A guide for employers

Preventing and managing work-related stress

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Contents

1. Introduction to preventing and managing work-related stress

Guidance to help employers identify, eliminate or reduce and manage the risk of work-related stress.

Work-related stress

Stress is not an injury or an illness, however excessive and long-lasting stress can have a negative effect on employees' health, safety and wellbeing and can lead to psychological injury. Work-related stress is recognised globally as a major occupational health and safety (OHS) hazard and can be challenging for employers to prevent and manage. Guidance on the following pages can help employers recognise psychosocial hazards that, if left unmanaged, may increase the risk of stress and psychological injury.

Psychosocial hazards

Psychosocial hazards are factors in the design or management of work that increase the risk of work-related stress and can lead to psychological or physical harm. Examples of psychosocial hazards might include poor supervisor support or high job demands.

Employees are likely to be exposed to a combination of psychosocial hazards. Some hazards might always be present at work, while others only occasionally. There is a greater risk of work-related stress when psychosocial hazards combine and act together, so employers should not consider hazards in isolation.

Psychosocial hazards do not necessarily reveal the causes of work-related stress. Causes are likely to be specific to the employee, work or workplace. Senior management should identify which psychosocial hazards negatively affect employees' health and well-being and take appropriate action to control the impact of those hazards.

Relationship of physical and psychosocial hazards

Work-related physical hazards and psychosocial hazards can be connected and one can affect the other. Employees who do not feel safe at work due to physical hazards can be at risk of developing work-related stress. Employees who are stressed have a higher risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and their concentration and decision-making abilities can be affected, increasing the risk of physical injury.

Definitions and terms

An explanation of some of the terms you will come across in guidance about work-related stress.

Hazard

A hazard is a situation or thing that has the potential to harm a person.

Hazards at work might include, for example, hazardous manual tasks, noisy machinery, a moving forklift, chemicals, electricity and working at heights.

Psychosocial hazards include work-related factors such as repetitive work, high workloads and aggressive or abusive behaviours, including bullying and violence at the workplace.

1. Introduction to preventing and managing work-related stress

Individual factors

Individual factors are any attributes or characteristics of the individual that might increase the likelihood of developing a disease or injury.

People respond to hazards in different ways. Individual differences that might make some people more susceptible to harm from exposure to the same hazard include:

- being a new or young employee
- having an existing disability, injury or illness
- having previously been exposed to a traumatic event
- people experiencing difficult personal circumstances

Despite individual factors, it is still an employer's responsibility to control risks across individuals and groups of employees, so far as reasonably practicable.

Risk

Risk is the possibility that harm – death, injury or illness – might occur when someone is exposed to a hazard.

Psychological injury

Psychological injury is a disorder diagnosed by a medical practitioner and includes a range of recognised cognitive, emotional, physical and behavioural symptoms. These might be short term or occur over many months or years and can significantly affect how a person feels, thinks, behaves and interacts with others. Psychological injuries are sometimes also known as mental health conditions or disorders.

Psychosocial hazards

Psychosocial hazards are factors in the design or management of work that increase the risk of work-related stress, which can then lead to psychological or physical harm. Examples include poor supervisor support or high job demands.

Work-related factors

Work-related factors are factors in the design or management of work that can positively or negatively affect an employee's mental health. Examples include supervision, workload and role clarity.

Work-related stress

Work-related stress is the physical and psychological response of an employee who perceives that the demands of their work or workplace environment exceed their ability or resources to cope.

Work-related stress does not itself constitute physical or psychological harm or injury but can result in an injury if stress is prolonged or severe.

2. The effects of work-related stress

Guidance to help employers understand psychosocial hazards, the effects of work-related stress and how to comply with their obligations to keep workplaces safe.

In this chapter

- Initial signs of negative health impacts
- Injuries and illness from exposure to stressful work-related factors
- Possible effects on performance
- Work-related stress and your legal duties
- Related information

Short-term or infrequent exposure to psychosocial hazards is not likely to cause harm, if employers manage it well. Some challenging work demands, with extra support and resources, might even improve performance.

However, a person's body is in a state of constant tension when stressful situations go unresolved, which will almost certainly result in harm to health, safety and wellbeing.

Initial signs of negative health impacts

Early signs of negative health impacts from exposure to psychosocial hazards may include:

Physical

- headaches
- indigestion
- tiredness
- problems sleeping
- slow reactions
- shortness of breath
- nausea

Psychological

- difficulty making decisions
- forgetfulness
- difficulty in concentrating
- memory lapses

Emotional

- irritability
- excess worrying
- feelings of worthlessness
- anxiety
- defensiveness
- anger
- mood swings
- feelings of dread

Behavioural

- diminished performance
- withdrawal from work
- not engaging at work
- impulsive behaviour
- sleeping problems
- increase in alcohol or nicotine consumption
- using prescription or non-prescription drugs

2. The effects of work-related stress

Injuries and illness from exposure to stressful work-related factors

Examples of psychological injuries that may arise from or be exacerbated by exposure to psychosocial hazards include:

- depression
- anxiety
- burnout
- emotional distress
- self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- trauma or stressor-related disorders
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

There can also be physical consequences from exposure to psychosocial hazards, such as increased risk of:

- cardiovascular disease
- musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)
- immune deficiency
- gastrointestinal disorders

Possible effects on performance

Increased exposure to psychosocial hazards can affect performance and lead to, for example:

- reduced productivity and efficiency
- decline in job satisfaction, morale and team unity
- increased absenteeism
- increased staff turnover
- avoidable/unexplained errors
- increased incidents and injuries
- increased conflict
- decline in the quality of relationships
- reduced client satisfaction
- increased health care expenditure and employee compensation claims

Work-related stress and your legal duties

Employer obligations

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (OHS Act) requires employers to comply with various duties, so far as reasonably practicable, to ensure health and safety in their workplace.

Employers' duties include obligations to:

- provide and maintain a working environment for employees that is safe and without risks to their health, including psychological health. This duty includes –
  - providing and maintaining safe systems of work
  - providing information, instruction, training and supervision so employees can perform their work safely and without risks to health
- monitor the conditions of workplaces under the employer's management and control
- monitor employee health
- consult with employees and any health and safety representatives (HSRs) when doing certain things, for example, identifying or assessing hazards or risks and making decisions about measures to control those risks
- attempt to resolve health and safety issues in line with any relevant agreed procedure or the relevant procedure prescribed by the *Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2017* (OHS Regulations)

In order to comply with their duties, employers:

- must consult with employees and HSRs to identify or assess hazards or risks to health and safety at a workplace under the employer's management and control, including work-related factors that can cause or contribute to stress
- where a risk has been identified, either eliminate the risk or implement measures to control it so far as is reasonably practicable

2. The effects of work-related stress

- following a report/injury/incident involving stress, need to investigate whether work-related factors contributed
- need to review and revise risk control measures

The definition of 'health' under the OHS Act includes 'psychological health', therefore any reference to OHS obligations in relation to the health of employees extends to their psychological health.

Employee obligations

Employees have a duty, while at work, to take reasonable care for their own health and safety, and to take reasonable care for the health and safety of people who might be affected by their acts or omissions in the workplace. Employees also have a duty to cooperate with their employer's actions to comply with requirements under the OHS Act and OHS Regulations.

More information about legal duties

The WorkSafe website has more information about legal duties, the OHS Act and OHS Regulations, as well as information about how WorkSafe applies the law in relation to reasonably practicable.

Reasonably practicable

Whether particular risk control measures are reasonably practicable depends on the specific workplace circumstances. For more information on what is 'reasonably practicable' when complying with Part 3 of the OHS Act, refer to WorkSafe's position on how WorkSafe applies the law in relation to reasonably practicable.

Related information

Occupational health and safety – your legal duties

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/occupational-health-and-safety-your-legal-duties

Information for employers: Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/information-employers-occupational-health-and-safety-act-2004

Information for employees: Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/information-employees-occupational-health-and-safety-act-2004

Information about reasonably practicable

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/how-worksafe-applies-law-relation-reasonably-practicable

3. Psychosocial hazards contributing to work-related stress

Guidance to help employers identify features in work design or management that may increase risks of work-related stress and psychological or physical harm.

In this chapter

- Common psychosocial hazards

Common psychosocial hazards

Common psychosocial hazards include the following:

Low job control

Low job control is where employees have little control over aspects of the work, including how or when a job is done. Includes tasks or jobs where:

- work is machine or computer-based
- work is tightly managed, such as in scripted call centres
- employees have little say in the way they do their work, when they can take breaks or change tasks
- employees are not involved in decisions that affect them or their clients
- employees are unable to refuse dealing with aggressive clients, such as in police services

High and low job demands

High and low job demands occurs when sustained high or low physical, mental or emotional effort is required to do the job.

High-demand tasks or jobs might include the following examples:

- long work hours
- high workloads, for example, too much to do, too many clients, fast work pace or significant time pressure
- work that is beyond the employee's capabilities or training
- long periods of attention looking for infrequent events. For example, air traffic controllers, long-distance driving or security monitoring
- emotional effort responding to distressing situations or distressed or aggressive clients. For example, paramedics dealing with difficult patients or social workers dealing with distressed clients with complex needs or situations
- exposure to traumatic events or work-related violence. For example, emergency services, mental health nurses and child protection workers
- working with clients with challenging behaviours
- shift work leading to higher risk of fatigue
- frequently working in unpleasant or hazardous conditions. For example, working in extreme temperatures or noise, around hazardous chemicals or dangerous equipment
- having to perform demanding work while wearing uncomfortable protective clothing or equipment. For example, nurses and orderlies working in surgery, teachers and educational support staff working in large, noisy open plan classrooms

Low-demand tasks or jobs might include where there is:

- too little to do
- highly repetitive or monotonous tasks which require low levels of thought processing and little variety. For example, picking and packing products and monitoring production lines

3. Psychosocial hazards contributing to work-related stress

Poor support

Poor support involves tasks or jobs where employees have inadequate:

- emotional or practical support from supervisors and colleagues
- information or training to support their work performance
- tools, equipment and resources to do the job

Poor organisational change management

Poor organisational change management occurs in workplaces where there is:

- not enough consideration of the potential health, safety and performance impacts during downsizing or relocations or the introduction of new technology and production processes
- not enough consultation and communication with key stakeholders and employees about major changes
- not enough practical support for employees during transition times

Poor organisational justice

Poor organisational justice occurs in workplaces where there is:

- inconsistent application of policies and procedures
- unfairness or bias in decisions about allocation of resources and work
- poor management of under-performance

Low recognition and reward

Low recognition and reward occurs in jobs where:

- there is a lack of positive feedback
- there is an imbalance between employees' efforts and formal and informal recognition and rewards
- there is a lack of opportunity for skills development
- skills and experience are under-used
- there is uncertainty about or frequent changes to tasks and work standards
- important task information is not available to the employee
- there are conflicting job roles, responsibilities or expectations. For example, an employee is told one job is a priority but another manager disagrees

Low role clarity

Low role clarity involves jobs where there is:

- uncertainty about or frequent changes to tasks and work standards
- important task information which is not available to the worker, or
- conflicting job roles, responsibilities or expectations, such as a worker is told one job is a priority but another manager disagrees or priorities are changed

Poor workplace relationships

Poor workplace relationships occur in jobs where there is:

- workplace bullying, aggression, harassment, sexual harassment and gendered violence, discrimination or other unreasonable behaviour by colleagues, supervisors or clients
- poor relationships between employees and their managers, supervisors, colleagues and clients or others the employee has to interact with
- conflict between employees and their managers, supervisors or colleagues. This becomes worse if managers are reluctant to deal with inappropriate behaviours
- lack of fairness and equity in dealing with organisational issues or where performance issues are poorly managed

3. Psychosocial hazards contributing to work-related stress

Poor environmental conditions

Poor environmental conditions involve exposure to poor-quality or hazardous working environments. Examples include:

- hazardous manual handling
- poor air quality
- high noise levels
- extreme temperatures
- working near unsafe machinery

Remote and isolated work

Remote work is work at locations where access to resources and communications is difficult and travel times might be lengthy. Examples include:

- farmers
- real estate agents
- a community nurse conducting visits at night
- night-shift operators in petrol stations or convenience stores
- offshore mining
- fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) employees

Isolated work is where there are no or few other people around or where access to help from others, especially in an emergency, might be difficult.

