

A guidebook for employers

Preventing and managing work-related stress

April 2016



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1. Overview of work-related stress

Introduction

The following information sheets provide guidance to employers about controlling work-related stress in relation to its employees. Employees may also find this information helpful in managing work-related stress.

Work-related stress

Stress is a widely used term and most people have some understanding of what it means. Work-related stress is recognised globally as a major challenge to employers and the impact it has on employees' health, safety and wellbeing is significant.

Work-related stress describes an employee's physical, mental and emotional response (stress response) when they, for example, feel that their work demands exceed their abilities and/or their resources (such as time, help or support) to do their work. It may also occur when employees feel they are not coping in workplace situations where it is important for them that they cope.

Stress responses may come from many work-related factors (and non-work related factors which are not the focus of this guidance). An employee's response to these factors may have a positive or negative impact on an employee's welfare. Often employees adjust to the impact of these factors and are able to continue to perform their normal work duties. However, some employees may experience work-related stress. While stress itself is not a disease, if it has a negative impact and becomes excessive and long-lasting, it can have harmful effects on employee health, safety and wellbeing.

Employer obligations

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (OHS Act) requires employers to, for example:

- provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health (including psychological health) for employees, so far as is reasonably practicable. This includes:
 - providing and maintaining safe systems of work, so far as is reasonably practicable
 - providing information, instruction, training and supervision as is necessary to enable employees to perform their work safely and without risks to health

- monitor workplace conditions under the employer's management and control, so far as is reasonably practicable
- monitor employee health, so far as is reasonably practicable
- consult with employees and health and safety representatives (HSRs), so far as is reasonably practicable, when doing certain things (eg identifying or assessing hazards or risks)
- attempt to resolve health and safety issues in accordance with any relevant agreed procedure or the relevant procedure prescribed by the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2007 (OHS Regulations).

In order to comply with these duties an employer should:

- identify and, if appropriate, assess any organisational factors that can cause or contribute to stress
- implement risk control measures to control the risk
- following a report/injury/incident involving stress, investigate whether organisational factors contributed
- review and revise risk control measures.

For more information, please refer to Chapter 2.

Using this guidance material

Note that 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.

For the purpose of this guidance, the term 'colleague' refers to employees with whom a specific employee works with within a workplace.

Whether particular risk control measures are reasonably practicable depends on the specific workplace circumstances. For more information on determining what is 'reasonably practicable' refer to WorkSafe's position on *How WorkSafe applies the law in relation to reasonably practicable*, at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

Overview of work-related stress

Factors contributing to work-related stress

Factors that can influence work-related stress can be classified as:

- organisational factors
- environmental factors
- individual factors.

Understanding what organisational, environmental and individual factors may lead to a stress response is crucial in controlling the impacts of work-related stress. These factors are sometimes collectively referred to as 'psychosocial factors'.

Organisational factors

This guidance largely focuses on organisational factors.

There are a number of organisational factors employees can be exposed to that may lead to them experiencing work-related stress and sustaining psychological and/or physical injury or illness (see Figure 1 on page 3 – *How organisational factors can lead to psychological and/or physical injury or illness*).

Organisational factors discussed in this guidebook are:

- work demands
- low levels of control over work
- poor levels of support by supervisors and colleagues
- lack of role clarity and role conflict
- poorly managed relationships
- poorly managed change
- incivility.

Further detail about these organisational factors is provided in Chapters 5 - 11.

Note that senior leader and management commitment to health and safety is critical. Senior leaders and managers should identify whether there are any organisational factors at their workplace that may contribute to work-related stress and need to be controlled.

Further details about identifying hazards and controlling risks associated with work-related stress are provided in Chapter 2.

Environmental factors

Environmental factors in the workplace can impact an employee's comfort and performance at work, and may lead to a stress response.

Types of environmental factors include:

- noise
- temperature and humidity
- lighting
- vibration
- air quality
- cramped workspace
- unguarded plant and equipment
- manual handling.

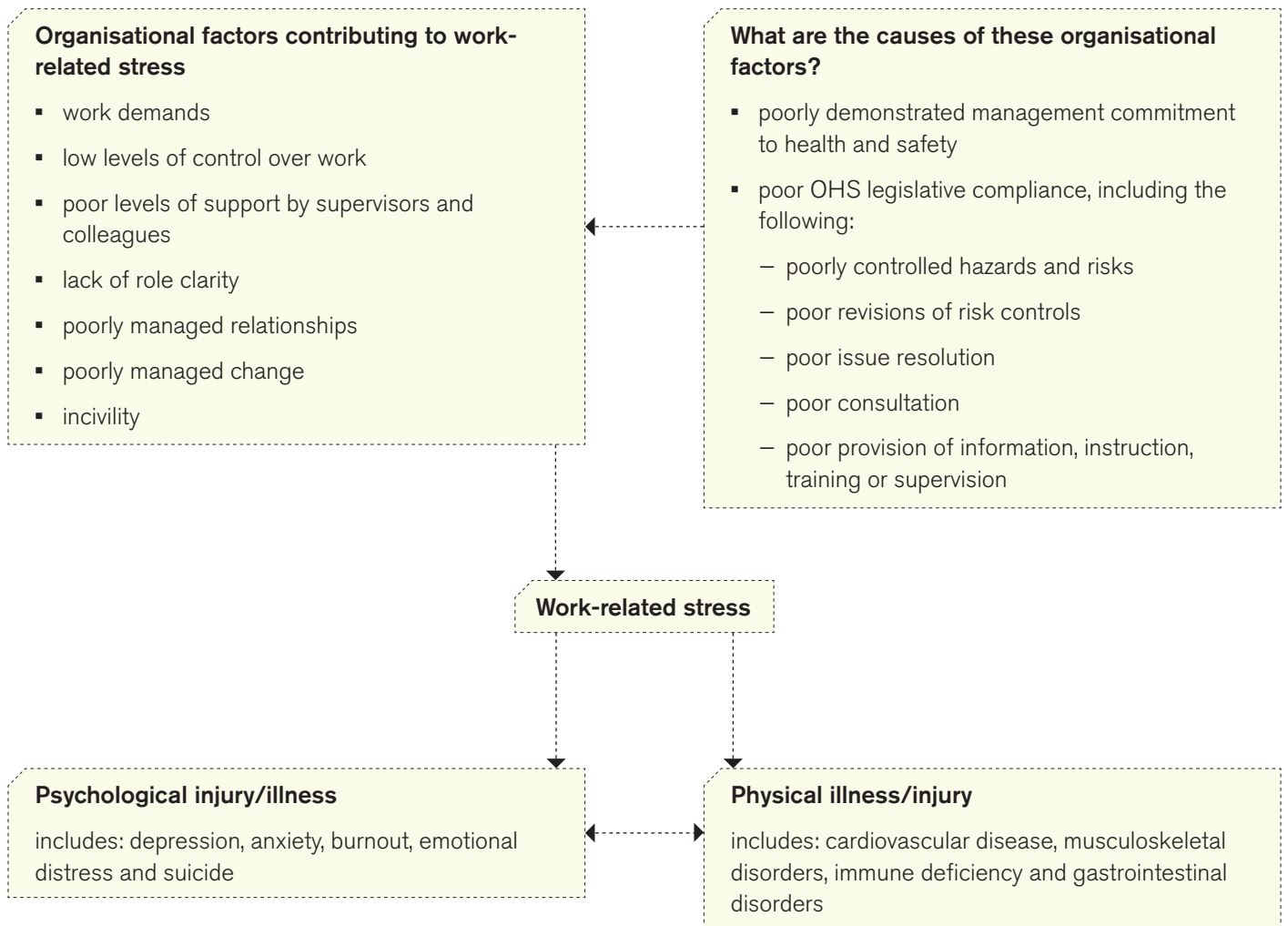
Information about environmental factors within the control of the employer is available in other WorkSafe guidance. For further information about identifying environmental factors, and assessing and controlling the resulting risks which may contribute to work-related stress go to [worksafe.vic.gov.au](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au).

