

## Occupational stress

'read out'

### Here is an example of an incident in WA.

A prison officer suffered stress disorder after an inmate attack left her feeling anxious about her safety and hyper-vigilant. The officer was punched by an inmate on the left cheek, which caused a 2cm cut just below the eye. She went to hospital where her cut and bruising were attended to and also underwent tests for HIV, hepatitis and syphilis. She was declared fit for work and returned to her duties while attending counselling sessions, which she stopped going to as the counsellor lacked the knowledge of the nature of her work. She sought a different counsellor after a colleague made a 'half joking, half threatening' gesture similar to her earlier assault, which caused her to feel 'angry and irritable for some time'. The clinical psychologist diagnosed the officer with an adjustment disorder with features of mild anxiety and stress, including symptoms of hyper-vigilance, social withdrawal, difficulty sleeping and elevated blood pressure.

'ask'

### Q. What possible factors could have contributed to the incident?

*Possible answers: Increase in the use of low level aggression and violence within the community; unsafe system of work; failure to inform the employee of the person's past history of aggressive behaviour; lack of appropriate work place policies and procedures dealing with violence, aggression and abuse; behaviour of colleagues; and inadequate information, instruction and training provided on how to prevent and handle such situations.*

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### What is stress?

Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them. This definition reminds us that stress is in fact a normal everyday occurrence that exists in a variety of situations - work, family responsibilities, other relationships, education, etc. It may exist in tasks such as being subjected to a test, examination or inspection, being required to speak in public or taking over new responsibilities. It may involve circumstances that are unfamiliar, complex, challenging or threatening and may be combined with pressures such as time deadlines.

Therefore, while the circumstances that cause stress ("stressors") are an everyday occurrence, people react to them in different ways. Some people appear to thrive on stress. It can have some beneficial effects - it can improve levels of motivation and concentration, and provide a sense of achievement once a problem has been overcome successfully. For a psychological injury to occur, however, the stressors have to be perceived by the person as abnormal and beyond his or her capacity to manage effectively and the reaction to them has to be negative in terms of physical, psychological or behavioural responses.

'ask'

**Q. What would some typical reactions to stress be?**

**Possible answers:** Muscular tension in neck and shoulders; headaches; stomach and digestive troubles; breathing problems; high blood pressure; rashes; cold sores; low immunity; anger; irritability; conflict with others; impatience; lack of motivation; difficulty concentrating; lethargy; sleep disturbance; and depression

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**Workplace safety and health is everyone's responsibility**

Our employer has a duty of care to provide a safe workplace and systems of work, information instruction and training and an opportunity for workers to consult about OSH. In relation to stress this would include:

- **Identifying hazards associated with our environment and the work we do**  
We can monitor the work situation through sick leave, turnover, grievances, incident reports, W.C. claims, vocational rehabilitation return to work programs, surveys.

'ask'

**Q. What would some of the risk factors for stress be in our workplace?**

**Possible answers:** Work demands and pressure; control over and flexibility in job tasks; level of job involvement; management or supervisory style; monitoring; organisational support; workplace culture; exposure to stressful incidents; general work environment; presence of other work hazards; interpersonal conflict; competing demands; changes in the workplace; achievement expectations; role conflict; individual factors such as skills and knowledge, background and past experience, motivation, level of job satisfaction, perceived support from management and co-workers.

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- **Assessing the risks associated with the identified hazards and putting measures in place to eliminate or reduce those hazards**

For example, if workers are working long shifts or are exposed to stressful situations, they may be more likely to take time off work due to stress or related illnesses. Review work content to remove unnecessary or duplicated tasks, or to add content where under-load occurs, job rotation if the workload is heavy or fast-paced, or where it is repetitive and boring, review how work should be done, advance warning of urgent or major jobs where possible, hiring casual or labour-hire workers to assist with temporary workload peaks review deadlines and schedules to ensure they are realistic.

- **Ensuring there are policies on stress related activities and how to deal with those who are stressed**

For example, drugs and alcohol, working arrangements such as working two jobs, breaks between shifts, maximum hours worked before a break, maximum overtime hours worked, violence and bullying.

- **Ensuring there is instruction on the effects of stress and coping with stress**

For example, how to manage sleep when doing shift work, lifestyle choices, stress indicators and management.

- **Giving us the opportunity to discuss issues and negotiate suitable arrangements for reducing stress**

Consultation between employers and employees and safety and health representatives and committees is an important part of the risk management process to identify hazards before injury, illness or incident occur and develop measures to eliminate or reduce the associated risks.

As individuals, we have a responsibility to take reasonable care to ensure our own safety and health and that of others affected by our work. We should be aware of our responsibilities and that lifestyle and individual choices may contribute to stress and impaired performance.

'ask'

**Q. Before I finish, is there anything that you can identify that we could be doing better in this workplace to combat stress?**

*Take notes about any suggestions... don't panic if there aren't any takers.*

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OK, unless anyone has any questions, thanks for listening to me.