Violent or traumatic events

A violent or traumatic workplace event is a workplace incident which exposes an employee to abuse, the threat of harm or actual harm and causes fear and distress which can lead to work-related stress and physical injury. Violent or traumatic events are common in groups such as first responders, health care workers, disaster and emergency services, social workers and defence personnel. Examples of violence or traumatic events include:

- robbery
- verbal or physical assault
- assault
- being bitten, spat at, scratched or kicked
- being threatened with or without a weapon

Understanding these psychosocial hazards is crucial in controlling the impacts on employee health, safety and wellbeing.

4. A risk management approach to work-related stress

This guidance explains the risk management process and how employers can apply it to help control the risk of work-related stress in the workplace.

In this chapter

- Consultation
- The risk management process
- Applying the risk management process
- Providing information, instruction, training and supervision
- Hierarchy of control for psychosocial hazards and risk factors
- Related information

Consultation

Employers must, so far as reasonably practicable, consult with employees and any health and safety representatives (HSRs) on health and safety matters, including, for example, when identifying or assessing hazards or risks and when making decisions about measures to control risks to health or safety, including the risk of work-related stress.

Consultation with employees is an essential element in the creation of a workplace that is safe and free from unreasonable risks to employees' psychological health.

WorkSafe has various resources which can help with consultation, including A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation.

The risk management process

The risk management process involves a series of steps to identify hazards and control risks. Employers should apply the risk management process to control, as far as reasonably practicable, exposure to factors which might contribute to work-related stress.

The risk management process involves the following steps:

1. Identifying hazards

Identifying the existence of psychosocial hazards that could cause harm, for example, high job demands.

2. Assessing associated risks, where necessary

Assessing the level of risk, including the likelihood and consequences of work-related stress, such as absences, errors, incidents, injury or illness.

3. Controlling risks

Implementing risk control measures to eliminate work-related stress risk, so far as reasonably practicable. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate the risk of work-related stress, reducing that risk so far as reasonably practicable.

4. Reviewing and revising risk control measures

Regularly reviewing and revising risk control measures to ensure they address the psychosocial hazards that have contributed or might contribute to work-related stress and psychological injury.

4. A risk management approach to work-related stress

Applying the risk management process

The following steps show how to apply the risk management approach to eliminate or reduce risks of work-related stress, as far as reasonably practicable.

Step 1: Identify the hazards

The first step in the risk management process is to identify psychosocial hazards that might contribute to work-related stress and psychological injury.

Determine the source of work-related stress by evaluating:

- productivity levels
- leadership capability
- rates of absenteeism
- workers compensation claims
- separation rates/turnover
- exit interviews
- employee engagement/morale
- customer feedback
- peak/seasonal demands
- incident reports
- data trends

Audit tools and surveys might also help identify relevant psychosocial hazards.

There might be other hazards that are unique to your industry or your organisation that you should consider. Employers can obtain more information about psychosocial hazards that contribute to stress by reviewing employee complaints and seeking feedback from employees, including one-on-one discussions and focus groups.

Focus groups, primarily used in larger organisations, are small groups from across the organisation. The purpose of a focus group is to provide a forum to determine the risk of exposure to psychosocial hazards. This is done by asking the group to consider potential causes of work-related stress.

Employee surveys can be an important tool to identify psychosocial hazards in the workplace. Surveys can help assess the degree to which the hazards affect employees and pinpoint where the hazards originate. When surveying employees, consider the size of the survey group, the method of selecting participants and how staff will receive the survey results. It is important to guarantee anonymity throughout the entire process.

Step 2: Assess the risks

Because many factors can affect work-related stress, a risk assessment might help prioritise risk control actions.

A risk assessment involves examining psychosocial hazards associated with work-related stress to assess whether, and to what extent, they create a risk to the health and safety of employees.

A risk assessment can take into account:

- the circumstances where work-related stress occurs
- the frequency and duration of exposure to psychosocial hazards, for example, whether risk to health and safety builds up over time or occurs in a single incident
- the likelihood that work-related stress might occur if the identified factor is not controlled

4. A risk management approach to work-related stress

Step 3: Control risks

After determining which psychosocial hazards are associated with work-related stress and pose a risk to employee health and safety, employers should select and apply appropriate risk control measures to control the risk, so far as reasonably practicable.

Examples of risk control measures to manage the risk of employee work-related stress include:

- job design to address high or low job demands
- developing supervisor/managerial skills through coaching, mentoring and training to improve the support of employees
- providing external assistance. For example, an employee assistance program (EAP) to increase job support
- communicating with employees about the availability of assistance to address job demands and levels of control
- promoting effective early intervention to improve support to employees and quality of relationships

Use the hierarchy of control for psychosocial hazards

The hierarchy of control is a step-by-step approach to eliminating or reducing risks. It ranks risk controls from the highest level of protection and reliability through to the lowest and least reliable protection. Eliminating the hazard and risk is the highest level of control in the hierarchy, followed by reducing the risk through substitution, isolation and engineering controls, then reducing the risk through administrative controls. Reducing the risk through the use of protective personal equipment (PPE) is the lowest level of control.

Section 20 of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (OHS Act) requires duty holders to eliminate risks to health and safety, so far as reasonably practicable. Employers should use the hierarchy of control when selecting and applying measures to control the risk of work-related stress. The WorkSafe website has guidance explaining the hierarchy of control and how to use it to eliminate or reduce risks at work.

Eliminate the risk

The most effective control measure involves eliminating the hazard and its associated risk. The best way to eliminate a hazard is to avoid introducing the hazard in the first place. Systematically considering work-related factors that present psychosocial hazards in job design forms part of this process.

Other controls for eliminating psychosocial hazards and risks can include:

- eliminating hazards through job design and safe systems of work
- eliminating after-hours or night work
- eliminating driving at night
- eliminating solo shifts

It might be more practical to anticipate hazards and design the work and workplace to avoid the hazards before they can become risks.

It may not be possible to eliminate a hazard if doing so means you are unable to make the end product or deliver the service. If elimination is not possible, the hazard or risk must be reduced as far as reasonably practicable.

Reduce the risk through substitution, isolation, structural or systems controls

If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate the hazards and associated risks, minimise the risks so far as reasonably practicable by substitution, isolation or engineering controls. However, it is important to realise that applying controls at this level for work-related stress might leave employers and their employees vulnerable to ongoing effects of those work-related factors that remain unaddressed at the source.

Examples of substitution, isolation and engineering controls include the following:

4. A risk management approach to work-related stress

Substitution

Substitute the hazard with something safer. For example:

- provide different tasks, type of work or work location
- move safety-critical roles to daytime away from night shift
- temporary or permanent change in reporting lines

Isolation

Isolate the hazard. For example:

- workplace design features such as physical barriers, video-conferencing, increasing the level of visibility and secure areas for employees only
- re-assign employees to other teams or work to separate them from other people or types of work that are sources of work-related stress

Engineering controls

An engineering control is a control measure that is physical in nature, including a mechanical device or process. Examples of engineering controls include:

- providing alternative tools or equipment such as a sit/stand desk
- workplace design to improve environmental conditions, for example, lighting, vibration, temperature, noise
- workplace design including safety barriers or screens

Reduce the risk using administrative controls

Administrative controls are work methods or procedures designed to minimise exposure to a hazard. In most cases, administrative controls use systems of work to control the risk, for example:

- updating job descriptions and reporting lines for role clarity
- a recognition and reward program that is fair, transparent and timely
- application of policies, procedures and written work plans that are available to all employees
- active promotion of health and safety policies, procedures and practices
- timely and comprehensive consultation around any organisational change that may affect employees
- promoting and encouraging healthy personal and workplace behaviours
- providing tools for employees. For example, resilience training, mental health first aid
- providing access to employee assistance programs such as counselling
- providing additional support during difficult events, such as times of organisational change or downsizing
- not tolerating unreasonable or harmful behaviours from any employee in the organisation
- implementing a critical incident stress management (CISM) procedure at the workplace where there may be risk of a stressful critical incident
- education and training at induction and at regular intervals that address unreasonable or harmful workplace behaviours
- limiting the amount of time employees are required to undertake certain tasks

4. A risk management approach to work-related stress

Reduce the risk using personal protective equipment (PPE)

PPE refers to anything employees use or wear to minimise risks to their health and safety. PPE for psychosocial hazards might be similar to those for physical hazards, where the exposure to a physical hazard causes concern or distress. For example:

- gloves and gowns for jobs involving exposure to contagious diseases or hazardous chemicals or substances
- hats and sunscreen for jobs performed outdoors
- protective eyewear
- personal alarm devices

Choose the most effective controls

Consider various control options and choose the controls that most effectively eliminate the hazard or, if elimination is not reasonably practicable, reduce the risk so far as is reasonably practicable in the circumstances. Reducing the risk might involve a single control measure or combination of different controls that work together to provide the highest level of reasonably practicable protection.

Safety leadership and culture

The concepts of safety leadership and culture are central to the hierarchy of control and are key to ensuring the ongoing health and safety of employees.

Committed leadership and culture provides an environment where employees feel safe to raise concerns and confident those concerns will be addressed in a fair and timely manner.

Safety leadership

Active and visible commitment to the prevention and management of psychosocial hazards from the top down is critical.

In particular, leaders should take responsibility for:

- setting and enforcing health and safety objectives and accountabilities
- ensuring effective health and safety systems of work are in place and used to identify and control risk
- allocating resources to the prevention and management of work-related stress
- role modelling compliance with policies and other desired behaviours

Safety culture

Common features of workplaces that prioritise safety include:

- leaders, managers and supervisors who know employers have health and safety duties under the OHS Act and are vocal and proactive in promoting employee safety
- leaders, managers and supervisors who commit to seeking out and implementing new and improved ways of doing things
- providing rewards and recognition for employees who prioritise safety
- establishing consequences for employees who do not prioritise safety
- providing genuine opportunities for employees to raise issues and have input into decision-making
- clear roles and responsibilities for employees
- encouragement for teams to work well together, and with other groups across the organisation, to solve problems and get work done
- ensuring employees have, or are provided with, the skills, knowledge, support and resources they need to do their work safely

4. A risk management approach to work-related stress

Step 4: Review and revision of risk control measures

The last step of the risk management process is to review and, if necessary, revise risk control measures to ensure they are effective and working as planned. When reviewing the effectiveness of risk control measures, it is important to make sure the controls are reducing the risk of work-related stress or whether the control measures need modification. It is also important to ensure that any risk controls have not inadvertently caused or increased other risks.

Consultation and project evaluations, including staff feedback or staff surveys, can help establish whether controls are working.

Risk management for work-related stress is not a one-off exercise, it needs to be ongoing. The dynamics and complexity of workplaces can mean changes such as a new supervisor, new employees or new processes or procedures can have significant, unexpected or unplanned negative effects on employees' stress levels. Employers should control any new or potential factors associated with work-related stress.

Providing information, instruction, training and supervision

Employers must provide the necessary information, instruction, training and supervision employees need to do their work safely and without risks to health. This might include:

- providing information about how employees can perform their roles safely. For example, safe systems of work
- training employees and ensuring they are competent to perform tasks safely
- supervising employees to ensure they apply safe systems of work and follow established work procedures

Employers should provide information to employees during their initial induction and at regular refresher training.

Ways to provide information and instruction might include presentations, procedure manuals and demonstrations of work processes. Employers can help control work-related stress if they provide employees with the necessary training, support and role clarity to do their job.

Employers should also provide information, instruction and training:

- so employees have the skills and knowledge to understand the stress factors and risks associated with work-related stress
- to all employees about appropriate workplace behaviours, how to raise health and safety issues and the procedure for dealing with the issue raised
- to supervisors about recognising and proactively addressing health and safety issues, concerns or complaints

4. A risk management approach to work-related stress

Hierarchy of control for psychosocial hazards and risk factors

Exposure to psychosocial hazards and other risk factors increases the likelihood of unwanted mental health and physical health outcomes. Employees may be exposed to multiple psychosocial hazards and other risk factors, and these can interact.