Individual factors

While individual factors generally interact with organisational and environmental factors, they are not within the direct control of the employer and are not the focus of this guidance.

Overview of work-related stress

Figure 1: How organisational factors can lead to psychological and/or physical injury or illness



Overview of work-related stress

Effects of exposure to work-related stress factors

Short-term or infrequent exposure to low-level work-related stress factors is not likely to lead to harm and, if well managed by employers, may result in improved performance. When stressful situations go unresolved, the body is kept in a constant state of stimulation, which can result in harm to health, safety and wellbeing.

Possible effects on organisational performance

Increased work-related stress levels of employees can lead to diminished organisational performance, for example:

- reduced productivity and efficiency
- decline in job satisfaction, morale and team cohesion
- increased absenteeism
- increased staff turnover
- increase in accidents and injuries
- increased conflict
- decline in the quality of relationships
- reduced client satisfaction
- increased health care expenditure and employees' compensation claims.

Possible effects on employee health, safety and welfare

Examples of harmful effects to health and welfare include:

- **Physical:** headaches, indigestion, tiredness, slow reactions, shortness of breath.
- **Mental:** difficulty in decision-making, forgetfulness.
- **Emotional:** irritability, excess worrying, feeling of worthlessness, anxiety, defensiveness, anger, mood swings.
- **Behavioural:** diminished performance, withdrawal behaviours, impulsive behaviour, increase in alcohol and nicotine consumption.

Common longer-term health issues linked to stress include cardiovascular disease (CVD), immune deficiency disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, psychiatric/psychological illness (PPI) and musculoskeletal disorders.

2. A risk management approach to work-related stress

Introduction

Under the OHS Act an employer has a **general duty** to provide and maintain a working environment for employees that is safe and without risks to health (including psychological health), so far as reasonably practicable.

For more information on determining what is 'reasonably practicable' refer to WorkSafe's position on *How WorkSafe applies the law in relation to reasonably practicable*, at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

The risk management process

This information sheet outlines a **risk management process** to help employers comply with their general duty. Employers should apply the risk management process to control, as far as reasonably practicable, exposure to factors which may contribute to work-related stress.

The risk management process involves the following steps:

Risk management process	Application of work-related stress
1. Identifying hazards	Identifying the existence of factors associated with work-related stress (eg job demands).
2. Assessing, where necessary, associated risks	Assessing the likelihood/consequence of injury/illness resulting from work-related stress.
3. Controlling risks	Implementing risk control measures to eliminate work-related stress risk so far as is reasonably practicable. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate the risk of work-related stress, reduce that risk so far as is reasonably practicable.
4. Reviewing and revising risk control measures	Reviewing and revising risk control measures to ensure they address the organisational factors that have contributed or may contribute to work-related stress.

For further information on the risk management process see WorkSafe's position on *How WorkSafe applies the law in relation to identifying and understanding hazards and risks*, available at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

The risk management process should be implemented proactively by employers, rather than reactively once an employee has experienced a stress response. Employers should be aware that risks to health and safety may build up over time or may occur in a single incident. Adopting a reactive approach may not only be costly but may lead to an employer contravening its general duty (see above).

The risk management process can also be summarised in Figure 2:

Figure 2: The four-step risk management process



A risk management approach to work-related stress

Step 1: Identify the hazards

The first step in the risk management process is to identify factors associated with work-related stress. The source of work-related stress can be determined by evaluating: productivity levels, leadership capability, rates of absenteeism, separation rates/turnover, exit interviews, staff engagement/morale, customer feedback, peak/seasonal demands, incident reports and data trends. Audit tools and surveys may also assist in identifying relevant organisational factors.

Organisational factors include:

- work demands (emotional, mental, physical)
- low levels of control over work
- poor levels of support by supervisors and colleagues
- lack of role clarity and role conflict
- poorly managed relationships
- poorly managed change
- incivility.

In general, an employer's compliance with the OHS Act and Regulations may mean that the employer is already addressing the organisational factors contributing to work-related stress, without expressly referring to them.

More information about the factors contributing to work-related stress can be gained by reviewing employee complaints and seeking feedback from employees (including having one-on-one discussions and/or through the use of focus groups).

Focus groups are small groups (typically 6-10 people) from across the organisation. The purpose of a focus group is to provide a forum for ascertaining the risk of exposure to work-related stress factors. This is done by asking the group to consider stress factors and how they may or may not apply to their workplace.

Worker surveys can be an important tool in identifying which work-related stress factors are present in the workplace, evaluating the degree to which they are affecting employees and pinpointing where they are originating. When undertaking an employee survey, consider the size of the group to be surveyed, how participants are to be selected and how survey results will be fed back to staff. Anonymity should be guaranteed throughout the entire process.

The above organisational factors are discussed in more detail in **Chapters 5 - 11**.

Step 2 - Assessing the risks

A formal risk assessment is unnecessary if knowledge and understanding about the risk of work-related stress and how to control it, already exist. However, if employers are unsure how to control the risk, a risk assessment can be helpful. As many factors can impact on work-related stress, a risk assessment may be needed in most cases.

A risk assessment involves examining the factor(s) identified as being associated with work-related stress to assess whether they give rise to a risk to the health and safety of employees.

A risk assessment may take into account:

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

Step 3: Control risks

After determining which factor(s) associated with work-related stress pose risk to employee health and safety, appropriate risk control measures should be selected and implemented in order to control the risk, so far as is reasonably practicable.

