



## Work-related stress

### Introduction

In the European Union, work-related stress (WRS) is the second most common work-related health problem, after back pain, affecting 28% of EU workers<sup>1</sup>. WRS can be caused by *psychosocial* hazards such as work design, organisation and management eg high job demands and low job control, and issues like bullying and violence at work. *Physical* hazards, such as noise and temperature, can also cause WRS. Prevention of WRS is one of the objectives in the Communication from the European Commission<sup>2</sup> on the new strategy on health and safety at work.

The Agency is producing a series of fact sheets to help tackle WRS and some of its key triggers. This fact sheet sets out a risk assessment and prevention approach that can be applied to WRS and its causes. It is intended for those seeking to tackle WRS in the workplace. The further information section at the end gives detail on Agency sources of assistance, including other fact sheets.

### What is work-related stress?

**Work-related stress is experienced when the demands of the work environment exceed the employees' ability to cope with (or control) them.**<sup>3</sup>

Stress isn't a disease, but if it is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill-health. Being under *pressure* can improve performance and give satisfaction when challenging objectives are achieved. But when demand and pressures become too much, they lead to *stress*. And this is bad for workers and for their organisations.

The situations outlined below are different in many respects but all show how pressure could lead to stress.

W works at an assembly line on piecework. She can neither influence the pace of her line nor the monotonous and highly repetitive tasks she has to perform.

X is a nurse employed in a hospital. Recently he has been promoted and his new job involves some work in the community. He is expected to work alone visiting vulnerable clients in their homes.

Y is employed as an administrative assistant in an office. He is a single father with two small children. He needs to leave his job no later than 17:00 on some days to pick his children up from school. But his workload is increasing, and his supervisor insists that he finishes various tasks before leaving.

Z works as a systems designer for a multinational information technology company. She is well paid, her tasks are stimulating and she has freedom to plan the tasks the way she likes. But her company's sales department has signed an agreement on the timely delivery of a new complex software system – yet to be designed by her and her understaffed project group.

### How big a problem is WRS and who is at risk?

WRS accounts for more than a quarter of two week or more absences from work through work-related health problems<sup>4</sup>. 1999 figures estimate that WRS costs Member States at least €20 billion annually<sup>5</sup>. WRS can lead to conditions such as depression, anxiety, nervousness, fatigue and heart disease. It also causes very considerable disturbances to productivity, creativity and competitiveness.

WRS can affect *anyone* in any sector and in any size of organisation.

### Legislation

The European Commission has introduced measures to ensure the safety and health of workers. The 1989 Council Directive (89/391) contains the basic provisions for health and safety at work and it makes employers responsible for making sure employees are not harmed by work, including through the effects of WRS. Member States have all implemented this Directive through legislation and some in addition have developed guidance on preventing WRS. Following the approach in the Directive, to eliminate or reduce WRS, employers should:

- Aim to prevent WRS;
- Assess the risks of WRS by looking for pressures at work that could cause high and long lasting levels of stress and deciding who might be harmed;
- Take adequate action to prevent the harm.

### Risk assessment and prevention of WRS

WRS is preventable and action to reduce WRS can be very cost-effective. Risk assessment for WRS involves the same basic principles and process as for other workplace hazards. Including workers and their representatives in this process is crucial to its success; they should be asked what is causing stress, which groups are suffering and what could be done to help.

The steps of risk assessment can be summarised as:

- Identify the hazards;
- Decide who might be harmed and how;
- Evaluate the risk by:
  - Identifying what action is already being taken;
  - Deciding whether this is enough; and
  - If it is not, deciding what more should be done.
- Recording the findings; and
- Reviewing the assessment at appropriate intervals and checking the impact of measures taken.

More guidance is now given on each of the stages of risk assessment, and later, suggestions are given for possible action:

#### 1. Finding out if there is a problem

Risk factors to look out for are:

- *culture* or 'atmosphere' of the organisation and how it approaches WRS;
- *demands* such as workload and exposure to physical hazards;
- *control* - how much influence workers have in the way they do their work;
- *relationships* - covering issues like bullying and harassment;
- *change* - how organisational change 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 managers;
- *training* to give workers the skills to perform their task;
- *individual factors* - catering for individual differences;

#### 2. Deciding who might be harmed and how

We're all vulnerable depending on the pressure we're under at any given time. The factors identified above will help to determine who is at risk.

