



**MINISTRY OF LABOUR,  
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS,  
EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING**

***WORK-RELATED STRESS  
GUIDELINES***



## FOREWORD

Work-related stress is now generally acknowledged a global issue in all professions and all workers in all countries. It is also widely acknowledged that it has a high cost in terms of human distress and impaired productivity. Stress is the first sign of a problem which can exacerbate into acute or chronic damages to the body systems and organs, particularly if the body cannot rest and recover.

Work-related stress is the result of an unresolved mismatch between the perceived load and the worker's capacity to cope. The rapid evolution in the world of work brought about by technological progress is imposing more demands on the physiological and psychological capacity of the worker.

Stress can cause gastro-intestinal diseases, cardiovascular problems, physical ailments and it can impair the auto-immune functions of the human body. "In Europe, where regional figures are available, stress is the second most frequently reported work-related health problem; 50 to 60% of all lost working days are attributed to work-related stress and the number of people suffering from stress-related conditions caused or made worse by work is likely to increase. This represents a huge cost in terms of both human distress and impaired economic performance". (ILO Publication 2016).

As Occupational Health aims at the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental

and social well-being of all workers in all occupations, patterns of prevention have to be devised and implemented to face the challenges that a changing world of work is bringing. Increasing emphasis has to be placed on improving working conditions and work organization in relation to stress at work and on practical measures to cope with stressful work situations.

In this context, these guidelines have been prepared after tripartite consultation at the level of the Advisory Council for Occupational Safety and Health. It is expected that all stakeholders in the world of work will adopt these guidelines to better manage stress and to minimise the consequences thereof for a healthier workforce in a prosperous nation.

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Stress is defined as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure and demands placed upon them.” (International Labour Organisation).

The nature of work is changing at a whirlwind speed. Perhaps more than ever before, job stress poses a threat to the health of workers and in turn to the survival of the organization and ultimately the prosperity of a nation.

Section 5 of the Occupational Safety and Health Act 2005 (OSHA 2005) clearly stipulates that– “Every employer shall, so far as is reasonably practicable, ensure the safety, health and welfare at work of his employees.” Occupational Health is the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations (International Labour Organisation).

Although it is not possible to give a universal prescription for preventing stress at work, it is possible to offer guidelines on stress prevention and management to assist employers and employees. The guidelines provide simple, concise and systematic steps that can be followed by an employer or an employee to better manage stress and prevent injuries and ill health at work.

## **2.0 UNDERSTANDING WORK-RELATED STRESS**

Work-related stress is the harmful physiological and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the jobs do not match the capabilities or needs of the worker. This can lead to poor health. The concept of job stress is often confused with challenge, which energizes us psychologically and physically. In the modern times when job demands cannot be met, the sense of satisfaction is turned into feelings of stress. In short, the stage is set for illness, injury and job failure.

## **3.0 CAUSES OF STRESS**

Different stress-related factors have the potential of causing harm to the individual worker and ultimately to the organisation.

Some common job stressors encountered at the workplace include: -

- (i) Job Content, e.g.
  - Monotonous tasks;
  - Unpleasant tasks.
  
- (ii) Workload and work pace, e.g.
  - Having too much or too little to do;

- Working under time pressures, time constraints – inability to meet deadlines at work.
- (iii) Working Hours, e.g.
- Strict and inflexible working schedules;
  - Long and unsocial hours
  - Unplanned working hours;
  - Badly-designed shift systems.
- (iv) Participation and Control, e.g.
- Lack of participation in decision making;
  - Lack of control (e.g.: no decision over work methods, work pace, working hours and the work environment (including safety and health aspects)).
- (v) Career developments, status and pay, e.g.
- Job insecurity;
  - Promotional issues (e.g. lack/ unfair);
  - Piece rate payments schemes;
  - Unclear and unfair performance evaluation systems;

- Being over-skilled or under-skilled for the job.
- (vi) Role in the organization, e.g.
- Unclear roles;
  - Conflicting roles within the same job;
  - Dealing with people and their problems.
- (vii) Interpersonal relationships, e.g.
- Inadequate, inconsiderate or unsupportive supervision;
  - Poor relationship with co-workers;
  - Bullying, harassment and violence;
  - Isolated or solitary work;
  - No agreed/unclear procedures for dealing with problems or complaints.
- (viii) Organizational Culture, e.g.
- Poor leadership;
  - Poor communication;
  - Lack of clarity about organizational objectives and structure.

(ix) Home-Work interface, e.g.

- Conflicting demands of work and home;
- Lack of support for domestic problems at work;
- Lack of support for work problems at work/ at home.

#### **4.0 THE EFFECTS OF WORK-RELATED STRESS**

##### **4.1. *The effects of work-related stress on individuals***

Stress affects people in various ways. The experience of work stress can cause unusual and dysfunctional behaviour at work and contribute to poor physical and mental health. In extreme cases, long term stress or traumatic events at work may lead to psychological problems and psychiatric disorders resulting in absence from work and preventing the worker from being able to work again.

For example, when affected by work-related stress people may:

- become increasingly distressed and irritable;
- give low performance;
- have difficulty to concentrate, to think logically and to make decisions;

- become unable to relax or concentrate;
- enjoy their work less and feel less committed to it;
- feel tired, depressed and anxious;
- experience sleep disturbances;
- experience serious health problems, such as:
  - Heart disease;
  - Disorders of the digestive system;
  - Increase in blood pressure;
  - Headache;
  - Musculoskeletal disorders.

Workers under stress are more prone to accidents at work. They find it difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Consequently, they may engage in unhealthy activities, such as smoking, alcohol drinking, drug abuse and risky behaviours which may expose them to risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Stress may also affect the immune system, impairing people's ability to fight infections. Stress can also lead to violent behaviour.