This guidance material provides examples of common and practical solutions/interventions which can be used by an employer to control risk associated with work-related stress.

Risk control measures to control work-related stress should target organisational and environmental factors specific to the workplace and the specific circumstances of individuals. Interventions (risk control measures) to control work-related stress may be ineffective if not targeted at the appropriate level(s).

Examples of risk control measures that can be put in place to manage the risk of employee work-related stress may include:

- developing supervisor/managerial skills through coaching, mentoring and/or training to improve support provided to employees
- planning workloads to address job demands and level of control

A risk management approach to work-related stress

- setting clear performance goals/accountability to ensure role clarity
- reassessing job descriptions to ensure role clarity
- setting new or adjusting current HR procedures to ensure role clarity and improved support
- providing assistance (eg an employee assistance program) to increase level of job support
- communicating with employees regarding availability of assistance to address job demands and levels of control
- checking employee understanding and implementation of changes as part of change management
- promoting effective early intervention to improve support provided to employees and quality of relationships.

The commitment of senior management, and consultation with employees and HSRs (if any) in relation to stress prevention, is critical to the success of implementing any such risk control measures.

Step 4: Review and revision of risk control measures

The last step of the risk management process is to review and, if necessary, revise the risk control measures that have been implemented to ensure they are effective and working as planned. When reviewing the effectiveness of risk control measures, it is important to determine whether the chosen controls are achieving their purpose of managing work-related stress or whether they need some modification. This can be achieved through consultation and staff evaluations or surveys about the effectiveness of stress prevention in the workplace.

Risk management for work-related stress is not a one-off exercise, but something that should be undertaken continually. The dynamics and complexity of workplaces can mean that changes such as a new supervisor, new employees or new processes or procedures can have significant, unexpected or unplanned adverse effects on the stress levels of employees. Any new or potential factors associated with work-related stress should be controlled.

Consultation

Employers must, so far as is reasonably practicable, consult with employees and HSRs (if any), on certain health and safety matters. Consultation must occur, for example, when identifying or assessing hazards or risks and when making decisions about measures to be taken to control risk to health or safety (which would include work-related stress).

For further information on consultation see *A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation*, at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

Provision of information, instruction, training and/or supervision

Employers must provide information, instruction, training and/or supervision to employees as is necessary to enable them to perform their work safely and without risks to health.

This may include:

- providing information about how employees can perform their roles safely (eg safe systems of work)
- ensuring that they have the appropriate competency through training to undertake tasks safely
- supervising employees to ensure that they *apply* safe systems of work and follow established work procedures.

Information should be provided to employees during their initial induction and at regular refresher training. Ways of providing information and instruction may include presentations, procedure manuals and demonstrations of work processes. Work-related stress may be controlled if employees are provided with the necessary training, support and role clarity to enable them to do their job.

Employers should also provide information, instruction and training:

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

3. Implementing a work-related stress risk management process

This chapter is intended for use by larger organisations, however, it could be useful for any workplace implementing a work-related stress management process.

Introduction

Managing risks associated with work-related stress can be undertaken as part of an organisational improvement strategy.

The success of this type of intervention can be attributed to:

- visible organisational and management commitment to dealing with work-related stress
- employee participation in the risk management process involving work-related stress
- organisational communication and consultation regarding the risk management process.

Ensuring implementation success

Organisational commitment

Senior management commitment is critical to the success of any significant organisational initiative. Risk management programs require resources (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/or behaviour.

Participation, communication and consultation

The OHS Act promotes co-operative and consultative relationships between workplace parties (eg between employers, employees and HSRs, if any) in order to control workplace risks to health and safety. When managing the risk of work-related stress, input from employees to assist in identifying and addressing stress factors is crucial.

Consulting with employees at each stage of the risk management process may assist in achieving 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 the factors that can increase the risk of work-related stress
- seeking assistance from employees may encourage them to accept and comply with the solutions (ie risk control measures) that are to be put in place

- employees can experience stress if they perceive that they have little control over their work and their work environment, and/or feel unsupported in their workplace. Communicating with them and seeking their participation in the risk management process may go some way towards alleviating this perception. The consultation process itself is likely to become part of the solution.

For further information on consultation see *A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation*, at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

Facilitating participation and consultation

The OHS Act requires employers to consult with employees and HSRs (if any) in certain circumstances.

In addition to appointing HSRs and setting up committees, a specific communication and project management structure could be set up to oversee and implement the risk management process. This structure might include a senior steering committee and/or a working group.

Senior steering committee

A senior steering committee may include a group of individuals in senior management positions and strategic areas of the organisation, such as human resources, workplace health and safety, and organisational communications, who are responsible for general operating policy, procedures and related matters affecting the organisation as a whole. A steering committee should include a 'project champion', who heads the committee and gives the project momentum. A project champion should be a senior decision maker in the workplace.

The purpose of a senior steering committee is to:

- provide overall guidance and direction for a project and to engage with senior management about the project
- provide tangible evidence of management support.

Employers may establish a steering committee to oversee the stress risk management process and to ensure that recommendations for change are implemented genuinely and strategically.

Implementing a work-related stress risk management process

Working group

A working group includes employees who more actively facilitate a process at an operational level. Working groups are an effective way of carrying out potentially large-scale strategic processes like work-related stress risk management. They should encourage full and active participation by employees in the risk management process.

The working group can:

- encourage employee participation
- identify and discuss perceptions and perspectives on work practices
- coordinate focus group discussions or the distribution of surveys
- review the results of surveys and other information obtained to respond and develop appropriate processes and procedures
- analyse and prioritise areas where action is needed
- develop an action plan to address the identified causes of work-related stress using a collaborative approach involving employees and managers
- report to the senior steering committee.

Involving employees in risk assessment

Employers must consult with employees on a range of matters, including when assessing hazards or risks to health or safety and when making decisions about the measures to be taken to control these risks. This may involve, for example, seeking employee input into the design, implementation and evaluation of any control measures for managing risks associated with work-related stress.

Feedback from consultations may initially be considered by the project champion and steering committee or working group, to determine how the results could be best positioned and presented to the organisation as a whole. Outcomes should be communicated in a timely and consultative manner to ensure employee commitment to any interventions (risk control measures).

Where feedback is not routinely provided on actions being taken as part of the risk management process, it can adversely affect the employee's sense of support and control, as the absence of information may be seen as lack of action.

4. Organisational factors contributing to work-related stress

Introduction

Organisational factors can contribute to work-related stress, which in turn may cause harm to the health, safety and wellbeing of employees.