It is important to design work to control psychosocial hazards and risks using the hierarchy of controls. Following are examples that may help you to understand how to apply the hierarchy of controls to psychosocial hazards and risks, which are highlighted in bold.

Examples, where reasonably practicable

Eliminate after-hours or night work **(high job demands, fatigue)**, eliminate driving at night **(high job demands, fatigue)**, eliminate solo shifts **(isolated work, stress)**.

Reducing the risk so far as is reasonably practicable may include designing jobs with safe workloads and scheduling **(high job demands, fatigue, stress)** or redesigning jobs to improve role clarity around job requirements and work timelines.

Modelling and promotion of positive interpersonal interactions, fairness, acknowledgement of achievements, and no tolerance for unreasonable behaviours from any person in the organisation, including leaders, supervisors and employees **(poor workplace relationships, poor support, poor organisational justice, poor recognition and rewards, bullying, stress, gendered violence)**.

Allow employees to have job control as far as reasonably possible **(stress)**.

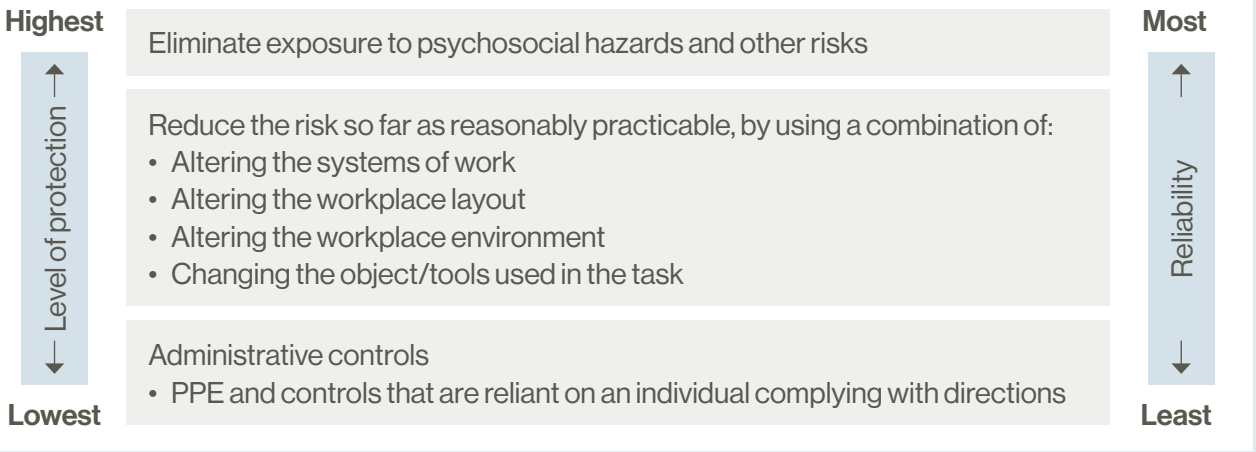
Timely consultation and take into account the views of the workers around any changes impacting on employees **(poor change management, stress)**.

Design to reduce exposure to environmental stressors, for example, lighting, vibration, temperature and noise **(poor job demands, poor environmental conditions, stress, fatigue)**.

Implement workplace design features, for example, physical barriers, visibility and secure staff areas **(poor environmental conditions, occupational violence)**.

Administrative controls may include training for resilience, employee assistance program (EAP), health promotion, codes of conduct, policies and procedures **(poor workplace relationships, poor change management, poor support, traumatic events, fatigue, stress, bullying, occupational violence, gendered violence)**.

Use of relevant personal protective equipment (PPE) for jobs with high risk of **occupational violence**.



4. A risk management approach to work-related stress

Related information

A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/consultation-guide-victorian-workplaces

5. Implementing a work-related stress risk management process

This guidance may help employers control work-related stress and may be useful for any employer implementing a risk management process to manage work-related stress.

In this chapter

- Ensuring success
- Related information

Ensuring success

The following measures may help employers implement a risk management process to manage work-related stress:

Workplace commitment

Senior management commitment is critical to the success of any significant workplace initiative. Risk management programs require resources such as people, money and time but, in the long-term, have been shown to provide considerable savings. Gaining employee commitment through frequent and open communication is also necessary to successfully change employee attitudes and behaviour.

Participation, communication and consultation

One of the key objectives of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (OHS Act) is to promote greater involvement and co-operation between employers, employees and any health and safety representatives (HSRs) on workplace health and safety matters. When managing the risk of work-related stress, it is important to have management commitment and input from employees to help identify and address psychosocial hazards.

- Consulting with employees at each stage of the risk management process will help achieve better health and safety outcomes because employees are in constant close contact with the day-to-day workplace environment and often have first-hand knowledge of factors that can increase the risk of work-related stress.
- Seeking input from employees may support their sense of participation and ownership over workplace safety decisions and control measures.
- Employees can experience stress when they have little control over their work and their work environment or feel unsupported in their workplace. Communicating with employees and seeking their participation in the risk management process should help ease this belief. The consultation process itself is likely to become part of the solution.

For information about consultation, see WorkSafe's A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation.

5. Implementing a work-related stress risk management process

Facilitating participation and consultation

The OHS Act requires employers to consult with employees and HSRs in certain circumstances. As well as facilitating the election of HSRs and setting up committees, employers could set up a specific communication and project management structure to oversee and implement the risk management process. This structure may include a senior steering committee or a working group, or scheduled manager and employee meetings. HSRs should be involved in all consultation.

Senior steering committee

A senior steering committee can include a group of individuals in senior management and strategic function positions who are responsible for general operating policy, procedures and related matters affecting the organisation as a whole. Examples of senior steering committee members include HSRs and representatives from human resources, occupational health and safety (OHS) and organisational communications departments. A steering committee should include a 'risk management champion' who heads the committee and gives the risk management process momentum. A risk management champion should be a senior decision maker in the workplace.

The purpose of a senior steering committee is to:

- provide overall guidance and direction
- engage with senior management
- provide evidence of management support

Employers might establish a steering committee to oversee the stress risk management process and to ensure the implementation of recommendations for change.

Working group

A working group includes employees who work at an operational level and HSRs. Working groups are an effective way of carrying out potentially large-scale strategic processes such as work-related stress risk management. Working groups should encourage employees to have full and active participation in the risk management process. A working group can:

- encourage employee participation
- identify and discuss insights and points of view on work practices
- coordinate focus group discussions or the distribution of surveys
- review the results of surveys and other information to respond and develop appropriate processes and procedures
- analyse and prioritise areas requiring action
- use a collaborative approach involving employees and managers to develop an action plan to address identified causes of work-related stress
- report to the senior steering committee, if applicable

5. Implementing a work-related stress risk management process

Involving employees in risk assessments

Employers must consult with employees and any HSRs on a range of matters, including when assessing hazards or risks to health or safety and when making decisions about measures to control the risks. This process might involve, for example, seeking employee input into the design, implementation and evaluation of any control measures for managing risks associated with work-related stress. Employers could also invite employees or HSRs onto senior steering committees and onto working groups.

The risk management champion and steering committee or working group might initially consider consultation feedback to decide how to position and present the results to the organisation as a whole. Employers should communicate outcomes in a timely and consultative manner to ensure employees are committed to risk control measures.

Failing to routinely provide feedback on actions which are part of the risk management process can have a negative effect on employees' sense of support and control because the absence of information can be seen as a lack of action.

Related information

A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/consultation-guide-victorian-workplaces

6. Early intervention for work-related stress – what managers need to know

This guidance may help managers identify early signs that an employee is experiencing work-related stress and suggests a series of steps to help employees.

In this chapter

- Why early intervention matters
- Early warning signs
- Talking about work-related stress
- Related information

Why early intervention matters

The way managers respond and the level of support they offer is critical if an employee is experiencing symptoms of work-related stress. Managers have a central and unique role because they are often in the best position to recognise when an employee might be struggling. Employers should have systems in place to ensure managers are in the best place to provide support, from starting conversations through to developing a plan to help the employee stay at work. Early intervention also maximises the success of identifying and addressing the work-related psychosocial risks which may have led an employee to experience work-related stress.

Early warning signs

Managers are not expected to diagnose a psychological injury or illness. However, the earlier a manager notices or is made aware an employee is experiencing possible signs of stress, the sooner steps can begin to help the employee.

Early warning signs an employee might be experiencing work-related stress include:

- excessive emotional responses and erratic behaviour. For example, uncharacteristic behaviour such as being overly sensitive, irritable, angry, teary or tense
- obsession with parts of the job while neglecting other parts
- working longer hours than usual without the expected outputs, or working fewer hours
- disengagement and withdrawal behaviour. For example, increased unplanned leave, reduced participation in work and social activities
- low morale, low motivation or low energy levels
- increased use of negative language and being involved in workplace conflict
- appearing tired and experiencing headaches or frequent aches and pains
- changes in physical appearance, such as less attention to personal grooming
- reduced performance

Talking about work-related stress

Good relationships are based on openness, trust and respect. Managers should be open and approachable and employers should provide training to ensure all managers have the skills to provide employees with a level of comfort when disclosing personal information that might affect their behaviour or performance at work. Having open and supportive conversations can also encourage employees to get help from their support networks, such as family, friends or medical practitioners, at an early stage.

6. Early intervention for work-related stress – what managers

Starting the conversation

A manager's first response should be an exploratory and empathic conversation which specifies the changes in the employee's behaviour in the workplace. Managers should express genuine concern and offer support. Conversations should be in a suitable private location to avoid unwanted attention so managers can provide their full attention, and maintain confidentiality and privacy.

Ask 'Are you okay?' or some version of that question, and be prepared to follow up if the employee provides an answer such as 'No, actually I don't think I am'.

A 5-step approach to talking about work-related stress

The following approach can help managers talk to employees about work-related stress.

Step 1: Make contact

- Arrange a meeting time.
- Allow enough time for a confidential discussion.
- Prepare what you want to say and what you want to achieve.
- Choose a private and confidential location.

Step 2: Explore the issues

- Ask open questions, listen carefully and be attentive.
- State the behaviour you have observed. For example: 'I have noticed that you appear distracted and less talkative in team meetings, is everything okay?'
- Define the issues and discuss factors from the workplace and employee's personal life that might be impacting on the employee.

Step 3: Develop options and offer support

- Explore what the employee wants to do, for example, workplace adjustments.
- Consider options, taking into consideration operational demands.
- Work together to come up with solutions about how the workplace can support the employee.
- Gently and constructively engage the employee if they keep coming up with barriers.
- Develop strategies to accommodate or change the workplace factors adversely impacting the employee including determining if other employees are affected or involved.
- If possible, where a direct manager is identified as a source of work-related stress, ensure employees are supported by an alternative manager or representative with appropriate seniority or the employee's health and safety representative (HSR).

With the consent of the employee, workplace support can include:

- working with the employee's general practitioner (GP) or treating practitioner on appropriate work adjustments
- encouraging the employee to access professional mental health support, starting with an appointment with their GP
- asking the employee if they are aware of support such as the workplace EAP, Lifeline and various e-mental health resources

It is also wise to check whether the employee has ready access to relevant support.

Step 4: Agree on action

- Decide on a course of action, for example, agreement that the employee will see their own GP or engage with an EAP.
- Define and agree on clear, specific steps at the workplace and personally follow up at an agreed time, review and provide feedback.

6. Early intervention for work-related stress – what managers

Step 5: Stay in touch

Do not leave matters open-ended. Follow up with a further conversation that follows the steps outlined above. An agreed outcome of the initial meeting might involve deciding how often you will follow up with the employee.

Respect employee privacy

Like any other health or personal issue, an employee makes a choice to talk with their manager about work-related stress. Some employees might not feel comfortable talking about how work will handle stress issues.

Employees are more likely to talk about work-related stress if they can be confident that:

- what they say is treated with respect and in confidence
- managers and colleagues support them and respond appropriately to their needs
- the workplace does not tolerate harassment and discrimination

Work-related stress can contribute to an employee experiencing a psychological illness or injury. If this is the case, a manager must not talk about the employee's psychological illness or injury with other members of the team or anyone else, unless that employee has given permission. If there is an impact on the team, ask the employee what they would like their colleagues told or how the employee wants the issue handled. For example, you could explain that the employee is unwell and that alternative work arrangements have been put in place.