<sup>1</sup> Third European survey on working conditions 2000. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2000. Luxembourg, 2001. <http://www.eurofound.ie/publications/EF0121.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Communication from the Commission – Adapting to change in work and society; a new Community strategy on health and safety at work 2002-2006. European Commission. 2002. <http://europe.osha.eu.int/systems/strategies/future/#270>

<sup>3</sup> Research on work-related stress. European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000. Luxembourg, 2000

<sup>4</sup> Work-related health problems in the EU 1998-1999, Eurostat. Luxembourg, 2001

<sup>5</sup> Guidance on work-related stress – spice of life of kiss of death? European Commission. Luxembourg, 2001

**Symptoms that WRS may be a problem in an organisation**

**Organisation**

Participation

- Absenteeism, high staff turnover, poor time-keeping, disciplinary problems, bullying, aggressive communication, isolation.

Performance

- Reduced output or quality of product or service, accidents, poor decision-making, errors.

Costs

- Increased costs from compensation or increased health care costs, referrals to health services.

**Individual**

Behaviour

- Tobacco, alcohol or drug abuse, violence, bullying or harassment.

Psychological

- Sleep problems, anxiety disorders, depression, inability to concentrate, irritability, family relationship problems, burnout.

Health

- Back problems, heart problems, peptic ulcers, hypertension, depressed immune system.

**3. Evaluating the risk**

For each of the factors in step 1 the following questions should be asked:

- What action is already being taken?
- Is it enough? and
- What more needs to be done?

For each of the risk factors in step 1, here are some ideas of what to look out for and what to do:

**Culture**

Is there good open communication, support and mutual respect? Are views from workers and their representatives valued?

- ✓ If not, communication should be improved, particularly for staff who work remotely.

**Demands**

Are staff overloaded or underloaded, do they have the capabilities and capacities for their tasks? What about the physical (noise, vibration, ventilation, lighting etc.) and psychosocial (violence, bullying etc.) environments?

- ✓ Sufficient resources should be made available if there are problems e.g. tasks should be re-prioritised.
- ✓ Staff training should enable people to carry out their tasks competently.

**Control**

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

- ✓ Staff should have control to plan their own work, and make decisions about how work should be completed and how to solve problems. Jobs should be enriched so staff can use their skills to advantage. A supportive environment is crucial.

**Relationships**

How are relationships between colleagues and between colleagues and managers? 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 workers anxious about their employment status? Are they confused by workplace changes and what it means for them and their colleagues? Clear communication helps – before, during and after change.

- ✓ Giving staff the chance to influence change makes them more involved

**Role**

Do people suffer role conflict (conflicting demands) or role ambiguity (lack of clarity)?

- ✓ Staff should have a clearly defined role and responsibilities.

**Support, training and individual factors**

Is there adequate induction for new recruits and staff whose jobs have changed? Are staff given social support? Is account taken of individual differences e.g. some members may thrive on working to tight deadlines; others may like time to plan.

- ✓ Staff should be supported given feedback and encouraged, even when things go wrong. Involve staff and value diversity.
- ✓ Workplace health promotion activities should be encouraged along with a healthy work-life balance.

**4. Recording the main findings**

It is good practice to record the main findings from the assessment and to share the information with employees and their representatives. This record should help to monitor progress.

**5. Review the assessment at appropriate intervals**

The assessment should be reviewed whenever significant changes happen in the organisation. Again this should be done in consultation with employees. The impact of measures taken to reduce WRS should be checked.

**Further information**

Further information on work-related psychosocial issues, including stress and bullying, is available at <http://osha.eu.int/ew2002/> This source is being continually updated and developed. Other fact sheets in this series are available here.

The Agency's website is <http://agency.osha.eu.int>

Guidance on work-related stress "Spice of Life – or Kiss of Death?". Employment & Social Affairs. Health and safety at work, European Commission, 1999  
[http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/h&s/publicat/pubintro\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/h&s/publicat/pubintro_en.htm)

**Acknowledgement**

This fact sheet includes information from the Health and Safety Executive guidance on tackling WRS and the Commission guidance mentioned above.