The following seven factors may contribute to work-related stress and if allowed to go on for extended periods may be harmful to psychological and physical health. These factors are interrelated and there is a greater risk of work-related stress when a number of these factors act in combination, so they should not be considered in isolation.

The organisational factors themselves do not necessarily reveal the root causes of work-related stress which is likely to be specific to the workplace, organisation or individual. Senior management should identify what organisational factors are impacting on employees' health and well-being and take appropriate action to control the impact of such factors.

Organisational factors

1. Work demands

Work-related stress may be experienced when work demands and pressures do not match an employee's knowledge, abilities or resources, which can challenge their ability to cope.

Some common work demands include:

- time pressure including inadequate time and resources to complete jobs satisfactorily, working too hard or too fast to meet difficult targets
- mentally demanding tasks such as work that requires high-level decision making or prolonged periods of concentration
- physically demanding work that requires strenuous or repetitive work
- work that is monotonous and unchallenging or does not utilise an employee's range of skills or previous training
- emotionally demanding tasks, including work that is emotionally disturbing or requires high emotional involvement
- working long hours or overtime, working through breaks or taking work home

- shift rosters that are unpredictable and/or affect the amount and quality of sleep, or make it difficult to balance work and family life.

For further information on work demands, see Chapter 5 – *Work demands* (see page 12).

2. Levels of control over work

'Level of control' refers to how much influence a person has in how they meet work demands and how they perform their work in general (also known as autonomy). Unnecessary levels of supervision and surveillance, excessive responsibility with little authority or decision making capability, and little or no say in how work is done, can all lead to a stress response.

Work should be meaningful, varied and allow for an appropriate degree of autonomy. Everyone in an organisation (not just those in senior positions) should feel they have at least some degree of input into their work. Ensuring communication and consultation strategies are appropriately utilised by supervisors and within teams can help.

For further information on levels of control see Chapter 6 – *Level of control* (see page 14).

3. Levels of support by supervisors and colleagues

Support provided by employers and colleagues can help reduce the stress responses employees might otherwise experience where their jobs are demanding and/or they feel that they are not in control.

Support covers things like:

- having clear management structures and reporting lines
- how feedback is provided by supervisors
- willingness of supervisors and colleagues to discuss work problems
- ability to raise work problems and how they are then addressed
- willingness of colleagues to help out when things are tough
- forming positive relationships with supervisors and colleagues.

If employees are supported (eg by being provided with information on or practical assistance for performing tasks), it can assist in controlling work-related stress.

Organisational factors contributing to work-related stress

Assistance such as talking over a problem with an employee, providing positive feedback/encouragement or informally congratulating colleagues or direct reports for a job well done can also help.

For further information on levels of support from supervisors and colleagues, see Chapter 7 – *Level of support from supervisors and colleagues* (see page 16).

4. Role clarity and role conflict

Lack of role clarity arises when work objectives, key accountabilities, colleague expectations and the overall scope and responsibilities of an employee's job are not clear. A wide range of situations can create confusion - for example, beginning a new job or starting in a new organisation, a transfer, a new supervisor or manager or a change in the structure of a work unit or organisation.

Role conflict may occur when an employee is required to perform a task within a role that conflicts with their values or expectations (eg the employee expects transparency and honesty and this does not exist in the workplace or when they are torn between two or more job demands that cannot be realistically achieved at the same time). The greater the role conflict, the higher the likelihood of an employee experiencing work-related stress.

The risk of work-related stress can be controlled by ensuring employees understand their role within the organisation and that any expectations placed on them do not cause conflict.

For further information on role clarity and role conflict, see Chapter 8 – Role clarity and role conflict (see page 18).

5. Managing relationships

Colleagues can be important sources of support but they can also be potential sources of stress. Relationships with supervisors, colleagues and subordinates can positively or negatively affect the way an employee feels. Conflict may arise from time to time wherever people work together, and in some cases can provide a positive environment for innovation and growth. Conflict becomes a factor contributing to work-related stress where it remains unresolved or becomes particularly intense. This may include prolonged friction and anger between colleagues, strained relationships or bullying. It is important for the employer to ensure that individuals and/or management take proactive steps to resolve conflict early.

For further information on managing relationships, see Chapter 9 – Managing relationships (see page 20).

6. Managing change

This factor refers to how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation. Change can be related to alterations in individual work conditions (eg a change of role or shift roster or the introduction of new technology), or can be related to work-team or organisational level changes (such as mergers, acquisitions, restructures or downsizing). Poor management of this process can lead to employees feeling anxious and uncertain about aspects of their work or employment status.

For further information on managing change, see Chapter 10 – Managing change (see page 22).

7. Civility in the workplace

Civility is treating others with consideration and respect. It is caring for your own identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process.

Incivility in the workplace involves low-intensity, inappropriate behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the recipient, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Examples of incivility include rudeness, sarcasm, mocking, disparaging remarks and the belittling or excluding of others and can be verbal or in writing (eg emails).

The causes of incivility are wide and varied and can overlap with other causes of work-related stress and bullying. The cause(s) of any incivility in the working environment should be identified and risk controls put in place to reduce any impact on employees' health and safety.

For further information on managing incivility in the workplace, see Chapter 11 – Civility in the workplace (see page 24).

5. Work demands

Introduction

Work demands are one of the most common sources of work-related stress. While employees may need challenging tasks to maintain their interest and motivation and to develop new skills, it is important that demands do not exceed their ability to cope.

Reducing the impact of work demands

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (risk control measures) will be used in the workplace to control work demands that may lead to work-related stress. Risk control measures for work demands should focus on job design in the context of the work environment and working conditions. Risk control measures should address time pressure, long or irregular working hours, mentally, physically and/or emotionally demanding work.

Time pressure

When there is a demanding workload employers should:

- ensure employees have adequate time to complete their tasks and allow them to have input when determining the timing and pace of their work
- consult with employees when determining performance targets
- set realistic and achievable targets, and take into account existing workloads when setting targets (team-based targets are an effective measure for improving overall performance against the organisational goals and building effective teams)
- regularly review workloads to ensure employees have sufficient resources (in terms of time, administrative support or equipment) to cope (workloads can be reviewed during team meetings, through an informal check-in with the supervisor or by undertaking worksite assessments)
- monitor workloads during periods of peak demand (eg Christmas, school holidays or seasonal peaks) and provide additional support where required
- assist employees in the development of 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 they are met

- encourage employees to speak up at an early stage if they feel their task demands are excessive and to seek guidance from management about priorities if there are insufficient resources to effectively complete the tasks.

It is important employees are competent at their job and that their work is rewarding. When employees are over-qualified for a role or particular task they may feel frustrated and unmotivated if they are not being challenged in their work. When employees are under-qualified they may become overwhelmed by the complexity of the work and may find it difficult to cope.