Employers should ensure that where a manager is genuinely worried a work health and safety risk exists, for example, there is potential for an employee to self-harm or there is a risk to other people, then assistance is sought from the EAPs, Manager Assist Programs or mental health service providers.

The following mental health service providers may be able to help.

- Beyond Blue
- Heads Up
- Sane Australia
- Lifeline
- Better Health Channel – Mental health and wellbeing support for LGBTI people
- Head to Health

Mental Health First Aid is an example of a practical program to support employees.

WorkSafe also has mental health resources which can provide information on legal duties, causes of workplace mental injury and creating a mentally healthy workplace.

Related information

Mental health

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/mental-health

WorkWell

www.workwell.vic.gov.au

Mental Health First Aid Australia

mhfa.com.au

Beyond Blue

beyondblue.org.au

Heads Up

www.headsup.org.au

Sane Australia

www.sane.org

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

Better Health Channel – Mental health and wellbeing support for LGBTI people

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/servicesandsupport/lgbti-services

Head to Health

headtohealth.gov.au

7. Work-related stress – low job control

This guidance may help employers manage the risks of work-related stress associated with employees' low job control.

In this chapter

- Low job control
- Ensuring appropriate levels of control
- Related information

Low job control

Low job control can be characterised by situations where:

- employees have little influence in how they meet work demands and how they perform their work in general. This might be described as a lack of 'autonomy'
- there are unnecessary levels of supervision and surveillance
- there is excessive responsibility with little authority or decision-making capability
- there is little or no say in how work is done
- work is not meaningful and lacks variety
- workload or pace exceeds capacity or staffing resources
- low control over workflow

Ensuring appropriate levels of control

Employers need to decide what risk control measures they will use in the workplace. Practical solutions to address low levels of job control should focus on job design, the work environment and working conditions. Risk control measures should address levels of self-direction, allowing input into decision-making, developing consultation and communication, and appropriate supervision.

Ensuring that supervisors and teams use communication and consultation strategies appropriately can increase employees' input into and control over their work.

Choice and self-direction

An employee's tasks should be meaningful, varied and allow for an appropriate degree of self-direction. To enable choice and self-direction the employer could:

- allow employees to have a say in how their work is organised
- allow employees to have input on –
  - how job tasks should be completed where the order and timing of tasks is not critical to the outcome
  - how problems should be tackled
  - the pace of their work
- ensure employees have the skills required to achieve their goals and, where skills are lacking, discuss opportunities for development
- use performance reviews as an opportunity for employees to have input into the way they do their work, rather than focusing only on performance
- provide opportunities for job rotation to enable skill development and job variation

7. Work-related stress – low job control

Input into decision-making

Everyone in an organisation should feel they have some degree of input into their work, not just those in senior positions.

There are various ways an organisation can encourage a cooperative approach to management and ensure everyone contributes to decision-making. Ways to encourage participation include:

- regular team meetings during which employees can have input into decisions that concern their work
- involving employees in the allocation of responsibility for tasks within teams and in deciding work objectives and anticipated outputs, roles, timeframes and resourcing
- providing training to develop supportive leaders who delegate and encourage participation and welcome new ideas

Consultation and communication

Employees can experience stress if they feel they have little control over their work and their work environment, or they feel unsupported in their workplace. Communicating with employees and seeking their participation in the decision-making process, including regarding the allocation of tasks, can change this perception.

Ways to improve employee participation and input into their work and work environment include:

- knowing when it is appropriate to consult with employees and ensuring consultation outcomes are communicated
- communicating with employees about how and why decisions are made and, whenever possible, seeking team involvement in making these decisions
- developing and maintaining a working environment where employees are consulted and can provide feedback on changes affecting their work
- developing a system that enables employees to have input into broader organisational issues

Remember, consultation on workplace health and safety matters must involve any health and safety representatives (HSRs).

For further information on consultation, see WorkSafe's A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation.

7. Work-related stress – low job control

Appropriate supervision

The management and supervision of employees can have an impact on whether an employee experiences work-related stress.

Employers should:

- ensure managers are competent supervisors, including providing support and training
- consult with employees when developing performance-monitoring systems and procedures for reviewing and monitoring employees
- develop team-based targets which help build effective teams and allow the measurement of team performance against organisational goals
- when assigning work, negotiate objective and reasonable standards to increase employees' ownership and control over their work and ensure work is allocated evenly
- allocate or arrange workload in a way that is appropriate for staffing levels
- avoid asking employees to regularly stay after hours without prior discussion and agreement
- develop a clear policy on appropriate monitoring that is not excessive or punitive

Employers should also regularly review and revise risk control measures to ensure they control the risk, so far as reasonably practicable, including when requested by an HSR.

Related information

A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/consultation-guide-victorian-workplaces

8. Work-related stress – high and low job demands

This guidance may help employers identify and control the risks of work-related stress from high and low job demands, two of the most common psychosocial hazards.

In this chapter

- High and low job demands
- Risk controls should focus on job design
- Related information

High and low job demands

Job demands involving sustained high or low physical, mental or emotional effort are among the most common psychosocial hazards. While employees might need challenging tasks to maintain their interest and motivation and to develop new skills, it is important that demands do not exceed employees' ability to cope.

High demands

High-demand tasks or jobs might include the following examples:

- long work hours
- high workloads, for example, too much to do, fast work pace or significant time pressure
- long periods of attention looking for infrequent events, for example, air traffic controllers, during long distance driving, security monitoring
- emotional effort in responding to distressing situations or distressed or aggressive clients, for example, paramedics dealing with difficult patients or situations
- emotional effort required to display emotions the organisation requires when the emotions do not align with those of the employee
- exposure to traumatic events or work-related violence, for example, emergency employees
- shift work leading to higher risk of fatigue
- frequently working in unpleasant or hazardous conditions. For example, extreme temperatures or noise, around hazardous chemicals or dangerous equipment
- having to perform demanding work while wearing uncomfortable protective clothing or equipment
- working with clients with challenging behaviours

Low demands

Low-demand tasks or jobs might include work where there is:

- too little to do
- highly repetitive or monotonous tasks which require low levels of thought processing and little variety, for example, picking and packing products, monitoring production lines
- regularly undertaking tasks that are well below capabilities, too easy

Risk controls should focus on job design

Risk control measures for job demands should focus on job design, considering the work environment and working conditions. Risk control measures should address time pressure, long or irregular working hours and mentally, physically or emotionally demanding work.

8. Work-related stress – high and low job demands

Time pressure

When there is a demanding workload, employers should:

- ensure sufficient staffing levels are available, where possible, by strategically recruiting to meet the needs of future attrition and known leave periods
- ensure employees have adequate time to complete their tasks and allow them to have input when deciding the timing and pace of their work
- consult with employees when setting performance targets
- set realistic and achievable targets that take into account existing workloads when setting targets. Team-based targets are an effective measure for improving overall performance against the organisational goals and for building effective teams
- regularly review workloads to ensure employees have sufficient resources in terms of time, administrative support and equipment to cope. Review workloads during team meetings, through an informal check-in with the supervisor or worksite assessments
- monitor workloads during periods of peak demand, for example, Christmas, school holidays or seasonal peaks, and provide additional support where required
- help employees develop personal work plans to help them prioritise their tasks
- negotiate reasonable deadlines for completing tasks
- inform employees of the reasons behind tight deadlines and why it is important to meet deadlines
- encourage employees to speak up at an early stage if they feel their task demands are excessive and to seek management guidance about priorities if there are insufficient resources to effectively complete the tasks

Employees are over or under-qualified

It is important employees are competent at their job and that their work is rewarding. When employees are over-qualified for a role or a particular task, they may feel frustrated and unmotivated if they are not challenged in their work.

When employees are under-qualified the complexity of the work might overwhelm them and they might find it difficult to cope.

Employers should consider the following risk control measures:

- design jobs within employees' capabilities
- ensure employees are competent and comfortable performing the core functions of their job
- consider employees' skills and abilities when allocating tasks
- provide training and skill development when needed and keep training records up to date
- limit tasks that under-use employees' skills
- consult with employees about the opportunity to broaden the scope of their job by expanding the range of tasks and responsibilities assigned to them
- rotate tasks to avoid repetitive and monotonous work

8. Work-related stress – high and low job demands

Demanding hours

When there are demanding hours of work, including overtime and shift work, employers should:

- ensure enough relief staff are present to cover for employees who are on planned and unplanned leave
- plan ahead for any overtime hours required so employees can make necessary adjustments to their work flow in advance
- notify employees of any unplanned tight deadlines as they arise and any exceptional circumstances that require long working hours
- consider personal circumstances such as caring responsibilities, disabilities or illness that may make it difficult to do overtime or vary their shifts
- ensure adequate work breaks and, where practicable, allow flexibility in the timing of breaks
- make working hours as regular and predictable as possible
- ensure rosters allow for a continuous break of sufficient time between rostered shifts and ensure additional time is allowed where overtime is involved
- discourage employees from regularly working long hours, answering emails or phone calls outside of work hours, taking work home or working through breaks. For example, reduce scheduling of shift work that exceeds 12 hours per shift
- ensure employees have adequate time management skills and provide training where needed
- promote work-life balance and encourage employees to take annual leave or holidays when they are due
- ensure employees agree to shift rosters and communicate and consult with employees when designing or changing rosters
- educate employees about the early warning signs of stress and fatigue, encourage them to report any tiredness and take breaks when they need to, where reasonably practicable
- ensure employees understand the need to get sufficient sleep
- minimise safety-critical tasks during the early hours of the morning, from 1am to 6am, because of the increased risk of fatigue

Demanding work hours might require a Fatigue Management Policy. For further information about managing fatigue in the workplace, see WorkSafe's Fatigue guidance.

Mental demands

There are various ways to manage work that requires lengthy periods of concentration or involves work of a confronting or conflictual nature. Employers should:

- rotate tasks and schedules so employees are not always assigned jobs that require a high level of decision-making or long periods of concentration
- give employees some control over the way they do their work, including work pace and order of tasks
- allow adequate time for breaks

For work that requires complex and high-level decision making, employers should:

- have systems in place to support employees when they have to make difficult decisions or when challenging situations might arise following decisions they have made, for example, child safety employees
- provide the information employees need to perform tasks competently, including adequate support and resources for decision-making
- provide additional practical assistance when employees are doing challenging tasks, for example, a second person to assist and ensuring adequate access to resources such as, for example, the right tools, computers etc.
- provide employees with the opportunity to discuss their work, access support or internal and external networks
- allow employees enough time to perform tasks
- provide well-maintained suitable equipment

8. Work-related stress – high and low job demands

- evaluate and review employees' competency and capability and provide additional training where needed

Physical demands

For work that is physically demanding employers should:

- make the physical environment as comfortable as possible and designed specifically for employees' tasks. For example, where needed, make changes to the workstation, tools or equipment or the way a job is done
- allow employees to take regular breaks away from physically demanding work and, where practicable, rotate repetitive tasks between employees
- ensure employees are well trained and physically capable of doing the required tasks
- ensure appropriate controls are in place in relation to managing challenging behaviours or occupational violence

Emotional demands

Some forms of work are emotionally demanding. This includes work that is emotionally disturbing, requires high emotional involvement or requires employees to regularly suppress their emotions, for example, customer service, social work and counselling.

For work that is emotionally demanding employers should:

- allow employees greater control over their jobs, where possible. For example, allow greater flexibility over work rosters and how employees complete their work
- encourage regular breaks or 'time out' from emotionally demanding work
- provide training, practical and on-the-spot support on how to diffuse difficult or confronting situations. For example, conflict management skills and ensure support is available
- ensure psychological and medical support is available to employees who are directly or indirectly involved in a traumatic event or in other emotionally demanding work
- provide training and support to employees who interact with clients, for example, patients and children, and employees who undertake tasks that require them to regulate their own emotions or display emotions that are different from their true feelings
- ensure the position description captures the emotional demands of a role and that applicants are informed of the role's emotional demands at the pre-selection stage, for example, at interview or by realistic job preview
- consider discussions or check-in procedures for emotionally demanding incidents or work
- consider a community of practice so employees can leverage support from each other
- provide sufficient supervisor and professional support for reflection and self-care
- create a culture which encourages discussing emotional reactions and regulation
- leverage resources, collaborate or partner with other organisations facing similar job demands

Related information

Fatigue

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/fatigue

9. Work-related stress – poor support

This guidance may help employers manage the risks of work-related stress associated with supervisors and colleagues providing poor support for employees.

