

STRESS AT WORK



What is stress?

"Stress arises when a person's capabilities are overwhelmed by demands"

Every day, individuals are confronted with a variety of demands or 'stressors'. These may arise from either personal sources e.g. ill-health, marital discord, family problems, financial uncertainty, or from institutional sources e.g. work overload or underload, role conflict, lack of control, physical environment. Stressors produce a biochemical response in the body which prepare the body to do what is essential during a stressful situation (in preparation for fight or flight).

The stress response is highly functional and can lead to elevated performance, through constructive and creative responses, increased and well directed energy, improved morale and motivation, and increased efficiency and effectiveness. Where an individual is exposed to demands that are too intense, frequent or chronic, the stress response can create unhealthy, destructive outcomes e.g. cardiovascular disease or depression.

There are wide individual differences in the way we each respond to stressors, and therefore the optimum stress load that maximizes performance varies by individual and by task. (The Yerkes-Dodson Law refers to the fact that performance increases with increasing stress loads up to an optimum point, and when the stress load becomes too great, performance decreases).

Some common signs of stress in individuals are:

- headaches, feeling tired, or having difficulty sleeping;
- worrying a lot, feeling anxious and tense for no explained reason;
- having difficulty concentrating, finding it hard to make decisions;
- lower level of confidence, making mistakes, forgetting things; or
- feeling impatient and irritable, drinking more alcohol, smoking more.

"Stress is inevitable: distress is not"

Stress may arise from both personal and organizational sources. Every employer clearly has a degree of control only over the latter, and these guidelines provide a framework for stress management in the workplace. Staff experiencing stress for personal reasons, however, may also benefit from the information outlined here.

Organisational stressors can be grouped into four categories.

- Physical - the physical environment in which one works eg temperature, office design, noise, lighting etc.
- Task - the nature of the work itself, the specific activities assigned to the employee e.g. reception, budget management.
- Role - the expectations that others have of one's role and its function within the organization e.g. conflicting or ambiguous expectations.
- Interpersonal - the social, personal and working relationships that exist.

RESPONSIBILITIES

What can the employer do?

- Provide training and information for managers and supervisors in effective management practices and styles, covering the nature of stress, and promoting responsible prevention and rehabilitation attitudes towards it.
- Make seminars available to staff to enable them to identify indicators of stress in themselves and others and to manage it effectively.
- Where appropriate, give consideration to adjusting the physical environment, the workload, task design, pacing of work and work schedules to alleviate significant stress/distress for an individual, in full consultation with the individual concerned.
- Some companies make available free specialist counselling for staff through the EAP programme regardless of whether the stress is work related or personal.
- Encourage positive attitudes to personal health through discounted access to the Recreational Centre and gym facilities.

- Provide up to date and accessible information on stress.

GUIDELINES FOR MANAGERS AND STAFF

PURPOSE

- To assist all staff to understand the causes of stress, and to work together in ways that encourage positive responses to work demands.
- To enable staff to identify indicators or symptoms of stress and to assess the extent to which they or other individuals are responding positively or negatively.
- To encourage managers and staff to seek information and early assistance in managing their own stress in a constructive way.
- To provide information and advice regarding the causes and impact of stress in the work situation, and offer some ways for managing stress positively.
- To have procedures for dealing with negative stress or distress effectively.

What can you do as a manager?

Prevention

- Allow staff to participate in collaborative decision-making.
- Allow staff to exercise as much autonomy and control as is practical.
- Provide training to enable work to be done most effectively.
- Provide accurate, fair, and prompt feedback on performance - praise staff for work well done.
- Consider job design, job descriptions and performance targets with the aim of reducing unnecessary stressors.
- Consult with employees to identify stressors in the workplace.
- Promote activities that make the workplace healthier, more stimulating, and more fun.
- Carefully match people to jobs by considering their individual skills, capabilities and needs.
- Attend training or information seminars in effective management practices.

Early Intervention

- Act immediately if a staff member seems overly stressed - do not ignore the signs.
- Explore whether their stress is in any way job related, discuss ways of alleviating it in the short term initially, and then focus on the sources of stress to consider long term solutions.

- Short term solutions could include sharing tasks amongst other staff, taking leave, or adopting flexible or reduced hours.
- Long term solutions should aim to eliminate or minimise the cause of stress where possible - the preventative strategies outlined above should be used.

"People are often able to flourish in stressful, demanding careers if they feel valuable and appreciated and that their work has significance. They may burn out when their work has no meaning and stress constantly outweighs supports and rewards."

What can you do as a colleague?

- Listen attentively with care and empathy if a colleague confides in you.
- Try to talk with your colleague if you believe he or she is very stressed; or
- Encourage your colleague to talk with his or her manager or a sympathetic friend.

What can you do for yourself?

- Manage your time so you work on the most important tasks.
- Take regular, necessary breaks during the day.
- Take your annual leave.
- Realistically prioritise your tasks.
- Discuss the issues that are causing you stress with your manager along with any suggested solutions.
- Seek advice and help from others - talk to partners, friends, colleagues, or your manager if possible.
- Learn a relaxation technique - and allow yourself time to use it.
- Exercise whether this is a simple walk or a gym exercise
- Consider professional counselling
- Cut down on stimulants (especially caffeine) and depressants (especially alcohol).
- Put some fun in your life - laughter is the best medicine!

PROCEDURES THAT EVERY COMPANY SHOULD HAVE

- Stress should be recognized as a potential psychological hazard and managed within the company's arrangements for health and safety. Consider stress where appropriate within hazard reviews and audits, and in particular during periods of restructuring, changing employment conditions, or conflict.

- Managers should be offered training to help them identify and control negative stress within their areas of responsibility. Such courses may include communication skills, conflict resolution, and/or managing change.
- Managers should regard institutional features that create stress as problems to be reported to senior managers in the same way as any other significant problem which cannot be resolved locally.
- Staff should be encouraged to attend stress awareness and management courses, or specific job related courses so they are better able to handle the pressures they encounter, even though their stress response may not yet be affecting their performance at work or impacting on their personal well-being.
- Where problems have developed some medical assistance may be required.
- The Harassment Policy should be used if harassment is the underlying source of the distress.

The information provided here is of a general nature. More specific assistance and advice can be obtained by e-mailing Integrity Rehab at request@integrityrehab.co.nz