The following risk control measures should be considered:

- design jobs within employees' capabilities
- ensure employees are competent and comfortable in undertaking 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-utilise 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
- avoid repetitive and monotonous work by rotating tasks.

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

- ensure sufficient relief staff are present to cover for employees who are on annual or sick leave
- plan ahead for any overtime hours required, so that 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 hours to be worked
- ensure adequate work breaks and, where practicable, allow some 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

Work demands

- discourage employees from regularly working long hours, taking work home or working through breaks (eg reduce scheduling of shift work in excess of 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 shift rosters are agreed to by employees and provide communication and consultation 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 that employees understand the need to get sufficient sleep
- minimise the amount of safety critical tasks undertaken during the early hours of the morning (3am to 5am).

This could involve implementing a Fatigue Management Policy. For further information about managing fatigue in the workplace, see *Fatigue – Prevention in the workplace*, at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

Mental demands

There are a number of ways to manage work that requires lengthy periods of concentration:

- rotate tasks and schedules so that employees are not always assigned jobs that require a high level of decision making or prolonged periods of concentration
- give employees some control over the way they do their work including work pace and order of tasks (see Chapter 6 – *Level of control* (see page 14)
- allow sufficient time for breaks.

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

- provide sufficient information to enable employees to perform tasks competently, including adequate support and resources for decision-making
- provide additional practical assistance when employees are doing challenging tasks (eg second person to assist)
- allow employees sufficient time to perform tasks and provide well maintained suitable equipment
- evaluate and review employees' competency and capability and provide additional training where needed

- have systems in place to support employees when they are required to make difficult decisions or when challenging situations may arise following decisions they have made (eg child safety employees).

Physical demands

For work that is physically demanding employers should:

- make the physical environment as comfortable as possible and designed specifically for the tasks being undertaken (eg make changes to the work station, tools or equipment, or the way a job is done where needed)
- 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 undertaking the required tasks.

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 (eg customer service, counselling).

For work that is emotionally demanding employers should:

- allow employees greater control over their jobs, where possible (eg allow greater flexibility over work rosters, and how they complete their work)
- encourage regular breaks or 'time out' from emotionally demanding work
- provide training on how to diffuse difficult or confronting situations (eg conflict management skills) and ensure support is available
- ensure psychological/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 are required to interact with clients (eg patients, children) and who undertake tasks that require them to regulate their own emotions or display emotions that are contrary to their true feelings
- ensure the emotional demands of a role are captured in a position description and that applicants are informed at the pre-selection stage (eg at interview) of the emotionally demanding nature of the role.

Work demands

In general, the key provisions of Victoria's health and safety laws in relation to work demands are:

- provision and maintenance of a safe working environment
 - provision and maintenance of safe systems of work
- consultation with employees and HSRs
- monitoring workplace conditions
- resolution of health and safety issues
- OHS Regulations 2007 (Victoria) - Manual Handling Chapter.

Employers should also review and revise risk control measures to ensure they are effective in controlling the risk.

6. Level of control

Introduction

The level of control employees have in meeting work demands and the way they perform their work in general can determine how they react to work-related stress factors. Low levels of job control, where there is high work demand and low support from supervisors or colleagues, can increase the likelihood of employees having a stress response.

Although some jobs may be inherently low in control (eg call centres), it is possible for all organisations to enhance employees' control over their work.

Ensuring appropriate levels of control are maintained

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (risk control measures) will be used in the workplace to address low levels of employee job control that may lead to work-related stress.

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, fostering consultation and communication, and appropriate supervision.

Choice/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 own work is organised rather than only imposing direction
- 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.

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 a number of ways an organisation can encourage a participative approach to management and ensure everyone contributes to decision-making. This includes:

- holding 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 determining 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 perceive that they have little control over their work and their work environment, and/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 alleviate this perception.

Ways this can be achieved include:

- 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 impacting on their work
- developing a system that enables employees to have input into broader organisational issues (eg a suggestion scheme/box)
- knowing when it is appropriate to consult with employees and ensure the outcomes of a consultation are communicated.

For further information on consultation, see *A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation*, at [worksafe.vic.gov.au](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au).

Level of control

For more information on the importance of participation, communication and consultation, see Chapter 3 – Implementing a work-related stress risk management process (see page 8).

Appropriate supervision

How employees are managed and supervised may have an impact on whether an employee experiences work-related stress.

Employers should:

- ensure managers are competent supervisors
- consult with employees when developing performance monitoring systems and procedures for how employees will be reviewed and monitored
- develop team-based targets which assist in building effective teams and allow team performance to be measured against the organisational goals which show contribution by the team and individuals
- when assigning work, negotiate objective and reasonable standards to increase employees' ownership and control over their work and ensure work is allocated equitably
- avoid asking employees to regularly stay after hours without prior discussion and agreement
- develop clear policies on the development, implementation and purpose of electronic performance monitoring (EPM) in consultation with employees and ensure all employees are aware of these policies.

EPM is a system to measure outputs at either an individual or group level (eg calls per hour).

- avoid unnecessary monitoring of employees and/or excessive or punitive use of EPM data in the performance review processes
- train supervisors in the objective, appropriate and ethical use of EPM.

In general, the key provisions of Victoria's health and safety laws in relation to levels of control are:

- provision and maintenance of a safe working environment
 - provision and maintenance of safe systems of work
 - provision of information, instruction, training and supervision
- consultation with employees and HSRs
- resolution of health and safety issues.

Employers should also review and revise risk control measures to ensure they are effective in controlling the risk.

7. Level of support from supervisors and colleagues

Introduction

Support provided by supervisors and colleagues can help reduce the stress responses people might otherwise experience when their jobs are demanding and they feel they do not have control over those demands.

Providing appropriate levels of support

Employers should make decisions about which practical solutions (risk control measures) will be used in the workplace to control low levels of support that may lead to work-related stress.

This will help employers meet their obligation to ensure that they provide a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Risk control measures should focus on job design, work environment and working conditions. For levels of support, risk control measures could, for example, include practical assistance, the provision of information, emotional support and constructive feedback, if reasonably practicable in the circumstances.

Organisational structures

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

- ensuring management structures across the organisation and reporting lines within work teams are clear (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 proper induction to the organisation and work unit
- 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 (eg working from home or flexible working hours).

Practical support

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

- assisting with work demands (eg helping the employee in completing a task they find challenging)
- setting clear work goals, and providing information on processes and procedures to be followed
- providing development opportunities
- conducting performance reviews which include constructive feedback
- providing assistance when employees are undertaking challenging tasks, such as new duties or roles and mentally, emotionally and/or physically demanding tasks
- 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 the impact. Ways this can be achieved include:

- holding regular team meetings to discuss pressures and challenges within the work unit
- assisting employees to come up with and/or work through practical solutions (risk control measures) for any task-related issues that arise
- providing sufficient information to enable employees to perform tasks competently, particularly when employees are taking on new work.

