

Work-related Stress

Work-related stress is a very significant occupational health and safety problem for teachers which can lead to conditions such as depression, anxiety, nervousness, fatigue and heart disease. Of all the work-related injuries and illnesses teachers suffer from, it is this which results in the most time of work and the most long-term consequences. Some idea of the magnitude of the problem is indicated by the fact that psychological injuries arising from the workplace now account for approximately 30% of Workers Compensation claims. However, it is likely that even this figure understates the problem, with research suggesting that there is a significant under-reporting of stress-related illnesses by employees.

Stress isn't a disease, but if it is intense and prolonged, it can lead to both mental and physical ill-health. Employees and employers both need to acknowledge that:

- stress is an OHS issue and like any other risks in the in the workplace, must be dealt with;
- an employer who fails to deal with stress in their workplace may be exposed to significant fines under the OHS Act and OHS Regulation;
- stress is usually both preventable and fixable;
- the key factors which contribute to stress need to be identified;
- there should be clear, simple procedures for employees to raise concerns with fear of retribution.

Work-related stress can be caused by psychological hazards such as work design, organisation and management, and issues like bullying and violence.

A stress prevention policy should focus on the workplace, rather than the individual. Good work organisation can largely prevent stress by ensuring

- management styles are consultative, so that workers participate in determining the expectations of the job and the arrangement of their own work situation, including any changes or restructuring of workloads;
- workloads are fair, distributed fairly and have realistic targets;
- access to appropriate leave when needed (e.g. FACS leave, sick leave);
- the work environment is safe and comfortable
- health and safety hazards are eliminated, minimised or controlled;

- adequate welfare facilities are provided (e.g. food heating facilities, staffroom space, secure storage for personal items)
- furniture and equipment are safe and suited to the purpose.

Risk Assessment and Management

If there is no stress prevention policy in the workplace, or it fails, it may be necessary to undertake a risk assessment.

The OHS Act 2000 requires employers to "identify foreseeable hazards that may arise from the conduct of the employer's undertaking, to assess the risks of those hazards and to eliminate the risks or, if not reasonably practicable to do so, to control the risks." It "requires an employer to consult with employees to enable them to contribute to the making of decisions affecting their health, safety and welfare at work." The Act also requires "such consultation when risks to health and safety arising from work are assessed and when decisions are made about measures to be taken to eliminate or control risks." All of these requirements apply to hazards which give rise to work-related stress.

The following is a guide to a risk assessment and management approach to the problem of workplace stress.

Step 1

Identify the hazards.

What or who is creating the stress?

Some factors to consider include:

- *culture* of the organisation and how its attitude towards stress;
- *demands* such as workload and exposure to hazards (e.g. very disruptive or violent students);
- *control* - how much influence workers have in the way they do their work;
- *relationships* - covering issues like bullying and harassment;
- *change* - how change within the workplace is managed and communicated;
- *role* - whether the workers understand their role in the organisation and that conflict in their role is avoided;
- *support* from colleagues and principals and managers;
- *training* to give workers the skills to perform their task;

- *individual factors* - recognising that people are different and catering for those individual differences.

Step 2

Identify the risks which flow from the hazards

Who might be harmed?

How?

Step 3

Evaluate the risks, eliminate or manage them

Which risks can be eliminated?

How can other risks best be controlled?

(refer also to the Risk Assessment matrix in the Federation's Risk Assessment and Management leaflet).

Some factors to consider include:

Culture

Is there good open communication, support and mutual respect?

Are the views and opinions of teachers valued?

If not, communication should be improved.

Demands

Are teachers overloaded? Do they have the capabilities and capacities for their tasks? What about the physical (noise, ventilation, lighting, staffroom space, etc.) and psychological (violence, bullying etc.) environments?

Sufficient resources should be made available if there are problems e.g. individual workloads reduced, tasks re-prioritised. Proper training should be provided to teachers who need it to perform particular tasks competently.. Effective policies should exist and be implemented to deal with issues such as disruptive student behaviour and violence

Control

Do individuals have sufficient say in the way their work is carried out?

Staff should have opportunities to plan their own work, and make decisions about how work should be completed and how to solve problems. A supportive environment is crucial.

Relationships

How are relationships between colleagues and between colleagues and supervisors? What about relationships between managers and senior managers? Is there evidence of any bullying or harassment?

Procedures should be available, such as disciplinary and grievance procedures, to deal with unacceptable behaviour. A culture should be developed where staff trust each other and recognise each other's contributions.

Change

Are teachers anxious about changes and feel they have little or no influence on these? Are they confused by workplace changes and what it means for them, their colleagues and/or their students?

Giving staff the chance to influence change makes them more involved. Genuine consultation before, during and after change is critical.

Role

Do people suffer from conflicting demands or have roles which are unclear or unreasonable?

Roles should be discussed and negotiated.

Support, training and individual factors

Is there adequate induction training for new teachers? Are teachers provided with professional development opportunities and training which meet their needs? Are teachers given support when issues beyond the workplace impact on their work? Is account taken of individual differences?

Teachers should be supported, given feedback and encouraged, even when things go wrong. Staff should have opportunities for meaningful involvement. Diversity should be valued.

Step 3

Recording the findings

Given the potential significance of work-related stress, it is advisable to document the findings of any risk assessment and management plan. This makes it easier to share the information and will assist with implementation, monitoring and review.

Step 4

Review the assessment at appropriate intervals.

The OHS Regulation 2000 "requires employers to review a risk assessment and any control measures flowing from it whenever it becomes apparent:

- a. the risk assessment are no longer valid,
- b. an injury or illness related to the hazard has occurred, or
- c. a significant change is proposed in the workplace, or in work practices or procedures related to the hazard."

What if the hazards giving rise to work-related stress are not dealt with adequately at the workplace?

Members should ensure that hazards which give rise to stress are reported to their principal or manager, and to their OHS Representatives/OHS Committee. Like any other OHS problem, if the employer does not deal adequately with it in the workplace, a WorkCover inspector can be called in to assess the matter. This may result in improvements notices being served on the employer issued and/or fines being imposed.

Other useful resources:

Your Teachers Federation organiser - 9217 2100

Federation leaflets: *Occupational Health and Safety*

Risk Management and Assessment