

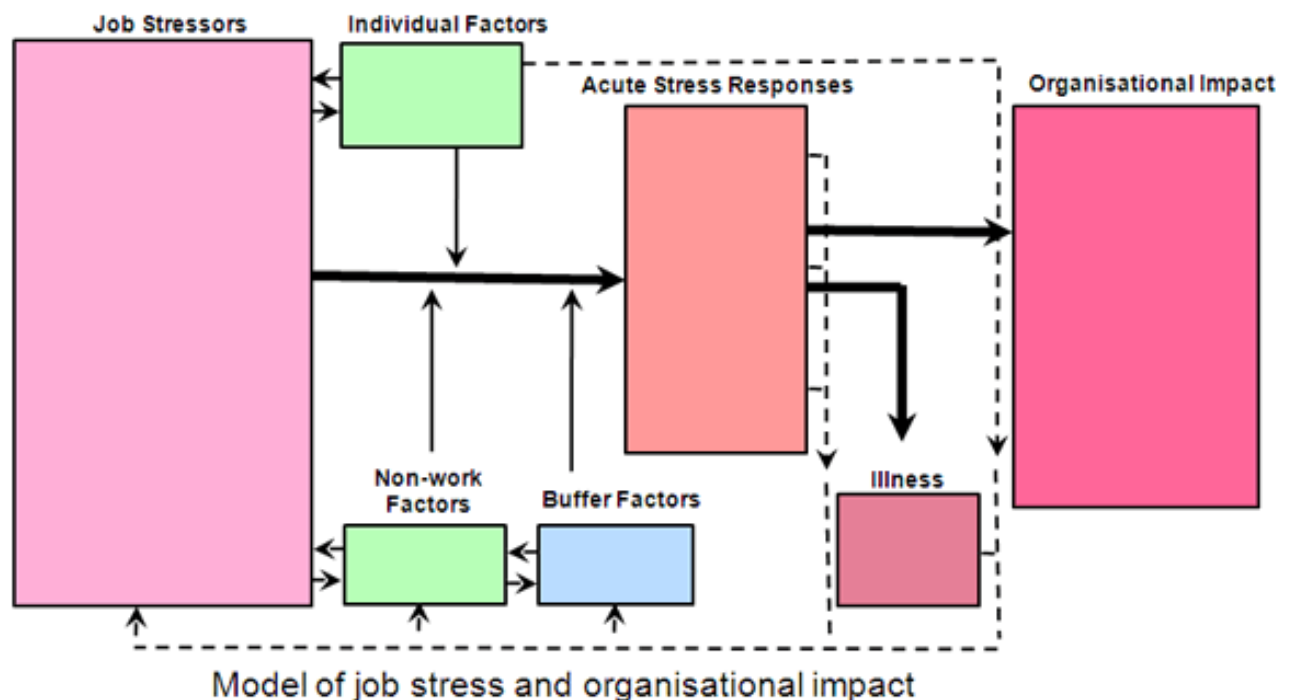
Come home healthy: Occupational stress, well-being and productivity

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What you will learn from this presentation

1. How occupational stress can affect your health
2. What are important occupational stressors
3. How occupational stress can affect the productivity of your workplace
4. How workplaces can tackle occupational stress by improving the quality of the working environment
5. What you can do if you think occupational stress is a problem at your workplace

The relationship between stressors, health and productivity



How occupational stress can affect your health

According to a study released on 23 January 2008 by Tarani Chandola and others, cumulative stress at work causes health problems in two ways:

- Directly by activating the neuroendocrine stress pathways (the systems that run your body automatically)
- Indirectly by causing unhealthy behaviours, such as poorer diet, less exercise and heavier drinking

In the case of coronary heart disease the study on 10 000 English public servants showed that around two-thirds of the health effect is due to the direct action of stress and one-third unhealthy behaviours.

It is normal for us all to feel pressure at work from time to time. This is often called distress, or a stress response, and can include:

- Worrying about work
- Not wanting to come to work
- Negative attitude to work, less job satisfaction
- Changes in behaviour at work or outside work, eg withdrawn, irritable
- Feeling anxious or low
- Difficulty sleeping
- Fatigue
- Problems with digestion and changes to eating patterns
- Substance abuse
- Higher heart rate
- Higher blood pressure

However if excessive pressure at work, more than we can cope with, continues over a long period of time, then illness can occur. The following conditions can be caused by occupational stress:

- Coronary heart disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- Musculo-skeletal conditions
- Mental health disorders.