Training and development

It is important employees feel confident and capable of undertaking assigned tasks. Ways to achieve this include ensuring:

- employees receive suitable training for them to be competent in their roles. Training can be both task-specific and more general (eg training in ethics and behavioural expectations (code of conduct), mental health and cultural awareness)
- 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

Level of support from supervisors and colleagues

- all employees, contractors and labour hire employees are aware of the policies concerning acceptable behaviour in the workplace
- employees are provided with managerial responsibilities (when appropriate) to encourage a wider understanding of their tasks. This 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.

Constructive feedback

The way feedback is provided, and how often it is provided, can have an impact on employees' stress response. Employers should ensure that managers and supervisors:

- provide regular feedback on task performance, but not too regularly as to undermine an employee's autonomy
- recognise employees/team members (either formally or informally) when tasks have been done 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 include opportunities for skill development (it is important that annual performance tools are not seen as a disciplinary measure).

Emotional support

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

Ways in which an employer can ensure that appropriate emotional support is provided to employees include:

- supporting open communication
- encouraging employees to share their concerns about

work-related stress factors at an early stage (employees should feel comfortable with discussing any issues that may arise)

- being aware of non-work-related stress factors that might be present in employees' lives and allow flexible work arrangements where practicable, if appropriate and if the employee is open to having such conversations
- promoting a team culture where employees assist each other and provide support when required
- allowing time to talk through problems with employees and promoting an 'open door' policy
- ensuring employees who are experiencing problems are managed sensitively
- being aware if a team member is behaving out of character and taking appropriate action
- improving team cohesion by holding formal and informal team-building activities
- establishing a colleague support system and a mentoring/buddy program for new starters.

In general, the key provisions of Victoria's health and safety laws in relation to the level of support from supervisors and colleagues are:

- provision and maintenance of a safe working environment
 - provision and maintenance of safe systems of work
 - provision of information, instruction, training and supervision
- consultation with employees and HSRs
- resolution of health and safety issues.

Employers should also review and revise risk control measures to ensure they are effective in controlling the risk.

8. Role clarity and role conflict

Introduction

Poorly defined or conflicting roles in organisations can contribute to work-related stress for employees. Poor role clarity arises from a lack of clarity in employees' performance objectives, key accountabilities, their colleagues' expectations of them and/or the overall scope or responsibilities of their job. An example is where multiple employees have partially overlapping role requirements in their job descriptions or where lack of clear accountabilities results in employees being torn between incompatible job demands.

Role conflict may also occur when an employee is required to perform a task within their own role that conflicts with their values or expectations (eg the employee expects transparency and honesty and this does not exist in the workplace).

The greater the role conflict of an employee with the roles of others, and the greater the conflict between the employee's actual role and their values or expectations, the higher the likelihood of an employee experiencing work-related stress.

Improving role clarity and reducing role conflict

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (risk control measures) will be used in the workplace to control poor role clarity and role conflict, that may lead to work-related stress.

Risk control measures should focus on job design, including clarity of performance objectives and key role accountabilities. By reducing the risk to psychological health, this may help the employer to meet their obligation to ensure that they provide a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, so far as is reasonably practicable.

Risk control measures should ensure that employees have an understanding of their role within the work group and the organisation relative to their colleagues and other work groups, and what to do when expectations placed on different employees are in conflict or are overlapping.

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.

For further information on how to manage task and/or relationship conflict see Chapter 9 - *Managing relationships* (see page 20).

The OHS Act provides that the employer must ensure all employees receive suitable information, instruction, supervision and training for them to be able to perform their work safely and without risks to health. This may have the effect of improving role clarity.

Additional specific examples of actions that an employer may take that may improve role clarity include:

- providing all employees with a corporate induction
- ensuring employees are aware of their role within their immediate work team or unit, program area and the broader organisation
- developing personal work plans that clearly define task objectives and expected outputs
- encouraging feedback on changes impacting their 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 and/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 key duties expected of them
- 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

Role clarity and role conflict

- checking with employees to ensure they understand any additional responsibilities or duties that are 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 may occur when employees are given two different and incompatible tasks at the same time, or their role overlaps with another employee or work group.

Role conflict can be managed by:

- ensuring the different requirements of various tasks are compatible
- having clear reporting lines so that employees know who they are directly accountable to
- ensuring employees are only accountable to one immediate supervisor
- ensuring systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities (eg holding regular team meetings to enable employees to discuss any potential role conflict)
- assigning roles to employees that do not conflict with their personal values.

In general, the key provisions of Victoria's health and safety laws in relation to role clarity and role conflict are:

- provision and maintenance of a safe working environment
 - provision and maintenance of safe systems of work
 - provision of information, instruction, training and supervision
- consultation with employees and HSRs
- resolution of health and safety issues.

Employers should also review and revise risk control measures to ensure they are effective in controlling the risk.

9. Managing relationships

Introduction

An employer should consider interactions between employees within their workplace, and implement appropriate risk controls if a risk to health and safety is identified.

Colleagues can be important sources of support, but interactions can also prompt a stress response. Relationships with managers, colleagues and subordinates can positively or negatively affect the way an employee feels. Wherever groups of people work together, it's 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 should take proactive steps towards preventing or reducing conflict as early as possible.

Reducing task and relationship conflict and encouraging team work

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (risk control measures) will be used in the workplace to manage relationship conflict in the workplace that may lead to work-related stress.

This will help the employer to meet their obligation to ensure that they 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 may arise over resources, procedures and policies or disagreements about facts. Modest levels of task conflict can encourage creative thinking and problem solving. High levels of conflict may limit employees' ability to focus on the task at hand.

Task conflict can be managed by ensuring there is role clarity and appropriate communication.

Role clarity

Ways in which role clarity can be achieved include:

- ensuring systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any conflicts they have within their role and responsibilities (eg holding regular team meetings to enable employees to discuss any potential task conflict)
- ensuring work duplication or unintentional role duty changes resulting in conflict are addressed.

For more information on role clarity, see Chapter 8 – *Role clarity and role conflict* (page 18).

Communication

Ways in which task conflict may be reduced through appropriate communication include:

- encouraging employees to have input into procedures and tasks
- involving employees in the decisions that may impact on their tasks, when possible
- holding regular team meetings to discuss the pressures and challenges within the work unit
- encouraging employees to come up with and work through practical solutions (risk control measures) for any task-related issues
- providing regular feedback on task performance
- recognising employees whenever tasks have been done well and being specific about what was done well
- providing employees 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 ability to negotiate solutions to resolve conflict.