In this chapter

- Poor support
- Job design, work environment and working conditions

Poor support

Poor support at work occurs in tasks or jobs where employees have inadequate:

- emotional and practical support from supervisors and co-employees
- information or training to support their work performance
- tools, equipment and resources to do the job

Job design, work environment and working conditions

Risk control measures to address work-related stress should focus on job design, work environment and working conditions. Risk control measures that provide support for employees could include, for example, practical assistance and providing information and emotional support and constructive feedback, if reasonably practicable in the circumstances. The following points explain how employers can provide support to employees.

Organisational structures

There are many approaches an organisation can take to ensure its employees feel supported, including:

- ensuring clear management structures across the organisation and reporting lines within work teams. This will help employees know who they are accountable to, either overall or for particular tasks, and where they can go for help with work problems
- providing new employees with a thorough induction to the organisation and work unit and, where possible, structured socialisation with a buddy system and tailored training plan
- providing and promoting employee assistance services that respond to individual issues or concerns, both work and non-work related
- promoting a culture that values diversity in the workplace
- providing and promoting flexible work practices that best suit individual and business needs, for example, working from home or flexible working hours

9. Work-related stress – poor support

Practical support

There are various types of practical support an employer can provide, for example:

- assisting with work demands, for example, helping employees complete a task they find challenging
- setting clear work goals and providing information on processes and procedures
- providing development opportunities
- conducting performance reviews which include fair, goal-focused and constructive feedback and asking employees what supports are required to achieve their goals
- providing assistance when employees undertake challenging tasks, such as new duties or roles and mentally, emotionally and physically demanding tasks
- ensuring the willingness of colleagues to help out when things are tough
- talking over a problem with an employee
- ensuring roles are backfilled or work is redistributed when employees are out of the office or away on leave

Communication

Employees can experience stress if they feel unsupported in their workplace. Regular communication can reduce stress responses. Ways to ensure regular communication can include:

- the willingness of supervisors and colleagues to discuss work problems
- the ability to raise any work problems and discuss how they are addressed
- regular team meetings to discuss pressures and challenges within the work unit, what is going well, and where support may be required
- helping employees come up with and work through risk control measures for task-related issues
- providing sufficient information so employees can perform tasks competently, particularly when taking on new work

Training and development

It is important employees feel confident and capable of completing their assigned tasks. Ways to give employees confidence include making sure:

- employees receive suitable training to be competent in their roles. Training can be both task-specific and more general, for example, code of conduct training in ethics and behavioural expectations, mental health and cultural awareness
- supervisors receive training regarding supportive policies and effective communication with employees
- competencies are up to date and relevant refresher training is provided
- training is available to part-time, casual and shift employees and those in remote locations
- all employees, contractors and labour hire employees are aware of the policies concerning acceptable behaviour in the workplace
- employees receive managerial training when appropriate to encourage a wider understanding of their tasks. Training could include managing –
  - workload and resources
  - health and safety
  - performance management
  - conflict
  - interpersonal skills
  - emotional intelligence, including empathy and expressing and managing own emotions
  - effective communication

9. Work-related stress – poor support

Constructive feedback

The way managers and supervisors provide feedback, and how often, can have an impact on employees' stress response.

Employers should ensure managers and supervisors:

- provide appropriate and immediate feedback on task performance, frequently, but not so regularly that it undermines an employee's independence
- recognise employees/team members either formally or informally when they have done tasks well and be specific about what was done well
- give employees practical advice and guidance on areas that need improving
- use annual performance reviews to provide constructive advice for future performance and aligned with support for opportunities for skill development. It is important that annual performance tools are not seen as a disciplinary measure, rather a supportive guiding discussion to help individuals reach their goals that are aligned with organisational goals

Emotional support

Emotional support from supervisors or colleagues can have a protective effect and might reduce an employee's stress response, particularly in situations of high demand and low control. Supervisors or managers are often the first point of call for employees. An employer should provide the necessary information, training and instruction to ensure employees' concerns are appropriately handled.

Ways in which an employer can ensure employees receive appropriate emotional support include:

- supporting open communication
- encouraging employees to share their concerns about work-related stress factors at an early stage by having workplace safety reporting mechanisms normalised and available. Employees should feel comfortable discussing any safety issues that might arise
- considering there might be non-work-related stress factors present in employees' lives and allowing flexible work arrangements where practicable, if appropriate and if the employee is open to such conversations
- promoting and developing a team culture where employees help each other and provide support when required
- allowing time to talk through problems with employees and promoting an 'open door' policy
- ensuring sensitive management of employees experiencing problems
- being aware and taking appropriate action if a team member is behaving out of character
- improving team unity by holding formal and informal team-building activities
- establishing a colleague support system and a mentoring/buddy program for new starters

10. Work-related stress – poor organisational change management

This guidance may help employers control change management risks that lead to work-related stress.

In this chapter

- Effects of change on the workplace
- Effective change management
- Reviewing roles

Effects of change in the workplace

Change in the workplace is inevitable, however it can lead to employees feeling anxious and uncertain about their work and employment status. Change can relate to alterations in individual work conditions, for example, a change of role or shift roster or the introduction of new technology. Change can also relate to work team or organisational changes, such as mergers, acquisitions, restructures or downsizing. Managing and communicating change can reduce the likelihood of an employee's stress response.

Effective change management

Employers must decide what risk control measures they will use in the workplace to control change management risks that might lead to work-related stress.

Planning change management and its communication across a workforce can help control risks and helps employers meet their obligation to ensure they provide a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, so far as reasonably practicable.

Control measures should target the work environment and focus on job design and working conditions. Risk control measures should address communication before and during a change process, ensuring effective consultation and participation take place and ensuring job roles are revised should any changes occur. Feedback is critical.

Communication

Communication is crucial for successful change. Failure to effectively communicate changes in the workplace can increase an employee's likelihood of work-related stress.

Employers can manage the impact of changes in individual work conditions or larger changes to the work team or organisation by:

- consulting with employees about proposed changes that may affect their health and safety
- ensuring the person communicating the change, usually the employer or senior manager, has the skills and authority to do so
- training managers or supervisors to support employees through periods of change
- explaining to employees the background and reasons behind the change, what the organisation wants from the change and the expected outcomes and timeframes
- explaining openly and honestly any significant adjustments that will follow the proposed change, for example, a restructure or the need to retrain employees
- establishing a communication system, for example, meetings or emails, that keeps employees regularly updated on developments
- communicating developments quickly to increase employees' feelings of job security and prevent the spread of rumours which can arise when people are left without information

10. Work-related stress – poor organisational change management

- encouraging an open-door policy for employees who want to discuss their concerns with managers or supervisors
- advising employees of the final decision, including reasons for that decision, both verbally and in writing within a reasonable timeframe

Consultation and participation

Employees can experience work-related stress if they feel they have little control over their work and their work environment or they feel unsupported in their workplace. Communicating with employees and seeking their participation in the change process may ease feelings of little control and lack of support.

Ways to communicate about change include:

- consulting with employees and health and safety representatives (HSRs) about workplace changes that may affect them – this must be done with regularity and as early as possible to allow time for reflection, discussion and understanding of the changes
- ensuring employees are aware of any potential impacts on their roles – as early as possible to reduce the stressful impact this may have
- providing opportunities for employees to take part in the change process to encourage acceptance, increase motivation and promote ownership of the process and outcomes
- encouraging involvement from individuals and work teams. This can include being involved in the planning stage of a change process and providing ongoing feedback on the proposed change
- providing group information and feedback sessions to give employees the opportunity to raise concerns about the change in a group setting. For example, have regular meetings or focus groups because employees may feel more comfortable raising issues in a group rather than individually
- providing employees with enough time to consider and respond to proposals
- providing feedback to the group or individuals following consultation and providing reasons why ideas will or will not be implemented
- implementing changes in a timely manner

Reviewing roles

A change in the structure of an organisation or work unit can affect role clarity, therefore it is important to review employees' roles to ensure employees continue to understand what is required of them.

Ways to ensure employees continue to understand what is required of them include:

- reviewing team and individual work plans after the change to ensure roles, objectives and accountabilities are clear
- changing job descriptions to match the new duties and tasks of the role, preventing uncertainty and role conflict. Employees should participate in the review process where possible
- encouraging employees to develop their skills to help them undertake new and challenging work produced by the change
- ensuring employees feel confident doing their job tasks and making sure they receive enough training to be competent in their roles
- providing re-training if required
- providing an opportunity for employees to have renewed input into the way they complete their work

Providing support

Employees may need additional practical or emotional support during times of organisational change.

11. Work-related stress – poor organisational justice

This guidance can help employers create a positive and fair workplace and may help control the risks of work-related stress from a lack of organisational justice.

In this chapter

Organisational justice

Organisational justice refers to employees' sense of fairness at work and includes procedural justice and interactional justice.

Procedural justice is the fairness of the processes those in positions of authority use to reach specific outcomes or decisions.

Interactional justice is the extent to which employees are informed fairly (informational fairness) and the extent to which they are treated with dignity and respect (interpersonal fairness).

It is important for employers to promote a positive and fair working environment because the experience of injustice can become a risk to employees' psychological health. A sense of organisational justice or fairness generally results in higher levels of engagement, trust, satisfaction, loyalty, creativity and cooperation. Working in a fair and transparent environment can also help employees cope with the challenges of their job.

When organisational justice can be a hazard

Some of the situations that may lead to poor organisational justice or a sense of unfairness include:

- lack of, or inadequate, policies and procedures
- lack of transparency of how decisions are made
- favouritism, nepotism, bias and lack of impartiality in decision making
- lack of communication regarding organisational direction, strategy, objectives and planning
- excluding affected people from consultation and decision-making processes
- failing to address inappropriate or harmful behaviour, poor performance or misconduct
- discrimination, harassment and unequal treatment of employees
- employees or managers believing that rules do not apply to them and failing to follow policies, guidelines and procedures, without accountability

11. Work-related stress – poor organisational justice

Procedural fairness

The following risk control actions can help ensure that employees regard procedures as fair:

- Foster a work environment characterised by respect, equity, fairness and openness.
- Design procedures so they consistently apply to all employees and work groups in an unbiased way. For example, develop a structured performance review process and implement it so all employees are reviewed using consistent and transparent criteria.
- Ensure key performance indicators are based on criteria that is within the control of the employees.
- Carry out procedures the same way each time, for example, job selection and performance management.
- Ensure decision makers are impartial and that they collect unbiased and accurate information to guide their decisions.
- Take time to listen to the concerns of all employees affected by a procedure.
- Create ways that make it possible for employees to seek additional information or clarification about any procedures or decisions, if needed.
- Appoint or promote employees based on performance, using valid and reliable selection and recruitment methods.
- Provide employees with a mechanism to appeal the result of a procedure.
- Where an employee might consider work practices to be unfair, encourage them to access the appeal process.
- Regularly review the effectiveness of procedures to ensure they meet their objectives.

Informational fairness

The following risk control actions can help ensure there is fair communication and information sharing within an organisation:

- Communicate organisational policies and procedures to all employees, both at induction and ongoing, and keep checking that all employees are aware of the policies and procedures.
- Create ways for employees to have input into decisions that directly affect them, and encourage them to do so.
- Ensure policies and procedures are readily accessible to all employees.
- Engage employees at all levels of the organisation during the development of policies and procedures.
- Communicate with employees about the reasons for changes to policies or procedures.
- Communicate the reasons for decisions and the background of decisions. People are more likely to accept a decision, even if unfavourable, if they know the reasons and the intended purpose.
- Use ongoing communication mechanisms such as team meetings, all-staff meetings, internal newsletters, emails, intranets or notice boards.
- Implement a system that allows all employees to have input into broader organisational issues, for example a mechanism for receiving and responding to suggestions.

