

STRESS AND THE WORKPLACE

What is stress?

Stress is a response to an event or situation which can be felt as either positive or negative. It usually means that something is happening that's causing some concern and is affecting how we are thinking or feeling.¹ Stress is common in daily life and may be associated with issues such as work, relationships or finances.

A certain amount of stress is normal and useful; it can motivate us to be at our best and meet a challenge. Too much stress, however, can result in a series of physical and emotional reactions that may lead to a range of health effects, including cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal issues, digestive disorders, immune system dysfunction, and sleep and memory disturbances. It can also lead to mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression and behaviours that, in turn, have a negative effect on our overall health and wellbeing, such as smoking, overeating or alcohol abuse.²

What is workplace stress?

Workplace stress is a growing concern in Australia. This is the response people may experience when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their capabilities, resources or needs.³ Stress is linked to a range of physical and mental health problems in employees, and can also have a negative impact on organisations through increased absenteeism, presenteeism and employee turnover.

Stress originates with exposure to stressors, which are those elements within an environment that cause stress. This exposure can lead to a range of short-term physical and psychosocial responses, such as elevated blood pressure and tension, and behavioural responses such as smoking. These short-term responses can then lead to long-term health problems such as coronary heart disease, anxiety, nicotine addiction or alcoholism.⁴

The following table lists some examples of workplace stressors.⁵

Factors	Factors
Work factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Excessive work hours ■ Unreasonable performance demands
Physical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Noise and overcrowding ■ Health and safety risks ■ Ergonomic problems
Organisational practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of autonomy ■ Poor communication ■ Unclear roles and responsibilities
Workplace change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Insecurity in job ■ Poor chances for advancement or promotion ■ High turnover
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Office politics, competition and conflicts ■ Poor relationships with managers ■ Bullying or harassment

What is the effect of too much stress in the workplace?

Workplace stress is a concern across all employment sectors and occupational levels. If there are high levels of stress in your workplace, you might see:

- increased accidents or injuries – stress affects concentration, energy levels and judgement so it can be an underlying cause of accidents, injuries and mistakes
- increased absenteeism, presenteeism and staff turnover; these can lead to inefficient, disrupted or reduced productivity
- accumulated leave due to high workload or job demands
- negative public perception of your organisation, which may affect your ability to attract workers.⁶

You can find out more about the effect of stress in your workplace by:

- talking to your employees, employee safety representatives or your Occupational Health and Safety Committee about what is contributing to stress at work; this needs to be done while understanding that some employees may not speak up for fear of revealing they can't cope
- undertaking an anonymous survey
- looking at incident reports, staff surveys and workers compensation claims, examining absenteeism data and information about staff transfers and resignations
- looking at the management style of the workplace and considering whether a style that is intended as strong and directive is coming across as demanding and unreasonable.

Stress-related presenteeism and absenteeism directly costs employers \$10.11 billion a year.⁵



How can I reduce stress at my workplace?

Historically, most organisations have approached the prevention and management of workplace stress by focusing on individual employees. However, recent research has found that it is far more effective to use a systems approach, which combines strategies aimed at individuals with strategies that are organisationally focused or work-directed.⁷

There are many practical strategies that can help you manage workplace stress within your organisation.

These include:

- consulting with employees about production schedules or lack of resources
- reviewing and improving workloads, performance goals, job descriptions or responsibilities and associated expectations, rosters and working hours, staffing levels and availability of resources
- providing training to maintain and enhance employees' skills so they cope with their job demands, particularly when new technologies or practices are being introduced
- communicating with employees, particularly if they are feeling overwhelmed by work
- ensuring managers are appropriately trained and understand the impact of their management style on employees
- implementing an overall health and wellbeing program that assists in managing the broader causes of stress on employees⁶



You can reduce job stress for your employees by actively discouraging behaviours that contribute to negative stress, such as:

- routinely working late
- taking work home at weekends
- being overly competitive.

Your organisation may also benefit by supporting employees to manage factors outside the workplace that might be causing them stress. Personal concerns such as relationship issues, financial issues or fatigue management could be causing stress and affecting your employees' social and emotional wellbeing. Providing information and support can help minimise the impact of these issues in the workplace.

For more information on reducing stress, including a range of practical stress management techniques, read Beyond Blue's fact sheet below.



Reducing stress

References

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5. Medibank Private 2008, *The cost of workplace stress in Australia*, Medibank Private Pty Ltd, Australia.
6. WorkCover Tasmania 2010, *Workplace stress: a guide for employers and workers*, Tasmanian Government.
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