Relationship conflict

Relationship conflict amongst employees may be harmful to both individuals and the organisation. Relationship conflict can present itself in various ways, including animosity, social conflict and abusive supervisory styles.

Managing relationships

Ways to manage relationship conflict include:

- ensuring that a code of conduct is in place and that code of conduct standards are enforced to demonstrate that there are consequences for poor behaviour
- training/inducting employees so that they are aware of appropriate work 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
- encouraging employees to share their concerns about work-related conflict at an early stage by supporting open communication
- developing and implementing formal and informal confidential complaint handling processes to enable the reporting of inappropriate behaviour.

The information contained in Chapter 11 – *Civility in the workplace* (see page 24) may also be useful.

Team work

Ways to promote productive and cohesive team work include:

- promoting a team culture where employees assist each other and provide support when required
- recognising that differences in employees' ideas and opinions leads to positive and creative outcomes
- 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 may negatively affect team communication (eg isolated work groups)
- rewarding the performance of a group as a whole rather than individuals - this may enhance teamwork and avoid potential conflict between employees
- reinforcing teamwork through rewards (eg a team dinner or a team trip)
- ensuring rewards are equitable and accessible to all team members who contribute to a project or task.

Bullying

Prolonged and unresolved relationship conflict may result in workplace bullying.

For guidance on how to manage risks to health associated with workplace bullying see *Your guide to bullying – Prevention and response*, available at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

In general, the key provisions of Victoria's Health and Safety laws in relation to managing relationships are:

- provision and maintenance of a safe working environment
 - provision of information, instruction, training and supervision
- consultation with employees and HSRs
- resolution of health and safety issues.

10. Managing change

Introduction

Change is inevitable within organisations and workplaces. In most cases, it is essential for future growth. Poor management of the change process can lead to employees feeling anxious and uncertain about aspects of their work or employment status.

Ensuring change is managed effectively

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (risk control measures) will be used in the workplace to control change management risks that may lead to work-related stress.

This will help the employer meet their obligation to ensure that they provide a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, so far as is reasonably practicable.

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

Communication

Communication is crucial in achieving successful change. Failure to effectively communicate changes in the workplace may increase an employee's likelihood of having a stress response.

The impact of communications about change, either concerning individual work conditions or larger changes to the work-team or organisation, may be managed by:

- consulting with employees about proposed changes that may affect the health and safety of employees
- ensuring the person communicating the change (usually the employer) has the skills and authority to do so
- training managers or supervisors to support employees through periods of change
- explaining the background and reasons behind the change, what the organisation wants from the change (key objectives) and expected outcomes and timeframes to employees
- explaining openly and honestly any significant adjustments that will follow the proposed change (eg a restructure or the need to retrain employees)

- establishing a communication system (eg meetings or emails) that keeps employees regularly updated on developments
- communicating developments quickly to prevent the spread of rumours and enhancing employees' feelings of job security
- encouraging an open door policy for employees who want to discuss their concerns with their managers or supervisors
- advising employees of the final decision both verbally and in writing.

Consultation and participation

Employees may experience stress if they perceive that they have little control over their work and their work environment, and/or they feel unsupported in their workplace. Communicating with employees and seeking their participation in the change process may alleviate this perception.

Ways this may be achieved include:

- consulting with employees about workplace changes that may affect them
- ensuring employees are aware of any potential impacts on their roles
- providing opportunities for employees to participate 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 provide ongoing feedback on the proposed change
- providing group information and/or feedback sessions to give employees the opportunity to raise any concerns about the change in a group setting (eg hold regular meetings or focus groups - employees may feel more comfortable raising issues in a group rather than individually)
- providing employees with enough time to consider and respond to any proposals
- providing feedback to the group or individuals following consultation and providing reasons why ideas will or will not be implemented

Managing change

- implementing changes in a timely manner.

For further information on consultation, see *A guide for Victorian workplaces – Consultation* at worksafe.vic.gov.au.

Reviewing roles

As discussed in Chapter 8 – *Role clarity and role conflict* (see page 18) a change in the structure of an organisation or work unit can impact role clarity, therefore employees roles should be reviewed to ensure employees continue to understand what is required of them.

Ways this can be achieved 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 ambiguity and role conflict (employees should participate in this 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 in undertaking their job tasks and making sure they receive enough training for them to be competent in their roles
- providing re-training if required
- providing an opportunity for employees to have renewed input to the way they complete their work.

Providing support

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

More information about how to provide such support is contained in Chapter 7 - *Level of support from supervisors and colleagues* (see page 16).

In general, the key provisions of Victoria's health and safety laws in relation to managing change are:

- provision and maintenance of a safe working environment
 - provision and maintenance of safe systems of work
 - provision of information, instruction, training and supervision
- consultation with employees and HSRs
- resolution of health and safety issues.

Employers should also review and revise risk control measures to ensure they are effective in controlling the risk.

11. Civility in the workplace

Introduction

Civility is treating others with consideration and respect. It is caring for your own identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process. Examples of civility include: disagreeing without disrespecting, seeking common ground when there are differences in opinion, listening without preconceptions and helping others to do the same.

In contrast, incivility in the workplace is described as low-intensity, inappropriate behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the recipient, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Examples include rudeness, sarcasm, mocking, disparaging remarks and the belittling or excluding of others and can be verbal or in writing (eg emails).

What causes people to be uncivil is varied. It can coincide or be caused by other identified factors that are known to cause work-related stress (Chapter 4 – *Organisational factors contributing to work-related stress* (see page 10) provides an overview of these factors). For example, conflict over role clarity may result in incivility between employees which, if left unmanaged, can lead to allegations of bullying or work-related stress.

The causes of any incivility in the working environment should be identified and appropriate risk controls put in place to reduce any impact on employees' health and safety. Tolerance of incivility in the workplace may significantly increase the risk of more significant counterproductive behaviours such as workplace harassment and bullying occurring.

At an organisational level implementing anti-bullying policies, procedures and specific training in addition to visible senior manager endorsement and support can assist in reducing the impacts of work-related stress. Discouraging incivility at a local team level can further reduce this risk.

Creating and maintaining civility

Strategies to create and maintain workplace civility:

1. Clarifying team rules of engagement or developing a team charter

This can take the form of a short workshop type exercise within a team. It is particularly effective when a new team is established, or when a new manager/supervisor is appointed.

It involves reviewing the organisational values and/or code of conduct in detail, and clarifying what each principle means in practical terms in the team environment, including understanding acceptable and unacceptable workplace behaviours. The goal is to develop a shared understanding of respectful behaviours that all team members can recognise and assume some responsibility for monitoring.