11. Work-related stress – poor organisational justice

Interpersonal fairness

Interpersonal fairness refers to the way all employees interact with each other and with their managers. The following risk control actions can help ensure there is a shared sense of interpersonal or relational fairness within an organisation:

- Treat all employees with respect, dignity and courtesy at all times.
- Ensure that management structures across the organisation and reporting lines within work teams are clear. This will help employees know who they are accountable to and where they can go for help with work problems.
- Ensure that employees have a current role or position description which includes the role purpose, reporting relationships and the key duties expected of them.
- Ensure that direct supervisors provide feedback to their employees on their performance so they are aware of how well they are performing and that their role expectations align with those of their managers.
- Use performance reviews as an opportunity to discuss employees' skill development and to provide constructive advice for future performance.
- When investigating any interpersonal conflict or misconduct issues, ensure all parties have equal opportunity to respond to allegations and are treated respectfully.
- Advise parties regarding the outcome of any investigations, to the extent possible and appropriate without breaching privacy and confidentiality.
- Train managers in how to have difficult conversations with their employees.

Managing poor performance

Managing performance is often associated with experiences of unfairness. The following risk control actions can help create a fair approach to performance management:

- All supervisors treat all employees with respect, dignity and civility at all times.
- Inform all employees of the processes used to manage poor performance.
- Provide employees with evidence for decisions made about their work performance.
- Allow employees to have input in the performance feedback process, for example, allow employees to respond to issues raised about their work performance.
- Keep discussions focused on improving work tasks or behaviours that are within the employee's control.
- Train all supervisors not to focus on blame but rather to use the performance improvement process as an opportunity for learning and improvement.
- When having difficult conversations, choose the meeting time and location carefully to maintain privacy and confidentiality and allow the employee time for reflection and support afterwards.
- Ensure grievance and complaint-handling procedures are available and applied fairly to all employees.
- Encourage employees to include a support person in performance management meetings.

Provide support

Practical or emotional support from supervisors and colleagues can have a positive impact on employees' perception of fairness.

12. Work-related stress – low recognition and reward

This guidance can help employers understand how recognising and rewarding employee performance may help control risks of work-related stress.

In this chapter

- Understanding recognition and reward
- Lack of recognition and reward as a hazard
- Providing positive feedback
- Relevant and tangible rewards
- Opportunities for development

Understanding recognition and reward

Acknowledging, rewarding and recognising employees for their contributions, achievements and efforts are essential for creating a positive work environment.

When an appropriate level of recognition and reward is present in an organisation:

- supervisors provide encouragement, positive comments and other gestures of appreciation
- employees feel appreciated and are more positive about themselves, their abilities and skills, and are more likely to contribute further to the organisation's results
- recognition of good performance and milestones reached are visible
- there are regular celebrations or acknowledgement of shared accomplishments
- employees are paid fairly for their work
- where relevant, promotions or other skill development opportunities are based on recognition of capability, effort and achievements
- the organisation appreciates employees' commitment and passion for their work

Lack of recognition and reward as a hazard

Some of the situations that may lead to poor demonstrations of recognition and reward include:

- lack of feedback or inadequate feedback about performance
- lack of positive feedback
- imbalance of employees' efforts with formal and informal recognition and rewards
- lack of opportunity for skills development
- employees' skills and experience are under-used
- unfair employee award processes that do not match employee contributions to the organisation
- underpayment or non-payment of extra hours or overtime

12. Work-related stress – low recognition and reward

Providing positive feedback

Risk control actions to help ensure employees feel appropriately rewarded and recognised include:

- providing regular feedback on performance
- training supervisors to provide feedback positively and constructively
- framing negative feedback as an improvement opportunity, setting realistic improvement goals and recognising positive changes as they occur
- praising employees whenever they have done tasks well, being specific about what was done well so it can be repeated
- listening to employees' needs, concerns and ideas and acknowledge them as a meaningful form of recognition
- recognising and rewarding employees for their creativity, ingenuity and effort, not just for their contribution or productivity
- formally or informally congratulating employees on a job well done by celebrating successes through –
  - events such as team lunches or morning teas
  - recognising individuals in team meetings
  - conducting staff awards programs
  - writing an article in an internal publication
  - advising managers further up the chain if someone performs well
- promptly recognising and celebrating successes
- ensuring recognition and rewards are appropriate and relevant for the employee or team

Relevant and tangible rewards

- Ensure recognition and rewards are appropriate and relevant for the employee or team.
- Use rewards to acknowledge good performance.
- Consider rewards as an expression of appreciation and a way of recognising individual or group contribution to a job responsibility, task or an organisational goal.
- Define the purpose of a reward, for example, to recognise the value of the employee's contribution, and take it into account when considering and planning the reward and its value.
- Ensure any financial reward system is fair and equitable for all employees and that rewards do not require unrealistic efforts.

Opportunities for development

- Provide opportunities for career development such as acting in higher-level roles during a superior's absence or developing specialist skills.
- Offer access to various in-house or external training programs beyond those necessary for employees' roles.
- Support participation in personal and professional development.
- Consider rotating jobs or using coaching and mentoring to enrich employees' lives, skills and motivation.

13. Work-related stress – low role clarity

This guidance can help employers with strategies and risk control measures to control work-related stress from low role clarity.

In this chapter

- Understanding low role clarity and role conflict
- Improving role clarity and reducing role conflict

Understanding low role clarity and role conflict

Low role clarity is characterised by jobs where there is:

- uncertainty about or frequent changes to tasks and work standards
- important task information that is not available to the employee
- conflicting job roles, responsibilities or expectations, such as an employee is told one job is a priority but another manager disagrees or priorities are changed
- poor explanation about an employee's performance objectives, accountabilities and others' expectations of their performance

Role conflict is characterised by situations where:

- an employee has to perform a task that conflicts with their values or expectations
- an employee is torn between two or more job demands that cannot be realistically achieved at the same time
- there are unclear reporting lines or competing demands

Improving role clarity and reducing role conflict

Employers must decide what risk control measures they will use to control low role clarity and role conflict that can lead to work-related stress.

Risk control measures should focus on job design, including clear communication of performance objectives and key role accountabilities. Risk control measures should ensure employees understand their role within the work group and the organisation, relative to their colleagues and other work groups, and what to do when expectations on different employees conflict or overlap.

Role clarity

A wide range of work situations can create role confusion, such as beginning a new job, starting in a new organisation, a transfer, a new supervisor or manager or following a change in the structure of a work unit. Lack of role clarity can lead to tension and conflict between employees.

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (OHS Act) requires employers to ensure all employees receive necessary information, instruction, supervision and training to perform their work safely and without risks to health. Fulfilling their OHS Act requirements can help employers improve role clarity.

Other examples of actions an employer can take to improve role clarity include:

- providing all employees with a corporate induction and thorough onboarding. Where possible, provide a structured socialisation process designed to address an individual training needs analysis and a supportive buddy system to assist with on-the-job learning

13. Work-related stress – low role clarity

- ensuring employees are aware of their role within their immediate work team or unit, program area and the broader organisation
- job task analysis and subsequent position description clearly outlining the role and associated expectations
- developing personal work plans that clearly define task objectives and expected performance
- encouraging feedback on changes that affect employees' job tasks
- implementing a performance feedback system where employees receive regular feedback on jobs well done and any areas for improvement
- encouraging employees to talk to their supervisor or manager early if they are unclear about the scope or responsibilities of their role
- ensuring employees have an up-to-date role or position description which includes the role purpose, reporting relationships and the employee's key duties
- ensuring that management structures and reporting lines within work teams are clear. This may help employees know who they are accountable to and where they can go for help with work problems
- providing an organisational chart that gives a clear view of the organisational structure and communication channels
- checking with employees to ensure they understand any additional or different responsibilities or duties required of them following an organisational change or restructure
- ensuring employees are comfortable with new functions
- using the performance review process to allow employees to have renewed input into the way they complete their work

Role conflict

Role conflict can occur when employees receive two different and incompatible tasks at the same time or their role overlaps with another employee or work group. Employers can manage role conflict by:

- ensuring the different requirements of various tasks are compatible
- having clear reporting lines so employees know who they are directly accountable to
- ensuring employees are only accountable to one immediate supervisor
- ensuring clear guidelines and support are available if client and supervisor expectations do not align
- ensuring systems are in place for employees to raise concerns about conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities. For example, have regular team meetings so employees can discuss potential role conflict
- assigning roles to employees that do not conflict with their personal values

14. Work-related stress – poor workplace relationships

This guidance may help employers manage employee relationships and also suggests measures to control work-related stress from workplace relationships.

In this chapter

- Understanding workplace relationships
- Reducing task and relationship conflict and encouraging teamwork
- Related information

Understanding workplace relationships

Employers should consider interactions between employees in the workplace and implement appropriate risk controls if they identify a risk to health and safety.

Negative interactions can start with low-intensity incivility, for example, sarcasm, mocking or social exclusion, and, if unaddressed, escalate into more damaging interactions such as bullying, violence or aggression. Interactions can be verbal or in writing, for example, an email.

Relationships with managers, colleagues and subordinates can positively or negatively affect the way an employee feels. Wherever groups of people work together, it is likely that conflict will arise from time to time.

Conflict may especially become a factor if it remains unresolved, becomes particularly intense or becomes workplace bullying. Employers need to take proactive steps to prevent or reduce conflict as early as possible.

Reducing task and relationship conflict and encouraging teamwork

Employers must decide what risk control measures they will use to manage relationship conflicts that may lead to work-related stress.

Managing relationship conflicts in the workplace will help employers meet their obligation to provide a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Controls should focus on job design, work environment, and working conditions. To manage relationships, employers should ensure employees have clearly defined roles, encourage communication and educate employees on appropriate workplace behaviours and on how to deal with conflict.

Task conflict

Task conflict can arise over resources, procedures and policies or disagreements about facts. Modest levels of task conflict can encourage creative thinking and problem solving. However, high levels or long-term conflict can limit employees' ability to focus on the task at hand and may create stress.

Employers can manage task conflict by ensuring there is role clarity and appropriate communication.

14. Work-related stress – poor workplace relationships

Role clarity

Ways in which role clarity can be achieved include:

- ensuring systems are in place so employees can raise concerns about any conflicts they have within their role and responsibilities. For example, regular team meetings so employees can discuss potential task conflicts
- addressing work duplication or unintentional role duty changes that result in conflict
- ensuring all tasks are clearly allocated so there are no conflicts over uncertainty around whose role it is to perform the task

Communication

Ways in which appropriate communication can reduce task conflict include:

- encouraging employees to have input into procedures and tasks
- involving employees in decisions that may impact on their tasks, when possible
- regular team meetings to discuss pressures and challenges within the work unit
- encouraging employees to come up with and work through risk control measures for any task-related issues
- providing regular feedback on task performance
- recognising whenever employees have done tasks well and being specific about what was done well
- providing employees with practical advice and guidance on areas that need improving
- coaching employees in communication skills to increase their awareness of other people's points of view and their ability to negotiate solutions to resolve conflict

Relationship conflict

Relationship conflict amongst employees can harm individuals and the organisation. Relationship conflict can present itself in various ways, including animosity, social conflict and abusive styles of supervision.

Ways to manage relationship conflict include:

- ensuring a code of conduct is in place and enforcing code of conduct standards to demonstrate that there are consequences for poor behaviour
- setting team rules of engagement or developing a team charter in consultation with team members
- leader and manager role modelling of appropriate workplace behaviours
- coaching individual employees who are demonstrating poor workplace behaviours
- providing conflict management training to all employees to teach them how to diffuse difficult or confronting situations
- training managers how to identify a conflict situation and resolve it early
- managing people issues and their resolution in a consistent and timely manner
- supporting open communication and encouraging employees to share their concerns about work-related conflict at an early stage
- developing and implementing formal and informal confidential complaint-handling processes to enable the reporting of inappropriate behaviour
- providing conflict resolution processes such as mediation, facilitated discussions or conflict coaching as options for resolving complaints of inappropriate behaviour
- arranging independent investigations into serious allegations of misconduct and then following up on identified issues
- training and inducting employees so they are aware of appropriate work behaviours, for example, civility training

14. Work-related stress – poor workplace relationships

Bullying

Prolonged and unresolved relationship conflict may result in workplace bullying. Workplace bullying is repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed at an employee or group of employees that creates a risk to health and safety. Workplace bullying can have an impact on an individual's health and affect their ability to do their job. It can also contribute to loss of productivity, staff turnover, absenteeism, low morale and financial costs.

