



HEALTH AND SAFETY  
AUTHORITY

work-related

# stress

a guide for employers

  
**STRESS**  
prevention at work

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# **WORK-RELATED STRESS**

## **A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS**

**(October 2002)**



# **WORK-RELATED STRESS - A GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS**

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The Health and Safety Authority (The National Authority for Occupational Safety and Health), is the state body charged with enabling safe and healthy work in Ireland. We do this by:

- ensuring that the national agenda supports safety, health and welfare at work
- enabling people to meet their responsibilities within the work environment
- ensuring that those who control or who carry out work activities discharge their responsibilities and duties.

## **A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO STRESS**

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Stress is only partly a work-related issue but the Authority recognises that where work-related stress (WRS) occurs it has a part to play in providing guidance on eliminating it.

The Authority's strategy on the prevention of workplace stress is to help secure a safer and healthier workplace with the assistance of employers, employees, trade unions, professional bodies and representative groups. Our aim is as follows:

1. To raise awareness of stress and its causes by informing employers and employees of the main sources of stress at

work, the behavioural and psychological results of stress and some of the harmful consequences for an employee's health which can arise if stress at work is not addressed promptly. This guide is part of that strategy.

2. To provide guidance and advice on the topic, through the Authority's information phone link, '**Infotel**', through presentations and workshops and published materials, and through partnerships with other stakeholders. The aim of such activities is to promote awareness and knowledge of the Risk Assessment approach to Work Related Stress.
3. To develop and publish a stress audit tool which can be used in Irish organisations to identify stress-related hazards associated with the working environment and eliminate or control them. '**Work Positive**', a user-friendly pack which can be used to identify sources of stress in organisations, is one of a number of tools available to help in this process. '**Work Positive**' is available from the Health and Safety Authority (details at the end of this guide).

However, the Health and Safety Authority is just one body with an input to make in this area. It is very important that a partnership approach to work-related stress is adopted, as work-related stress is not simply a health and safety matter, but is a complex issue requiring the input of many different areas of expertise.

Management and employees both have an important role to play in recognising and managing stress within themselves and others.

## **AIM OF THIS GUIDE**

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This guide aims to increase employers', employees' and managers' understanding of and awareness of work-related stress, what causes or might cause it, and what should be in place to prevent and manage it. The guide also aims to assist those with responsibility to meet their legal obligations within their organisation.

## **WHAT IS WORK-RELATED STRESS?**

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Stress can be broadly defined as the negative reactions people have to aspects of their environment. Work-related stress simply refers to those reactions due to pressures within the working environment.

*'Stress occurs when an individual perceives an imbalance between the demands placed on them on the one hand, and their ability to cope on the other. It often occurs in situations characterised by low levels of control and support.'* (Professor Tom Cox, Institute of Work, Health and Organisation)

There are certain work practices which have a marked effect on general stress levels, like bullying, for instance, or sexual harassment, job insecurity due to the fast pace of change, increased levels of responsibility without increased authority, lack of training, and/or certain patterns of shift work. These are some causes of work-related stress but the list is not exhaustive.

## **WHY BOTHER ABOUT STRESS?**

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There are several compelling reasons for dealing with Work Related Stress e.g. A recent Mental Health Association of Ireland (MHAi) survey found that 35% of adults claim to have

experienced notable levels of stress in the recent past, while 11% (300,000 people) said that workplace stress interferes with their family lives.

Work Related Stress has the potential to have a great financial impact on business. The total cost of stress-related illnesses across the European Union, according to the most recent survey, is €13 billion. This is made up of re-training costs, sickness pay, accident and/or illness insurance payouts and recruitment costs.

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 1989, requires employers to put in place systems of work which protect employees from hazards which could lead to mental or physical ill-health. There is also an obligation on employers to draw up a written risk assessment of all known hazards, including psychosocial hazards, which might lead to stress.

There are also obligations on employers and employees in Common Law in terms of a duty of care to protect others from avoidable harm as well as legal obligations under Industrial Relations legislation. A recent Labour Court recommendation held that 'work-related stress is recognised as a health and safety issue and employers have an obligation to deal with instances of its occurrence which may be brought to their attention'.

### **WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF WRS?**

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Work-related stress results from an interaction of the individual and the working environment. Each individual brings into the workplace their own particular personality, medical

history, psychological make-up and coping skills. As a result, what may be stressful for one employee, may not be for another. However, some workplace factors inevitably lead to stress, such as badly designed shift work, poor communications, bullying and harassment.

**Table One: Stressful Characteristics of Work**

*(Professor Tom Cox et al.)*

Category	Conditions defining hazard
<b>CONTEXT TO WORK</b>	
Organisational culture and function	Poor communication, low levels of support for problem solving and personal development, lack of definition of organisational objectives.
Role in organisation	Role ambiguity and role conflict, responsibility for people.
Career development	Career stagnation and uncertainty, under or over promotion, poor pay, job insecurity, low social value to work.
Decision latitude / Control	Low participation in decision making, lack of control over work (control, particularly in the form of participation, is also a context and wider organisational issue).
Interpersonal relationships at work	Social or physical isolation, poor relationships with superiors, interpersonal conflict, lack of social support.
Home-work interface	Conflicting demands of work and home, low support at home, dual career problems.
<b>CONTENT OF WORK</b>	
Work environment and work equipment	Problems regarding the reliability, availability, suitability and maintenance or repair of both equipment and facilities.
Task design	Lack of variety or short work cycles, fragmented or meaningless work, underuse of skills, high uncertainty.
Workload / workpace	Work overload or underload, lack of control over pacing, high levels of time pressure.
Work schedule	Shift working, inflexible work schedules, unpredictable hours, long or unsocial hours.