Note: if a team has entrenched low level counterproductive behaviours that have not been addressed, then this initiative may be less effective. In such circumstances, the same process should be implemented over a longer period.

Education and feedback regarding unacceptable behaviours should occur over time to ensure workplace behaviours become consistent with the organisational values and/or code of conduct. The assistance of an internal HR professional or an external professional may be needed. Where a team has become highly dysfunctional consideration should be given to disbanding the team and starting again.

2. Manager role modelling

A manager acting as a role model and displaying acceptable behaviours has a powerful effect and influences team morale and behaviours. An example often cited is where a manager goes out of their way to say 'good morning' to a disengaged employee on a regular basis, and over time, the employee begins to acknowledge and collaborate better with their colleagues. Managers need be mindful that employees make judgements about the genuineness of a manager's behaviour in relation to organisational values, the congruence between actions and words, and this can influence team behaviours.

3. Timely comments and feedback

Some managers utilise value statements and a code of conduct in a proactive and positive way to shape the culture of their team environment. Other managers' only use these documents punitively, when an issue occurs. There can be a demonstrable difference in the team environment depending on the approach taken.

Proactive managers tend to comment and offer feedback in team meetings about actual workplace experiences and situations that link with or reflect organisational values and/or the code of conduct. Over time this approach can have the effect of building a shared understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours.

Civility in the workplace

A proactive approach makes it easier to address any behaviour that falls outside acceptable parameters because it stands in clear contrast to the shared team understanding of acceptable behaviour. Some team members may build a clearer understanding of behaviours they should not tolerate and may feel more empowered to raise their concerns.

4. Name a behaviour and initiate frank conversation

Sometimes it becomes important to actually name a specific behaviour and initiate a frank conversation with an employee or group of employees. This involves providing clear but also supportive feedback regarding expected behaviours. It may include further coaching by managers, recommending consultation with an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) if one exists, or other professional assistance. Many employees may lack awareness about how their behaviour impacts on others. Explaining the issue and how they can rectify it may elicit a positive response.

In general, the key provisions of Victoria's health and safety laws in relation to role clarity and role conflict are:

- provision and maintenance of a safe working environment
 - provision of information, instruction, training and supervision
- consultation with employees and HSRs
- resolution of health and safety issues.

12. Early intervention – what managers need to know

Why early intervention matters

If an employee is experiencing symptoms of work-related stress, the way a manager responds and the level of support offered is critical.

A manager has a central and unique role as they are often best placed to recognise when an employee may be struggling, and to provide support, from initiating conversations through to developing a plan to help them stay at work.

Early warning signs

Managers are not expected to diagnose a psychological injury or illness but, the earlier they notice that an employee is experiencing possible signs of stress the sooner steps can be taken to help them.

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

- disproportionate emotional responses and erratic behaviour (eg uncharacteristic behaviour which may be overly sensitive, irritable, angry, teary or tense)
- obsession with parts of the job while neglecting others
- working longer hours than usual (without the expected outputs), or working fewer hours
- disengagement and withdrawal behaviour (eg increased unplanned leave, reduced participation in work activities)
- low morale (eg 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 levels of performance.

Talking about work-related stress

Good relationships are based on openness, trust and respect. Managers should be open and approachable. A trusting and supportive team culture should be promoted to provide employees with a level of comfort when disclosing personal information that may affect their behaviour or performance at work. Having open and supportive conversations may also encourage employees to get help from their support networks, such as family, friends or medical practitioners at an early stage.

Starting the conversation

A manager's first response should be an exploratory and empathic conversation which specifies what changes have been noticed in the employee's behaviour in the workplace. Managers should express genuine concern and offer support. Conversations should be undertaken in a private location (like a closed office or a quiet coffee shop) so managers can provide their full attention and privacy can be maintained.

Ask "Are you OK?" or some version of that question, and be prepared to follow up if a response such as "No, actually I don't think I am" is provided.

Early intervention – what managers need to know

Talking about work-related stress - A five step approach

Step 1: Make contact

- arrange a meeting time
- allow sufficient 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 (eg 'I have noticed that you appear distracted and less talkative in team meetings, is everything OK?')
- define the issues and discuss.

Step 3: Develop options and offer support

- explore what the employee wants to do (eg could workplace adjustments be made?)
- 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.

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

- working with the employee's general practitioner (GP) on appropriate work adjustments
- referring the employee for a fitness for duty assessment with an independent medical examiner (IME)
- Asking the employee if they are aware of support such as Lifeline and various e-mental health resources (eg mindhealthconnect).

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

Step 4: Agree on action

- decide on a course of action (eg agreement that the employee will see their own GP or attend the Employee Assistance Program (EAP))
- define and agree on clear, specific steps
- follow up at an agreed time, review, and provide feedback.

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 may involve clarifying how often you will follow up with the employee.

Early intervention – what managers need to know

Respect employee privacy

Like any other health or personal issue, an employee makes a choice about talking with their manager about work-related stress. Stigma may prevent people from feeling comfortable talking about how stress issues will be handled at work.

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
- harassment and discrimination is not tolerated by the organisation.

Work-related stress can contribute to an employee experiencing a psychological illness/injury. If this is the case, a manager must not talk about the employee's psychological illness/injury with other members of the team or anyone else, unless that employee has given permission. If there is an impact on the team, the employee should be asked what they would like their colleagues to be told (eg explain that the employee is unwell and the alternative work arrangements that have been put in place).

Employers should ensure that where a manager is genuinely worried that a work health and safety risk exists, for example, where there is potential for self-harm by an employee or where there is a risk to others such as team members or clients, then assistance is sought from the Employee Assistance Programs, Manager Assist Programs or mental health service providers.

Examples of Mental Health Service Providers include:

- [Beyond Blue](#)
- [Heads Up](#)
- [Sane Australia](#)
- [Lifeline](#)

An example of a practical program to support employees is [Mental Health First Aid](#).

WorkSafe Victoria

WorkSafe Agents

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

Advisory Service

Phone.....(03) 9641 1444

Toll-free.....1800 136 089

Email.....info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

Head Office

222 Exhibition Street, Melbourne 3000

Phone.....(03) 9641 1555

Toll-free.....1800 136 089

Website.....worksafe.vic.gov.au

For information about WorkSafe in
your own language, call our Talking your
Language service

廣東話.....1300 559 141

Ελληνικά.....1300 650 535

Македонски.....1300 661 494

Italiano.....1300 660 210

普通话.....1300 662 373

Српски.....1300 722 595

Español.....1300 724 101

Türkçe.....1300 725 445

Việt Ngữ.....1300 781 868

العربية.....1300 554 987

English.....1300 782 442

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