Employers need to have processes in place to ensure that any allegation of bullying or identified bullying in the workplace is investigated and action taken to eliminate it, as far as reasonably practicable.

You'll find information on the WorkSafe website about how to deal with workplace bullying.

Teamwork

Ways to promote productive and cohesive teamwork include:

- promoting a team culture where employees help each other and provide support when required
- recognising that differences in employees' ideas and opinions leads to positive and creative outcomes and opportunity to respectfully discuss
- promoting a culture where colleagues trust and encourage each other to perform at their best
- encouraging effective, honest, open communication at all levels
- looking for design issues that might negatively affect team communication, for example, isolated work groups
- rewarding the performance of a group as a whole rather than individuals. Rewarding a group may enhance teamwork and avoid potential conflict between employees
- reinforcing teamwork through rewards, for example, a team meal
- ensuring rewards are equal and accessible to all team members who contribute to a project or task

Related information

Bullying in the workplace

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/bullying-workplace

Work-related gendered violence including sexual harassment

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/work-related-gendered-violence-sexual-harassment

15. Work-related stress – poor environmental conditions

This guidance can help employers manage environmental conditions that might increase employees' risk of work-related stress.

In this chapter

- Environmental conditions
- Addressing environmental risks
- Identifying hazards and controlling risks
- Related information

Environmental conditions

Environmental conditions are those external factors in the environment that affect employee comfort and performance at work. Noise and dust might be factors in the workplace or employees might use toxic chemicals. These factors can cause work-related stress and, combined with psychosocial hazards, can heighten overall work-related stress.

Types of environmental stressors include:

- noise
- thermal comfort
- lighting
- vibration
- air quality
- available workspace

Employers must provide and maintain safe systems of work and must eliminate, so far as reasonably practicable, risks to health and safety in the workplace. Fulfilling their obligations under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (OHS Act) can help employers control environmental factors that cause work-related stress.

Addressing environmental risks

Employers should identify hazards and risk control measures as part of an overall risk management program, in accordance with the hierarchy of control.

Consultation with employees and HSRs is essential to identifying and understanding the impact of environmental conditions on employees and identifying risk controls.

Some questions employers can ask their employees and HSRs include:

- what environmental conditions are causing discomfort or disruption?
- is the workplace quiet or too loud?
- is the room temperature comfortable?
- is it too bright or dark?
- is the workspace comfortable and appropriate for the work?
- Is the work station comfortable and appropriate for the work?
- is there enough space for performing work?
- is there any aspect of the work or working environment causing concern or distress?

15. Work-related stress – poor environmental conditions

Identifying hazards and controlling risks

WorkSafe has a range of information about health and safety topics that are important to your workplace and can help identify hazards and control risks that can lead to work-related stress.

Some of the most relevant resources on the WorkSafe website include:

- Compliance code: Workplace amenities and work environment
- Noise
- Officewise
- Working in heat
- Safe operation of cold storage facilities

For the full range of health and safety topics on the WorkSafe website, visit the Safety topics landing page.

For information and guidance about your industry and the kind of work you do, refer to the Industries page on the WorkSafe website.

Related information

Compliance code: Workplace amenities and work environment

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/compliance-code-workplace-amenities-and-work-environment

Noise

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/noise

Officewise

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/officewise-guide-health-and-safety-office-handbook

Working in heat

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/working-heat

Safe operation of cold storage facilities: A handbook for workplaces

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/safe-operation-cold-storage-facilities-handbook-workplaces

Safety topics

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/safety-topics

Industries

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/industries

16. Work-related stress – remote and isolated work

Guidance on this page can help employers manage the risks of work-related stress for employees working remotely or in isolation.

In this chapter

- Understanding remote and isolated work
- Working from home
- Understanding the risks of working alone, remotely or in isolation
- Risk controls for working alone, remotely or in isolation
- Related information

Understanding remote and isolated work

Remote work is work at locations where access to resources and communications is difficult and travel times may be lengthy. Isolated work is where there are no or few other people around and access to help from others, especially in an emergency, may be difficult.

An employee can be considered to be working alone or in isolation even if other people are close by, whether for a short period of time or weeks on end. Therefore, staff working in larger institutions and cities can also be working alone or in isolation.

Remote and isolated work can be characterised by situations that include:

- workplace isolation, for example, working on a farm or in a geographically isolated location
- travelling long distances or for long periods
- when travelling for work, for example, in a hotel, at an airport or even at a different site or office
- as a contractor at a location of another employer
- working alone physically, for example, unpacking in a warehouse
- working away from others, for example, a long-haul ship
- out-of-hours work such as shift work
- working unsupervised, for example, in public transport
- working from home

Examples of remote and isolated work might include:

- farming
- real estate agents
- a community nurse conducting visits at night
- School principal or doctor in a rural area
- night shift operators in petrol stations or convenience stores
- offshore mining
- fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) employees
- computer-based work, for example, office employees, working from home

16. Work-related stress – remote and isolated work

Working from home

Working from home, sometimes called telework, telecommuting or e-work, is a way of working that has become increasingly available and sometimes necessary, mostly in industries involving computer or phone-based work. Working from home presents a range of hazards and risks, including situations where an employee is working from an unstaffed satellite office, mobile office, virtual office or 'hotelling', which is working in rented or shared office space.

Employers have a duty, so far as reasonably practicable, to provide a working environment for their employees that is safe and without risks to health. This duty includes controlling new risks when an employee works from a location other than their usual workplace, such as their home.

Health and safety benefits of working from home can include:

- reduced commuting stress
- flexible work practices that allow for work-life-family balance
- potential for more efficiency and productivity
- uninterrupted time for work that involves concentration or quiet

Some hazards associated with working from home might overlap with hazards for remote and isolated work. Overlapping hazards might include, for example, the physical work environment, personal safety and security of the employee at the workplace location and ways to communicate or stay in touch.

Hazards that can be more specific to working from home include:

- home office environment, including adequate lighting, ventilation, temperature control, excessive noise or distractions and walkways with hazards such as electrical cords
- domestic and family violence
- workstation set-up, which may not be consistent with ergonomic principles
- the way work is organised and performed
- communication and relationships between employees, supervisors, and the workplace
- mental, emotional and social aspects of work
- caring for children or others

Find information about office health and safety in WorkSafe's Officewise guidance, available on the WorkSafe website.

Consulting employees who work from home is important for identifying and preventing potential hazards. Consultation is particularly important for workload and relationship hazards such as:

- expectations about after-hours availability, frequent overtime or to be on-call
- high workloads or performance pressures
- management styles that have not adjusted to non-traditional working arrangements
- exclusion from social relations, informal networking and the workplace community
- challenges for managing professional profile or image
- missed opportunities for mental stimulation or for discussing ideas with colleagues
- potential for feeling isolated or lonely, depending on circumstances
- resentment among employees who are office-based without access to working-at-home arrangements
- disadvantages for career advancement or a sense of job insecurity as a result of perceived 'absence' from the physical workplace
- being 'out of sight, out of mind', meaning employees may be inadvertently left out of important communications and meetings

A lack of social contact for employees who work from home, particularly over an extended period, can lead to anxiety, lack of motivation, reduced engagement and loss of involvement in decision-making within the organisation.

16. Work-related stress – remote and isolated work

To help employees realise the benefits of working at home, employers should:

- provide clear policies and procedures for employee access to working at home
- provide written plans or agreements about how work is arranged and for remaining socially connected
- adjust management styles accordingly

Despite the potential benefits, working from home may not suit all employees, depending on their home environment, type of work and preferred ways of working. For example, some employees with young children or those experiencing domestic or family violence may prefer coming into the office. It is important that employees have a say in whether and how often they work from home, how their work is arranged and that they retain the option to work at the office or workplace if possible.

Practical suggestions for supporting employees to remain engaged while working at home include:

- regularly checking in to make sure employees feel supported and are coping with working at home, for example, by setting up regular or daily phone or video conference meetings
- creating opportunities for team communications, for example, by using online tools or apps to establish team-wide chat groups
- being available, accessible and willing to listen when employees need to contact the office
- providing employees with appropriate control and flexibility over how they do their work
- providing practical tools to support positive mental health, such as access to an employee assistance program
- encouraging employees to stay physically active, eat well and regularly go outside
- making sure employees effectively disengage from their work and log off at the end of the day
- ensuring realistic workloads so employees do not feel obligated to work overtime and can disengage from their work at home

Working from home because of infectious diseases or pandemics

The WorkSafe website provides specific information on hazards to employees who are working at home in response to the spread of infectious diseases.

Understanding the risks of working alone, remotely or in isolation

People who work alone, remotely or in isolation face different levels of risk compared with other employees. These employees might be unable to access immediate assistance from team members, other people or emergency services due to the location, time and type of work they are doing.

Exposure to violence and poor access to emergency services are two key hazards. Psychologically, concerns over safety and welfare, social isolation, threats and attacks from clients and the public are linked to work-related stress.

Some other risks associated with working alone or in isolation can include:

- forms of occupational violence and aggression, such as road rage, customer, client or patient abuse, robberies, incidents with vehicles or machinery
- slips, trips and falls
- employee health concerns that put them at greater risk when alone
- social isolation
- inadequate equipment or space for setting up an ergonomically appropriate workspace of office

16. Work-related stress – remote and isolated work

When completing a risk assessment, employers should think about some of the other risk factors specific to the workplace that could affect employees when they are working alone or in isolation. Risk factors to consider could include:

- the workplace environment, taking into account where the work is being performed and the weather
- testing and measuring factors such as noise, dust, hazardous substances and manual handling processes
- analysing records such as the injury register, incident report and near misses
- the layout and design of the workplace
- access to safe and suitable accommodation if travel and stopovers are required
- communication systems used or needed
- training and supervision provided to manage risks
- fatigue management
- physical security of the location
- physical fitness and the employee's physical ability to carry out duties
- psychological fitness and the employee's mental ability to carry out duties
- regularity of contact with other people when working at home, for example, whether employees live alone

Risk controls for working alone, remotely or in isolation

Risk controls for working alone, remotely or in isolation should focus on consulting with employees to understand their experiences and hazards in the context of their work and working environment. Risk control measures should address both physical and psychosocial hazards since these go hand in hand. Actual or perceived physical hazards might contribute to feeling unsafe and work-related stress.

Consulting employees

Employers have a duty, so far as reasonably practicable, to consult with their employees and elected health and safety representatives (HSRs) about risks to health and safety.

As an employer it is important you speak with your employees to understand their experiences of working alone, remotely or in isolated conditions. There are many ways you can talk with and begin to support your employees, including:

- one-on-one discussions with managers and employees
- adding working alone, remotely or in isolation as an agenda item at your regular meetings. These meetings may be 'toolbox talks', production meetings, staff meetings or any other channels your organisation uses to communicate
- discussing hazards as part of a routine, for example, speaking to employees while casually walking around your workplace
- through HSRs
- through health and safety committees
- focus groups
- interviews
- staff surveys

16. Work-related stress – remote and isolated work

Conversation prompts

Here are conversation prompts to help start a conversation with employees about risk controls for working alone:

- How do you know when you are at risk when working alone?
- What do you consider are the physical and mental health risks involved with working alone?
- What things can the organisation do or provide you with to improve your physical and mental safety?
- What support networks are in place, in addition to physical safety?
- Who do you call when you need to reflect or debrief regarding your work or when you need assistance?
- How would the workplace support you if you feel unsafe?

Think about any employees who work for periods with little or no contact with other people and make sure you include them in your discussions about the risks associated with working alone, remotely or in isolation.

Job design

It is important employers speak with employees to understand their experiences of working alone, remotely or in isolated conditions. Employee feedback is important for job design – the way work is organised and experienced – so that it is effective and tailored to the task and individual.

