

Managing work-related stress



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It's easy to get stressed about work-related stress. It costs the economy at least \$15 billion per year. The direct annual cost to employers alone due to absenteeism and poor performance is \$10 billion per year. And things seem to be getting worse.

"A surge in mental health and disability claims from stressed white-collar workers is hitting the profits of Australian insurers," the Australian Financial Review reported, with data from group and retail insurers showing they "paid out a combined \$10 billion during the year to March 2015, up from \$8.64 billion in 2014."

But it doesn't have to be this way. Work-related stress can be well managed if you have a clear understanding of the definition, signs and causes of stress, and also implement effective measures for the individual and at an organisational level.

DEFINITION AND SIGNS

Some pressure at work can be good. For example, a deadline can focus your mind, leading to improved performance.

However, when pressure is excessive or prolonged, it can lead to work-related stress. For instance, a tight deadline on a project that a person feels they have neither the skills nor ability to do well.

Rather than being a disease itself, work-related stress is the reaction of the mind and body to change.

The psychological signs of work-related stress include irritability, mood swings, worrying, helplessness, memory and decision-making difficulties, and feeling disconnected from others.

The physical signs are new ailments or worsening of existing ones. For example, headaches, muscle aches, heart palpitations, increased blood pressure, fatigue, sleep difficulties and stomach upsets.

Any of these signs may result in behavioural problems such as frequent sick leave, low output, excessive errors, excessive work at home outside work hours, avoiding social engagements, and alcohol and drug abuse.

It's important to note that outward signs are usually noticeable to managers and colleagues, however, people can be reluctant to admit to distress due to concerns that it indicates weakness or failure.

STRESSORS

Stress is a highly individual thing. What you find stressful can be fine for someone else. Overall, this variation relates to a person's resources to cope with stress. This may relate to their background, culture, skills, experience, health status and personality.

Even then, there are factors called stressors that are common across the broad population of people affected by work-related stress. Stressors include excess demand, such as too much work or erratic work patterns, lack of control, such as not having a say about how work is performed, and reduced support from colleagues and superiors.

Other important stressors are difficult relationships such as bullying and poor teamwork, inadequate role designation, and poor quality communications, particularly when undergoing change.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Research shows that dealing with the stressors (common causes of stress) is more likely to achieve a long term solution compared to just attending to the person affected by stress and, for example, simply providing stress reduction training. This is a key principle that needs to be applied to both prevention and management measures, particularly at an organisational level.

PREVENTION

Prevention includes the following measures that can be provided by managers:

- + Ensure people have the skills, training and resources for their jobs
- + Provide varying working conditions and flexibility
- + Ensure people influence how their jobs are done
- + Treat people fairly and consistently; bullying, harassment shouldn't be tolerated
- + Ensure good communications, especially during change
- + Be sensitive to workplace changes such as staff movements and workload change
- + Be approachable and available for people, and address issues clearly, honestly and in a timely manner
- + Take stress seriously, show understanding towards people who admit to being under pressure, avoid being judgemental or seeking explanations in personality 'flaws'
- + Encourage an open and understanding attitude to what people say about work pressures
- + Provide stress reduction training for individuals, in addition to the above

MANAGEMENT

Management measures when a person is affected by stress include:

- + Where stressors can't be changed, it may be appropriate to move the person
- + If sick leave is recommended, contact should be maintained with the person and their doctor. This should be done personally, if practical. However, sensitivity may be required if the person requests privacy
- + The person may be able to work reduced hours or in a different job, before returning to the old job
- + Avoid the temptation to dismiss someone as 'the easy way out'
- + Take into account the effect of any measures on other staff

TREATMENT

Treatment for work-related stress is mostly provided by a psychologist or counsellor including cognitive strategies such as recognising and challenging unhelpful thoughts, improved time management, seeking collegial support, and practising good communications and problem-solving.

Additional approaches include adopting healthy lifestyles such as regular physical activity, stopping smoking or reducing alcohol or drug use. Stress reduction techniques may also be recommended. Whether it's breathing exercises, guided imagery, meditation and yoga, they can all help you to take the stress out of work-related stress.

TREATMENT

DO	DON'T
Act promptly when you believe there's a problem.	Delay if there's no concrete reason to believe the matter will resolve itself.
Use knowledge of the person to decide the best approach.	Hesitate to seek advice from Human Resources.
Decide if you're part of the problem. If so, involve a credible third party.	Use being part of the problem as an excuse for inaction.
Start low-key, casually, but prepare facts such as where the person's performance has deteriorated.	Make a fuss or back the person into a corner.
If problem isn't affecting performance, be prepared to respect privacy.	Use respect for privacy as an excuse for inaction. Offer assistance. If refused, leave offer open whilst continuing to monitor situation.
If discussion gets heated or personal, have a time-out and involve credible third party.	Engage in arguments.
Assist the person to reach a personally acceptable outcome.	Avoid seeming indifferent, but don't become emotionally involved. If person needs a confessor or lecturer, refer for professional assistance.
Accept if problem is out of your league and identify best course of action.	Hesitate to seek professional assistance or advice from more senior management or Human Resources.
Take sincere interest in the person's wellbeing, but remember your prime responsibility is the person's performance.	Get personal and lose focus on the facts about the person's performance.
Respect confidences and the person's privacy.	Say or do things that compromise integrity.
Document and get the agreement of the person on any decisions or commitments.	Leave documentation and agreement more than 1-2 days, as things can change rapidly.

Work-Related Stress Claims Facts and Figures

- + **One in five (20%) Australians of working age experience a mental illness in any year.**
- + **The overall prevalence of mental health conditions is highest in the financial and insurance sector with 33% of people experiencing a mental health condition.**
- + **It is estimated that mental health conditions cost Australian workplaces approximately \$11 billion per year.**
- + **This includes \$146 million in compensation claims and \$4.7 billion in absenteeism.**
- + **Organisations can play a vital role in reducing the prevalence of mental health in society.**
- + **PWC estimates a 2.3 ROI (return on investment) to employers who invest in making their workplaces mentally healthy.**

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