management
- Lack of support
- Role conflict
- Trauma.

Causes of work-related stress

Some of the factors that commonly cause work-related stress include:

- Long hours
- Heavy workload
- Changes within the organisation
- Tight deadlines
- Changes to duties
- Job insecurity
- Lack of autonomy
- Boring work
- Insufficient skills for the job
- Over-supervision
- Inadequate working environment
- Lack of proper resources
- Lack of equipment
- Few promotional opportunities
- Harassment
- Discrimination
- Poor relationships with colleagues or bosses
- Crisis incidents, such as an armed hold-up or workplace death.

Self-help for the individual

A person suffering from work-related stress can help themselves in a number of ways, including:

- Think about the changes you need to make at work in order to reduce your stress levels and then take action. Some changes you can manage yourself, while others will need the cooperation of others.
- Talk over your concerns with your employer or human resources manager.
- Make sure you are well organised. List your tasks in order of priority. Schedule the most difficult tasks of each day for times when you are fresh, such as first thing in the morning.
- Take care of yourself. Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly.
- Consider the benefits of regular relaxation. You could try meditation or yoga.
- Make sure you have enough free time to yourself every week.
- Don't take out your stress on loved ones. Instead, tell them about your work problems and ask for their support and suggestions.
- Drugs, such as alcohol and tobacco, won't alleviate stress and can cause additional health problems. Avoid excessive drinking and smoking.
- Seek professional counselling from a psychologist.

- If work-related stress continues to be a problem, despite your efforts, you may need to consider another job or a career change. Seek advice from a career counsellor or psychologist.

Benefits of preventing stress in the workplace

- Reduced symptoms of poor mental and physical health
- Fewer injuries, less illness and lost time
- Reduced sick leave usage, absences and staff turnover
- Increased productivity
- Greater job satisfaction
- Increased work engagement
- Reduced costs to the employer
- Improved employee health and community wellbeing.

Work-related stress is a management issue

It is important for employers to recognise work-related stress as a significant health and safety issue. A company can and should take steps to ensure that employees are not subjected to unnecessary stress, including:

- Ensure a safe working environment.
- Make sure that everyone is properly trained for their job.
- De-stigmatise work-related stress by openly recognising it as a genuine problem.
- Discuss issues and grievances with employees, and take appropriate action when possible.
- Devise a stress management policy in consultation with the employees.
- Encourage an environment where employees have more say over their duties, promotional prospects and safety.
- Organise to have a human resources manager.
- Cut down on the need for overtime by reorganising duties or employing extra staff.
- Take into account the personal lives of employees and recognise that the demands of home will sometimes clash with the demands of work.
- Seek advice from health professionals, if necessary.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychologist
- Your manager
- Human resources manager at your workplace
- WorkCover Advisory Service Tel. 1800 136 089

Things to remember

- Some of the many causes of work-related stress include long hours, heavy workload, job insecurity and conflicts with co-workers or bosses.
- Symptoms include a drop in work performance, depression, anxiety and sleeping difficulties.
- It is important for employers to recognise work-related stress as a significant health and safety issue.
- A company can and should take steps to ensure that employees are not subjected to unnecessary stress.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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