Good job design will consider how other work-related factors contribute to workplace health and safety, with consideration for:

- workload
- whether job demands are too high or low
- the level of control employees have over how they organise and perform their work
- an appropriate degree of self-direction
- input into decision making

In the context of working alone, remotely or in isolation, employers should consider:

- inherent dangers of the task
- the physical requirements of the work, including manual handling and ergonomics, periods of rest and activity
- the mental requirements of the work, including pace, noise or quiet for concentration, collaboration, physical movement or exercise and social connection
- tailoring work to the employee, tasks and environment
- sufficient variety of work and tasks
- adequate and appropriate workload
- providing employees with appropriate control and flexibility over how they do their work
- tools, equipment and supplies required
- personal protective equipment (PPE) and supplies
- access to information and other resources
- access to facilities, such as toilets, drinking water, etc.
- safety of the site or location, including adequate facilities for the welfare of employees
- providing practical tools to support positive mental health, such as access to an employee assistance program
- encouraging employees to stay physically active, eat well and regularly go outside
- making sure employees are effectively disengaging from their work and logging off at the end of the day

16. Work-related stress – remote and isolated work

Management and supervision

So far as reasonably practicable, employers must provide information, instruction, training and supervision to employees, as is necessary, to enable them to work in a way that is safe and without risks to health.

The management and supervision of employees can help prevent and manage work-related stress. In the case of employees working alone, remotely or in isolation, employers should:

- ensure managers are competent supervisors
- adapt management styles to non-traditional working arrangements
- ensure managers and supervisors are accessible and available
- develop relationships that foster mutual trust for open communication
- consult with employees when developing performance-monitoring systems or procedures to review and monitor employees
- develop team-based targets which help build effective teams and allow measurement of team performance against organisational goals which show contribution by the team and individuals
- use performance reviews as an opportunity for employees to have input into the way they do their work, rather than focusing only on performance
- when assigning work, negotiate objective and reasonable standards to increase employees' ownership and control over their work and ensure work is allocated evenly
- avoid asking employees to regularly stay after hours without prior discussion and agreement

Communication and keeping in touch

Employers have a duty, so far as reasonably practicable, to monitor the health of employees and conditions at any workplace under the employer's control. Keeping in touch with employees is important when they are physically separated from the workplace and should include:

- developing a communication plan so managers and employees know when and how to contact each other
- consider a nominated 'back-up' contact in the event the primary manager or supervisor is unavailable, for example, in a meeting or on leave or sick
- regularly check in to make sure employees are safe and feel supported, for example, by setting up regular phone or video conference meetings
- creating opportunities for team communications, for example, by using online tools or apps to establish team-wide chat groups
- being available, accessible and willing to listen when employees need to contact the employer
- opportunity for or planned contact in person with managers, supervisors and team members or for collaboration
- opportunity for informal networking and socialising
- keeping employees informed and connected
- involvement in decision making

16. Work-related stress – remote and isolated work

Safety and security

So far as reasonably practicable, employers have a duty to maintain each workplace under their management and control in a condition that is safe and without risks to health. Some hazards and risks might be associated with the perceived and actual personal safety and security of the workplace or location where work takes place.

Safety and security hazards might be particularly relevant to employees who are mobile or perform their work at locations other than employer-controlled workplaces, for example, tradespeople working at residential properties, employees who work alone in satellite offices with client or customer exposure or farmers working alone.

To address these hazards, employers should consider:

- a buddy system, if possible, particularly when there is a risk of violence
- designing workplace layouts to include physical barriers, monitored closed circuit television (CCTV) and enhanced visibility
- automatic warning devices that raise the alarm in an emergency and are activated by absence of activity from the employee
- personal duress devices that are monitored
- escorts to vehicles if working alone after hours
- satellite tracking systems or devices, with employee consultation about the purpose of the tracking and limits for privacy purposes
- check-in procedures such as texts or phone calls before and after travelling or meeting customers and clients
- emergency procedures
- security guards or patrols
- employees working alone have adequate first aid training and an adequate first aid kit
- regular workplace inspections and necessary rectifications occur

Policies and procedures

Employers have a duty under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (OHS Act) to consult with employees, so far as reasonably practicable, about measures to control risks to health or safety. An employer who is required to consult with employees must:

- share information about the matter with employees
- give employees a reasonable opportunity to express their views about the matter
- take into account the views of employees and their HSRs

A policy for working alone, remotely or in isolation could be a stand-alone document. Alternatively, information on working alone, remotely or in isolation could be part of a general occupational health and safety policy. What is important is that everyone knows where to find the policy. Individually tailored written plans can also be helpful for specific employees, types of work and working arrangements. It is important to regularly revise any written plans, policies and procedures to ensure they remain current and continue to meet everyone's needs.

Further information on risk controls for working alone, remotely or in isolation is available on the WorkSafe website.

Related information

Officewise

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/officewise-guide-health-and-safety-office-handbook

Infectious diseases

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/infectious-diseases

Working alone

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/working-alone

17. Work-related stress – violent or traumatic events

This guidance can help employers identify potential exposure to violent or traumatic events and suggests risk controls for work-related stress from violence or trauma.

In this chapter

Violent or traumatic events

Work-related violent or traumatic events are incidents that can cause fear and distress and involve exposure to abuse, the threat of harm or actual harm. The fear and distress from violent or traumatic events can lead to work-related stress, psychological injury and physical injury. The impact of traumatic experiences can arise from a single distressing event, or from the cumulative impact of many events over time, including direct or indirect exposure.

Some industries have a higher risk of employee exposure to potentially traumatic incidents, especially with repeated or prolonged experiences. Examples include emergency services, first responders, disaster management, customer service, defence, transport, justice personnel and health and community services.

Traumatic experiences in these types of roles can involve threats to life and witnessing or experiencing serious injuries. Examples include:

- being involved in or witnessing serious motor vehicle or transport accidents
- being verbally, physically or sexually assaulted
- acts of violence such as an armed robbery, war or terrorism
- being bitten, spat at, scratched or kicked
- being threatened with or without a weapon
- stressful events such as death, suicide, accident or injury
- ongoing bullying
- natural disasters such as bushfires, earthquakes or floods
- severe or life-threatening weather events
- needle-stick injuries
- workplace incidents, injuries or deaths
- repeated exposures to aversive details in reports

A person is more likely to experience an event as trauma when the person considers the incident to be:

- unexpected
- something they were unprepared for
- unpreventable
- uncontrollable
- the result of intentional cruelty

17. Work-related stress – violent or traumatic events

Types of trauma risk

Direct or indirect exposure to violence or traumatic events can cause trauma. Vicarious trauma, also known as secondary trauma, refers to the negative effects of indirect exposure to potentially traumatic events during the course of one's work. For example, helping others cope with traumatic events, witnessing a fatality, reviewing distressing information or investigating a serious injury or fatality.

While single exposure to violence or traumatic events can result in a risk of trauma, multiple exposures also pose a risk of trauma. Cumulative trauma refers to the impact associated with repeated exposure to potentially traumatic events. Exposure can occur directly from violent and aggressive behaviours or indirectly during the course of one's work, such as through counselling an assault victim or reading details relating to an assault. For example, as part of their work, some employees, such as child protection workers, lawyers, police officers, forensic scientists, journalists and custom officers, may need to repeatedly listen to or view material containing detailed descriptions or images of distressing and traumatic events experienced by others.

Risks of violent or traumatic events

While exposure to traumatic or violent events may be difficult to predict, it is possible to identify situations leading to increased risks and to implement appropriate risk controls. Work situations that have greater risks of violence or trauma include:

- handling cash, drugs or valuables
- working alone, working in isolation, working in the community and working at night
- providing services to distressed, highly agitated or incarcerated people
- enforcement activities
- responding to emergencies
- working in areas where you or others may be exposed to distressing or traumatic events, for example, health care, community work, counselling, funeral services, protective services, legal services, high-risk work where injuries may occur

Where repeated exposures to violence or trauma are a part of normal work role additional risks of cumulative trauma experiences need to be considered.

17. Work-related stress – violent or traumatic events

Implementing controls for violent or traumatic events

Effective systems, processes and training can help reduce the risk of violent events. It is also possible to prevent the effects of exposure to trauma by adequately preparing employees. Preparation includes both the ability to respond in the moment and access to coping strategies and social support to help after an incident.

Violent events

The following are examples of risk control actions to prevent violent events:

- Ensure the physical work environment and security are well designed –
  - the building is secure, well maintained and fit for purpose
  - secure on-site parking or escort to private means of transport is available
  - security measures such as closed circuit television (CCTV), timer safes, anti-jump screens are in place
  - employees are separated from the public where possible
  - access to work areas is limited by electronic security passes, door locks, or remote locking doors
  - visibility of those entering and exiting the premises
  - communication and alarm systems are functioning and monitored at all times, and that is known by employees
  - regular checks and risk assessments are carried out
  - Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is considered
- Implement strategies to reduce client or customer frustration, for example –
  - clearly visible instructions and service level expectations
  - readily available directions and assistance
  - alternative strategies to queues, such as buzzers or numbers
  - providing entertainment in waiting areas
- Develop a culture of low tolerance of aggression towards employees through management commitment, policies and processes.
- Conduct awareness campaigns highlighting expectations of acceptable behaviour as well as the rights, responsibilities and consequences of inappropriate client or customer behaviour.
- Provide skill-based training to employees in –
  - violence prevention measures
  - situational risk assessment
  - positive behaviour strategies
  - de-escalation and emotional regulation
- Develop and regularly review work systems and procedures in consultation with employees, including –
  - procedures for working in isolation
  - procedures for opening and closing the business
  - monitoring employees working in the community or away from the workplace
  - processes to assess client needs and provide appropriately skilled employees
  - management plans for clients or customers known to have a history of aggression, complex or challenging behaviours
  - identification systems which clearly identify employees and authorised visitors
  - systems to map and record areas of concern for safe entry and exit
  - procedures in the event of crime

17. Work-related stress – violent or traumatic events

Traumatic events

The following are examples of risk control actions for management of traumatic events:

- Implement processes for employees exposed to potentially distressing situations or content. Processes could include –
  - employee assistance programs
  - peer support programs
  - reporting systems where employees, as a matter of course, report exposure to distressing circumstances and where managers or others can check in following exposure to such situations
  - working in pairs or teams
  - rotating roles or activities to have adequate breaks from roles which are likely to involve exposure to distressing events
  - implement file flagging processes on potentially distressing files or cases to avoid inadvertent exposure to distressing content
  - ensure there are guidelines and processes in place following a traumatic event in the workplace
  - ensure workload allows sufficient recovery time
- Ensure there are procedures in place to respond to critical incidents, for example, a Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) plan. At a minimum there should be –
  - practical support provided to employees following a violent or traumatic event
  - counselling and professional support services available to employees and supervisors following a violent or traumatic event
  - appropriate information provided to employees, including the availability of resources
  - regular monitoring of employees' wellbeing following exposure to violent or traumatic events and encouraging access to employee supports such as counselling and professional supervision
- Ensure managers are trained in appropriate responses to violence and trauma.
- Ensure employees are trained in normal responses following a traumatic incident.
- Ensure recruitment and selection practices incorporate a realistic job preview so applicants are aware the role has the potential to expose them to trauma.
- Implement professional supervision among peers and supervisors.
- For organisations that frequently provide services to clients who have experienced trauma, consider becoming a trauma-informed employer through the introduction of specific training and practice changes.
- Redesign work wherever possible, particularly in situations where work roles involve repeated exposures to traumatic experiences.
- Where repeated high-risk exposure to distressing experiences is a necessary part of the role, additional risk controls could include reducing workload, increasing breaks, and recovery time, implement systematic health screening to identify trauma stress responses, and implement annual health assessments.

Further guidance on work-related violence is available on the WorkSafe website.

Related information

Work-related violence

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/work-related-violence-guide-employers

Notes

WorkSafe Victoria

WorkSafe Agents
Agent contact details are all available at
worksafe.vic.gov.au/agents

Advisory Service
Toll-free 1800 136 089
Email info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

Head Office
1 Malop Street, Geelong 3220
Phone (03) 4243 7000
Toll-free 1800 136 089
Website worksafe.vic.gov.au

Information in your language
For information about WorkSafe in your own language, call our Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) on **131 450**.

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