## **4.2. *The effects of work-related stress on organisations***

An organization with a population of stressed workers will affect its healthiness and performance.

For example, consequences of work-related stress on organizations include:

- Increasing absenteeism;
- Increasing turn-over;
- Decreasing work commitment;
- Decreasing performance and productivity;
- Increasing costs;
- Increasing unsafe working practices and accident rates;
- Damaging the organization's image both among its workers and externally.

## **5.0 MANAGING WORK- RELATED STRESS**

Stress can be managed at two levels:

- Individual level.
- Organisational level.

### **5.1 *Individual Level***

An individual can manage work-related stress by considering the following factors:

#### **(i) Recognition of warning signs of excessive stress at work**

In order to be able to manage stress one has to be able to recognize warning signs and symptoms of stress which might include:

- a) Feeling anxious, irritable, or depressed;
- b) Inability to concentrate;
- c) Muscle tensions/headache;
- d) Social withdrawal;
- e) Using alcohol or drugs to cope with the situation.

## **(ii) Adopting a healthy lifestyle**

A healthy lifestyle might include:

- (a) Regular exercise/Relaxation exercise;
- (b) A balanced diet;
- (c) Getting enough sleep - It is important to improve the quality of sleep;
- (d) Getting support - close relationships such as family and friends are vital in helping one through times of stress.

## **(iii) Prioritizing and organizing**

Prioritizing and organizing can be achieved through:

- (a) **Time management** - create a balanced schedule; do not over-commit; try to leave earlier in the morning;
- (b) **Task management** - prioritize tasks, tackle tasks in order of importance; break projects into small steps: delegate responsibility when needed; be willing to compromise where possible.

#### (iv) Improving emotional intelligence

***Emotional intelligence*** is the ability to manage and use the emotions in positive and constructive ways. It is about communicating with others in ways that draw people to us, overcome differences, repair wounded feelings, and defuse tension and stress. When it comes to satisfaction and success at work, emotional intelligence matters just as much as intellectual ability.

Emotional intelligence in the workplace has four major components namely: *Self-awareness*, *Self-management*, *Social awareness* and *Relationship management*.

Some key skills needed to raise one's emotional intelligence and manage stress at work include:

- Realizing when one is stressed and recognize the particular stress response;
- Recognizing and effectively using non-verbal cues and body language;
- Developing the capacity to meet challenges with humour;
- Resolving conflicts positively and in a healthy and constructive way can strengthen trust between people and relieve workplace stress and tension.

## (v) Breaking bad habits

Negative thoughts and behaviour make job stress worse; turning around these self-defeating habits will help easier handling of stress.

Examples:

- *Flip negative thinking;*
- *Don't try to control the uncontrollable;*
- *Clean up the workstation;*
- *Take time away* - take a quick break and move away from the stressful situation;
- *Talk it over with someone* - sharing thoughts and feelings with a trustworthy person can help reduce stress;
- *Connect with others at work* - encourage colleagues to support each other;
- *Look for humour in the situation* - when used appropriately, humour is a great way to relieve stress in the workplace.

Employees should accept opportunities for medical treatment and counselling whenever recommended.

## **5.2 Organisational Level**

The organisation can consider the following six key areas in order to manage stress problems at the workplace:-

### **(i) Demand**

Demand refers to the workload, work patterns and the working environment. The employer can:

- develop personal work plans to ensure members of staff know what their job involves;
- discuss anticipated workload and challenges and adjust work patterns to cope with peaks and staff absences (this needs to be fair and agreed with employees);
- ensure that sufficient resources are available for staff to be able to do their jobs (time, equipment, etc.);
- provide training (formal or informal) to help staff prioritize;
- consider implementing personal development/training plans;
- review working hours and shift work systems to help employees to cope with pressures external to the organisation (e.g. child care, poor commuting routes, etc.);

- take measures to control physical violence and verbal abuse including provision of training to help staff to deal with such situations.

## **(ii) Control**

Control refers to 'how much say the person has in the way they do their work'. The employer can assess:

- where possible, whether employees have control over their pace of work;
- whether employees are encouraged to develop new skills and to use their existing and new skills and initiative to do their work;
- whether employees are consulted over their work patterns.

## **(iii) Support**

Support can be achieved through appropriate policies and procedures which include encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

**Note:** - Employers can provide regular training on stress management and Employee Assistance Programs to the employees having serious problems related to stress.

#### **(iv) Relationships**

Relationships refer to the promotion of a positive working environment to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

This can be achieved through the promotion of positive behaviours, avoidance of conflicts, sharing of information, prevention of unacceptable behaviours and developing a positive attitude towards dealing with work-related stress.

#### **(v) Role**

Role refers to whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles.

The employer can ensure that:

- as far as possible, the different requirements the organisation places upon employees are compatible;
- information are provided to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities;
- as far as possible, the requirements the organization places upon employees are clear; and systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

## **(vi) Change**

Change refers to how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation. The employer can provide employees with timely information; consult them on changes and give them training to support any changes in their jobs.

## **6.0. CONCLUSION**

In a globalised world characterized by intense competition, one cannot ignore the impacts of work-related stress on the employees and the organisational productive capacity. It is therefore imperative that due consideration is given to the management of stress so as to promote a healthy workforce which ultimately culminates into a healthy and prosperous nation.

These guidelines on work-related stress will surely help employers and employees to have a better understanding of the causes and effects of stress and on how to manage stress at work. However, work stress remains a real challenge. As organisations and their working environment keep changing, so do the stressors employees may face. It is recommended that there should be continuous monitoring for stress problems at the workplace.

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