
MANAGING WORKPLACE STRESS

Policy Notes

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..... (service name) recognises that workplace stress is a growing employment and health and safety issue. As an employer we have a duty of care to take reasonable steps to prevent stress by identifying its causes and introducing measures to reduce its effects.

Such action is based on the proposition that stress management is a significant and legitimate health and employment issue. Excessive stress should not be seen as inevitable in modern society or as a sign of individual weakness. Employees experiencing stress or related conditions should be encouraged to seek appropriate support and assistance.

Stress can be a significant contributing factor to a range of short term physical or mental health conditions and changed behaviour patterns including

- Physical symptoms such as headaches, skin or respiratory infections, raised heart rate and sleep disorders
- Psychological issues including irritability, depression and anxiety
- Behavioural characteristics including increased use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee or drugs, increased accident rates, eating disorders, concentration or memory lapses, inability to 'switch off' and increased error count

When stress is experienced over long periods other signs may emerge including high blood pressure, heart disease, ulcers, and long term anxiety and depression.

Causes of work related stress may include

- Poor physical working conditions
- Poor job design or content
- Excessive or uncontrolled workloads and/or conflicting demands
- Inconsistent or poorly communicating management
- Tasks inappropriate to the employee's ability
- Bullying, harassment or intimidation

Stress can also arise from pressures people experience in their personal lives such as bereavement, family/relationship difficulties or financial problems. Such factors and conflicting home/work demands can also increase stress rates at work. We believe that stress management initiatives are central to our organisational culture and way of working. Primary responsibility for addressing stress lies with management although all employees have a duty to themselves and others to reduce stress in the workplace. Where necessary this may well include modifying personal behaviour.

Role of Managers and Supervisors

Management recognises that workplace stress is a serious issue and

- that positive action is required to prevent or combat it when it arises
- that an integral part of any stress management initiative is the need to foster a supportive culture and 'blame free' way of working

To this end we will publicise and implement coherent objectives and strategies, promote clear two way communication and encourage participation in decision making by all employees. Managers and supervisors must be alert to signs of stress in employees and take appropriate action to deal with any problems highlighted. Measures taken will vary according to circumstances but may include

- Identifying those jobs where stress has been or could be an issue
- Assessing what can be done to reduce the risk of stress to employees
- Meeting all employees (who report to them) on a planned and regular basis and providing space to listen to and discuss employee concerns
- Ensuring that work allocation is appropriate, reasonable and realistic
- When employees are absent from work finding out why, maintaining regular contact with employees on longer term absences and offering support
- Ensuring that all new employees receive a planned induction programme that prepares them for employment withService
- In conjunction with employees identifying their training and development needs and monitoring progress in meeting these needs
- Providing advice and support to employees who are, transferred, promoted or called in for relief purposes to help them adjust to their new situation

Role of Employees

All employees have a responsibility to address their own stress levels as follows

- Eat sensibly, get enough rest, avoid excessive intakes of alcohol or tobacco
- Exercise regularly by walking, jogging, cycling, swimming etc
- Make time for yourself through hobbies, interests or leisure pursuits
- Give yourself thinking time each day
- Relax-take short breaks during the day in order to unwind at day's end
- Talk things through with colleagues, family, friends or management

Employees should also be prepared to modify their own behaviour if it is causing stress to others. Placing undue stress on a colleague or subordinate is unfair and will not be tolerated. Legislation requires employees to take reasonable care of their own health and safety and that of others who may be affected by their acts or omissions. Employees must co-operate fully withService in the exercise of its statutory duties in this area. Allegations of bullying, harassment or intimidation will be dealt with under agreed internal policy and procedures and according to current legislation.

Seeking Help

Most people get help informally from family, friends and colleagues but may need to talk to someone outside this immediate circle. Work matters or home issues affecting work should be discussed initially with the employee's supervisor either as part of a regular meeting or by special arrangement. Supervisors will always guarantee total confidentiality except where they recommend the involvement of the Director and/or other appropriate person. This may include a human resource professional or qualified counsellor who will also be bound by the same code of confidentiality.

In a sector such as children's services it is important to remember that employees move from place to place working with children. It is our collective duty to manage workplace stress in order to create the best environment for all concerned in the best interests of the children.

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