

# Overview of occupational stress



Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

Stress is a term that is widely used in everyday life and most people have some idea of its meaning. Occupational (or work-related) stress is recognised globally as a major challenge to workers' health, and the health of an organisation.

Occupational stress describes the physical, mental and emotional reactions of workers who perceive that their work demands exceed their abilities and/or their resources (such as time, help/support) to do the work. It occurs when they perceive they are not coping in situations where it is important to them that they cope.

A worker's response to stressors at work may be positive or negative for worker wellbeing, depending on a number of factors. In the vast majority of instances, people adjust to stressors and are able to continue to perform their normal work duties. While stress itself is not a disease, if it becomes excessive and long-lasting it can lead to mental and physical ill-health.

## Your legal obligations

Occupational stress leading to illness, injury and weakened organisational performance can come from many sources, both work and non-work.

Employers are not able to control workers' personal lives and the stressors they may encounter there, however they do have

a legal obligation to minimise their exposure to work-related factors that can increase the risk of occupational stress.

The *Queensland Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995* imposes an obligation on people to ensure the workplace health and safety of themselves, their employees and others at the workplace. This obligation extends to protecting workers from the risk of harm from stressors at work.

## Risk factors for occupational stress

The key to reducing the effects of occupational stress is to understand what organisational, environmental and individual characteristics may lead to stress in the first place.

### Organisational

It is important to understand the types of organisational stressors people can be exposed to when examining occupational stress. A simplified model is shown in Figure 1 (over page).

The model identifies the kinds of organisational stressors or risk factors that might lead to workers experiencing stress and sustaining psychological and/or physical ill-health. These risk factors are outlined in more detail in Tip Sheet 4.

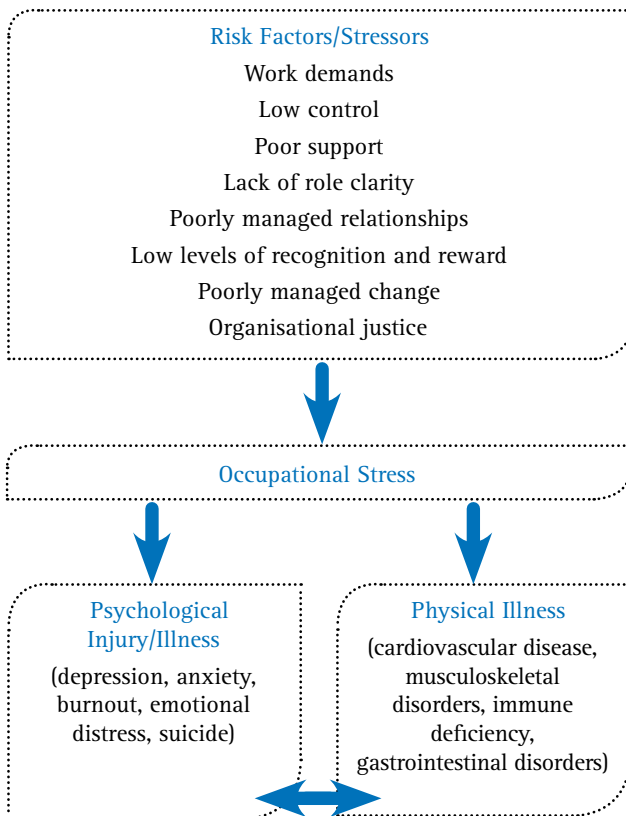
## Environmental

Environmental stressors such as physical, chemical or biological agents can influence the worker's comfort and performance in his or her work environment, and might contribute to a stress response. These factors can cause stress on their own, but often act to exacerbate a person's response to another stressor.

Types of environmental stressors include:

- noise
- temperature and humidity
- lighting
- vibration
- air quality
- unguarded plant and equipment.

Figure 1.



## Individual

People respond to stressors at work in different ways. It has been suggested that this can, in part, be related to physiological and/or personality factors (e.g. resilience). Worker well-being appears to benefit from a combination of challenging work, a supportive atmosphere and adequate resources.

While it is important to recognise these individual differences and to match jobs and tasks to individual abilities, this does not reduce an employer's legal obligation to minimise workers' exposure to risk factors for occupational stress and to ensure the workplace does not exacerbate an existing illness.

## Outcomes of exposure to occupational stress

### Possible health effects

Short-lived or infrequent exposure to low-level stressors are not likely to lead to harm, in fact short-term exposure can result in improved performance. When stressful situations go unresolved, however, the body is kept in a constant state of stimulation, which can result in physiological and/or psychological changes and illness. For example:

Physical: headaches, indigestion, tiredness, slow reactions, shortness of breath

Mental: difficulty in decision-making, forgetfulness

Emotional: irritability, excess worrying, feeling of worthlessness, anxiety, defensiveness, anger, mood swings

Behavioural: diminished performance, withdrawal behaviours, impulsive behaviour, increase in alcohol and nicotine consumption

Common longer-term health issues linked to stress include cardiovascular disease (CVD), immune deficiency disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, psychiatric/psychological illness (PPI) and musculoskeletal disorders.

### Possible effects on organisational performance

Increased stress levels of workers in an organisation can lead to diminished organisational performance as measured by the following:

- productivity and efficiency may be reduced
- job satisfaction, morale and cohesion may decline
- absenteeism and sickness absence may increase
- there may be an increase in staff turnover
- accidents and injuries may increase
- conflict may increase and the quality of relationships may decline
- client satisfaction may be reduced
- there may be increased health care expenditure and workers' compensation claims.

The effects of occupational stress on organisational performance provide good reasons – above and beyond legal obligations and the direct financial and human costs – as to why employers and other obligation holders should reduce workers' exposure to workplace stressors.

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