A person could experience work-related stress as a result of various factors including:

- his/her role
- the relationships at work
- the hierarchies and leadership involved
- the degree of control (s)he experiences
- the training given
- the reward systems in place
- the perceived ability to do the job.

### **EFFECTS OF STRESS**

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The effects of stress differ from individual to individual. They can be reduced if there is support available and aggravated if there are other outside circumstances which also put a strain on the individual. The experience of stress can change the way a person feels, thinks and behaves and can also produce physical changes.

Usually, the effects of stress can be categorised as follows:

- mental (how the mind works)
- physical (how the body works)
- behavioural (the things we do)
- cognitive (the way we think and concentrate)

A person will often experience the effects of stress in a number of ways. When you are stressed, you are less likely to eat well,

get adequate sleep, take exercise and relax. You can also experience irritability, reduced attention span and memory impairment. Irritability due to stress can create secondary problems such as the loss of social support. Being stressed over a prolonged period of time has been associated with increased blood pressure and cardiovascular problems.

If the individual feels exposed to a stressful environment and is left unsupported, the stress he or she experiences may become more severe and lead to ill health, absenteeism and other organisational problems.

### **PREVENTION OF WORK-RELATED STRESS**

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There is a legal requirement for employers to assess the working environment for systems and practices which lead to stress and to put in place preventative measures.

Policies which benefit employee health can improve productivity. Low levels of perceived stress are associated with low staff turnover, low levels of absenteeism and low rates of injury. Organisations that are perceived as healthy tend to have clear policies and active methods of dealing with people which encourage:

- respect for the dignity of each employee
- regular feedback and recognition of performance
- clear goals for employees in line with organisational goals
- employee input into decision-making and career progression
- consistent and fair management actions.

## HOW TO MANAGE STRESS AT WORK

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There are three main types of stress management interventions used in organisations – Primary, Secondary and Tertiary.

- **Primary Interventions (Prevention)** This approach looks at the issue of stress ‘at source’, in order to prevent it occurring. It usually involves some form of organisation-wide change in the system of work, be it the design of how things are done, what is done and/or who does what.
- **Secondary Interventions (Management)** This approach focuses on the employee throughout his or her period with the organisation. It includes aspects of work such as training for the job, training in aspects of health and safety generally, support in terms of providing adequate management of the social and technical aspects of an employee’s working life. This good management practice has a role both in preventing stress and helping stressed employees to recover.
- **Tertiary Interventions (Minimisation)** This focuses on the provision of counselling and employee assistance programmes or outsourced support services in order to assist employees who feel a need for extra support, other than that contained in the human resource function.

A combination of all three, is generally advisable, rather than focusing solely on any one to the exclusion of all others.

These approaches fit in to the risk management framework of health and safety systems, aiming as it does to identify and

eliminate the causes of stress, as far as is reasonably practicable. Risk management is a structured step-by-step problem solving approach involving participation and consultation. It helps identify and focus on the real issues causing stress.

This involves an assessment of 'where we are now' as an organisation and where we need to go.

These steps are as follows:

- Identify the hazards (causes of stress) – what are the aspects of your organisation that have the potential to cause stress.
- Assess the risks – prioritise them according to severity and likelihood of negative outcome.
- Eliminate the risks – change the system so that the stressful aspect of work is eliminated.
- Contain the risks – limit the impact of and/or reduce the number of causes of stress.
- Protect from the risks – reduce the degree of exposure to the factors that cause it.
- Monitor the risks – on-going review of levels of stress in your organisation.

**Control strategies** are methods that can be used to reduce the incidence of stress. Examples include:

- Re-designing some aspect of the work environment (e.g. a less crowded office space, re-arranging the reception area, altering equipment)

- Re-designing the task itself in some way (e.g. shortening production lines, improving teamwork, decreasing responsibility)
- Providing support at various levels (e.g. training for line managers, more human resource staff, access to occupational health staff)
- Providing feedback on performance (e.g. introduction of and training in performance management or other systems of feedback)

## **CONCLUSION**

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Research continues to show that our satisfaction at work is very much related to how work makes us feel, even more than how much we get paid, or what our career prospects are. While addressing Work Related Stress can be challenging, it can also be a vehicle for positive change, better, more productive relationships at work and increased creativity and productivity. Therefore addressing Work Related Stress is in everyone's interest.

## **CASE STUDIES**

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Stress reduction interventions (From: Research on Work-Related Stress – European Agency of Safety and Health at Work, 2000 (pp 115 -116))

Employees working in 25 outpatient clinics at hospitals in the UK reported that not having a clear role in the organisation and experiencing regular conflict between different aspects of their roles were causes of stress. A programme was initiated to deal with this. Clinic supervisors were given training in response to this finding, particularly about participation in decision-making. The number of staff meetings was also increased. The effects of this intervention were evaluated against a number of measures and, after six months, significant improvements in the level of role ambiguity and conflict were found.

The First American Bankcorp of Nashville, Tennessee (150 banks in all) experienced problematic high turnover rates, sickness absence and low productivity. The intervention involved setting up 'action teams' from each area of operations, and training them in identifying and solving problems, with employees rotated on and off the teams. Turnover was cut by 25%.

Other organisational interventions reported include holding a stress management workshop to clarify what work stress as opposed to general stress involves. Then an audit of employees to identify the source of workplace stressors was carried out, a 'stress reduction committee' to prioritise and review the

identified stressors was set up. Following this, the committee planned a series of interventions over a specified time-frame, to be audited annually, recognising that the process and how it is managed is as important as the content.

### **WORK POSITIVE PACK**

**“Work Positive, Prioritising Organisational Stress”  
is an audit tool within a user-friendly pack and is  
available at a cost of €30 from:**

**Publications, HSA, 10 Hogan Place, Dublin 2.  
Tel: (01) 6147000  
[www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)**

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