

SAFEGUARDS

Information

WORKPLACE STRESS

OBJECTIVE

To provide guidelines for identifying, controlling or managing the risk factors for stress that originate in the workplace.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Section 19 of the *Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act 1986* requires employers to ensure that workers are safe from risks to health, safety and welfare, and that the work environment is safe.

BACKGROUND

There is a range of physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms that may be reported by those experiencing high levels of stress.

Identification of psychological hazards that may create a stressful environment must be included in any hazard management system.

Identification of psychological hazards (frequently referred to as 'stressors') requires particular effort as they:

- are not as easily identified as physical hazards
- may occur suddenly as a result of a traumatic experience, such as a threat or an armed hold-up
- can build up gradually, such as a result of continued high work demands and conflict in working relationships.

The experience of stress is a complex response and the reaction to a given stressor will vary from individual to individual. Stress for one person may be stimulation for another. This makes it difficult to define all sources of work related stress. However, if certain factors are present in the workplace they will create some degree of distress to those who are exposed.

The impact of these stressors will be influenced by the personal circumstances and experiences of employees.

Examples of factors that may expose a worker to the risk of stress include:

- high job demand combined with low job control
- delegation without authority

- lack of feedback on job performance
- poor match between the demands of a job and a worker's skills, abilities and aptitudes
- regular contact with clients who are themselves under strain, for example child protection, health care or emergency workers
- change at a rate that does not allow time for adjustment
- unclear or conflicting roles and responsibilities
- inadequate training or skills for the immediate job
- poor physical environment, such as excessive noise, poor lighting or ventilation
- managers/supervisors who do not possess necessary people management skills, may lead to workers not feeling valued
- shiftwork
- traumatic experience in the workplace, such as violence or harassment.

RISK CONTROL MEASURES

Ensure stressors are identified and assessed by:

- consulting employees. This is important, as the effect of stressors can be complex. Also effective consultation and communication are important elements in preventing a stressful work environment
- monitoring known indicators, such as poor job performance, morale, increased conflict, staff absences and other staff turnover.

Control the effects of stressors by:

- removing or reducing stressors
- rotating workers through tasks that are known to be demanding
- assisting workers to deal with distress where stressors cannot be removed.

Use the following methods to reduce stress:

- develop a democratic management style and team environment
- demonstrate that the contribution of each individual is recognised and valued
- establish selection and placement procedures based on merit and the requirements of the job

- match jobs to worker abilities and interests
- induct workers into the job, section and organisation
- define roles and responsibilities clearly
- document job descriptions, processes and procedures
- provide appropriate training for all levels
- monitor workload and work pace
- have a fair system of feedback and job appraisal
- establish career development opportunities
- respond to and resolve conflict at the earliest sign of problems
- carefully plan to introduce change
- design jobs to provide variety and reasonable workloads
- allow an appropriate level of worker discretion to achieve the job outcome
- control physical hazards where present and if necessary provide protective equipment.

Use the following methods to help workers deal with stress:

- provide information about stress and the effects of stressful situations
- train staff in problem solving techniques, rational thinking, conflict resolution and social skills
- develop policies and procedures to minimise the effect of anticipated stressful situations before they arise
- provide access to employee assistance programs
- promote activities that enhance physical and mental health.

FURTHER INFORMATION

SafeWork SA

GPO Box 465
ADELAIDE SA 5001

Country Offices

Berri, Mount Gambier, Port Lincoln, Port Pirie and Whyalla

Help and Early Intervention Centre

Library and Bookshop
100 Waymouth Street, Adelaide

Telephone 1300 365 255

(If calling from a mobile phone or from interstate tel. (08) 8303 0400)

Website www.safework.sa.gov.au

Re-issued **November 2007**

Review **November 2008**

This Safeguard replaces OHL10 – Workplace Stress