Eleven important occupational stressors

1. Job security – How secure do you feel in your job?
2. Workload – Is your workload too much, too little, about right?
3. Control – Do you feel you have control over how work?
4. Scheduling – How flexible are the hours you work? Can you balance your work and home life?
5. Job content – Is the work stimulating?
6. Social environment – Do you have too little, too much or about right contact with people in doing your job?
7. Physical environment – How demanding is the job physically?
8. Relationships – Are your relationships with co-workers and supervisor supportive? Do you experience conflict and unacceptable behaviour by clients, co-workers or managers?
9. Role definition and feedback – Do you have a clear understanding of what is expected of you. Do you get praise if you do something well? Are you advised if you need to improve, and given the resources to do so?
10. Change management – Do you feel you have a say on decisions in the workplace?
11. Opportunity for learning and development – Are you learning on the job? How will this job help your longer term career?

The impact occupational stress can have on productivity in workplaces

Poor organisation of work, or people management, from the point of view of human factors, can lead to occupational stressors, which in turn can lead to:

- Increased absenteeism
- Increased workers compensation claims
- Increased injury frequency rates
- Increased staff turnover rates
- Decline in productivity associated with reduced work effectiveness, counterproductive work behaviour and a decline in organisation citizenship behaviour
- Decline in quality
- Increased use of occupational health and safety and employee assistance services.

How workplaces can tackle occupational stress by improving the quality of the working environment

Our approach to the prevention and management of occupational stress is changing. For many years the focus was on identifying early people who were distressed and assisting them, with aim of preventing them becoming ill. This is secondary prevention.

Now we realised that a more effective way is to tackle the occupational stressors arising from the way work is organised and the way people are managed. In other words to tackle the risk factors at source: primary prevention. Researchers in the UK advocated this approach over ten years ago, suggesting that psychosocial hazards should and could be addressed in the same way as we tackle physical hazards in occupational health and safety.

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) adopted voluntary stress management standards in 2005 which describe how this can be done. Now Australian jurisdictions are moving in this direction.

A summary of the methodology I use, which is consistent with the HSE standards, is below:

1. Identify hazard
2. Obtain approval for risk assessment and action plan
3. Assess nature and extent of risks
 - a. Analysis of existing survey data eg EOP
 - b. A new survey
 - c. Analysis of HR data eg absenteeism data, utilisation of EAP data
 - d. Interviews with managers and supervisors
 - e. Focus groups with staff
4. Facilitate development of action plan
 - a. Workshops
5. Monitor and review.

The questions I am aiming to answer with steps 1-4 are:

- What is the organisational health of this organisation?
- What are the factors which are risks and opportunities for organisational health in this organisation?
- What are the priority areas for improvement?
- What suggestions for improvement have been identified so far?
- What is the action plan?

The questions I often ask supervisors and staff in interviews and focus groups are:

1. What do you/your staff like most about working here?
2. What do you/your staff like least about working here?
3. Are there things about working here that have a positive impact on health and well-being?
4. Are there things that have a negative impact on health and well-being?
5. Present statistics obtained in risk assessment. What do you think is causing these statistics? Prompt as necessary and explore each of the 11 occupational stressors for relevance and impact in this workplace
6. What do you think could be done to improve this workplace to address this problem? Has anything been tried so far? Did it work? What else could be done to address this problem?

What you can do if you think occupational stress is a problem at your workplace

First you need to find out whether more than one person in the work unit is affected. If only one person is affected then it may mean there is not good job fit between that person and their job, or that the person involved has poor relationships with their supervisor or co-workers, or that there are problems outside work which are having an impact. Assist that person to raise their difficulties with their manager. The manager should work with the staff member to find out what the problem is and make adjustments to address it. Confidential counselling services called employee assistance programs are often available which can be helpful. They often provide advice and mediation services as well.

If there are several people in the work unit experiencing symptoms of stress responses then psychosocial risks arising from the way work is organized or the way people are managed may exist. In the first instance you should raise the issue with the manager of the work unit.

Take it up in a constructive way. Make sure you have thought through the problems being experienced by staff, what they think the causes might be and any suggestions they and you might have for changes to the way work is done in your area which would improve the situation. Even though the solutions you propose may not end up being practical for one reason or another, providing constructive suggestions will show you are willing to help find answers. It may help to let the manager know that new methods for tackling occupational stress have been developed recently. For example, you could give them a print out from the HSE website, or a copy of this hand-out.

What you should be aiming for is for management to agree to having an assessment of the quality of the work environment undertaken, which follows the methodology described in this hand-out.