



**Public Service Association of NSW  
Policy on Occupational Stress**

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**Premier's Department Guidelines on  
Occupational Stress – Hazard Identification  
and Risk Management Strategy**

August 2003



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## PSA Policy on Occupational Stress

1. For the purposes of this policy and guidelines the term occupational stress is used to describe any physical, psychological, or psychiatric injury, illness, or disease, which has been substantially caused or aggravated by exposure to a stressor, or stressors, at work.

2. The PSA recognises that occupational stress is a major occupational health and safety issue affecting a large number of NSW public sector workers, as a result of a number of factors, which may include but are not limited to:

- poor management of occupational health, safety, and rehabilitation
- poor work organisation
- inadequate staffing levels
- excessive individual workload
- unsafe work practices
- excessive working hours
- unsafe systems of work
- poor working conditions
- occupational violence including sexual and other forms of work related harassment, victimisation, bullying, or aggressive behaviour at work.

The Premier's Department policy and guidelines *Occupational Stress – Hazard Identification and Risk management Strategy* requires NSW Public Sector agencies to develop, implement, and monitor appropriate strategies, and to review their continued effectiveness, to prevent the incidence of occupational stress. At agency level these PSA and Premier's Department strategies must be introduced in consultation with the PSA, and PSA workplace delegates, in accordance with the PSA guidelines.

The PSA also calls on the NSW Government to promote and support a major initiative aimed at controlling and preventing the incidence of occupational stress in NSW workplaces by requiring the NSW WorkCover Authority, and relevant Industry Reference Groups, as part of this initiative, to develop, promote, and provide comprehensive guidance material to assist employers to fulfil their obligations under the Act in the prevention of occupational stress.

*Revised policy issued August 2003*



**Premier's Department**

**New South Wales**

# **OCCUPATIONAL STRESS**

## **HAZARD IDENTIFICATION AND RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY**

**August 2003**

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# Foreword

Occupational stress is a major issue in today's workplace and a matter of increasing concern to employers, employees, governments, insurers and the community. Losses across industry are substantial and increasing, in both human and economic terms.

Major direct expenses are incurred through workers compensation, superannuation, sick leave and absenteeism. Less quantifiable losses occur through individual suffering, medical retirement, reduced productivity, poor public image, impaired customer service, poor morale and high staff turnover. Costs to the public health system are also significant.

The results of occupational stress can have a negative impact on people in all types of workplaces and at all levels of work. Further, its effects extend beyond the employee's workplace into their family life and the wider community. Losses can include career prospects when employees are medically retired, or financial loss due to extended periods of leave. Losses can also include inability to sleep and depression or anxiety, which can result in further stress.

Past approaches to managing occupational stress in the NSW public sector have focused on allaying the symptoms of stress by providing employees with coping strategies (eg stress management programs). While it is important for employees to be able to develop and utilise these strategies, there is an overriding legislative responsibility for agencies to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees. This obligation also extends to people other than employees.

The focus of this strategy is significantly broader, by providing agencies with practical guidance in identifying their risk or potential exposure to occupational stress in the workplace and outlining key issues in developing local prevention and management strategies. Agencies should address poor systems of work, working environments and organisational practices that are or can create stressors. The effective management of occupational stress is a key component in improving the efficiency and health of our organisations.

This strategy does not limit the reasonable actions of employers arising from matters including employee discipline, investigations, and performance appraisal as outlined in section 11A (1) of the *Workers Compensation Act 1987*.

The development of this strategy reflects the provisions of the *Workplace Injury Management and Workers Compensation Act 1998* of which injury management and occupational rehabilitation are key elements. It draws on the provisions outlined in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000* and the *Occupational Health and Safety Regulation 2001*.

C Gellatly  
Director-General  
Premier's Department

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# Part 1 - Strategy

## Strategy Intent

The *Occupational Stress – Hazard Identification and Risk Management Strategy* is a comprehensive and systematic risk management approach to the identification, prevention and management of the causes of occupational stress. The strategy draws on best practice systems, the expertise of professionals in this field, and provides practical guidance to agencies.

This strategy is underpinned by the Premier's Department Policy and Guidelines which set out public sector agencies' major legislative and policy obligations in relation to occupational health and safety (OHS):

- *Taking Safety Seriously – Improving workplace safety management in the NSW public sector (1999) and*
- *Taking Safety Seriously – A systematic approach to managing workplace risks in the NSW public sector (2002).*

The strategy does not limit the reasonable actions of employers arising from matters including employee discipline, investigations, and performance appraisal as outlined in section 11A (1) of the *Workers Compensation Act 1987* (see Appendix B).

## Aim

The strategy provides practical guidance for agencies in identifying risks and a prevention strategy for the causes of occupational stress. Agencies will be able to utilise this framework in their OHS plans.

## Benefits

- overall improvement of staff health, well being and workplace culture
- prevention and control of the causes of occupational stress
- reduced employer costs, turnover, workplace conflict and lost productivity caused through occupational stress.

## Underlying Principles

- senior management responsibility, accountability, commitment to and resourcing of measures to ensure a healthy and safe working environment
- union and staff consultation underpinned by training and information sharing
- appropriate training in and knowledge of OHS issues and their effective management by all levels of managers and supervisors
- integrated core business strategies and management systems that support the agency's OHS policy framework and risk management strategy
- access by staff to relevant employee assistance programs including critical incident management
- effective resourcing and utilisation of the agency's OHS committee

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## Relevant Legislation and Policies

*Taking Safety Seriously: Improving workplace safety management in the NSW public sector, Policy and Guidelines 1999*

*Taking Safety Seriously: A systematic approach to managing workplace risks in the NSW public sector, Policy and Guidelines 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2002*

*Workers Compensation Act 1987 and Regulations*

*Workplace Injury Management and Workers Compensation Act 1998*

*Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000*

*Occupational Health and Safety Regulation 2001*

*Managing and Supporting Attendance at Work 2000*

*Revised 'Fitness to Continue Procedures' – HealthQuest and other Approved Providers, Premier's Memorandum No. 2001-11*

*Dealing with Employee Work-related Concerns and Grievances, Policy and Guidelines 1996*

*Harassment Free Workplace, Policies and Guidelines 1996*

The above mentioned legislation and policies should be read in conjunction with those detailed in both editions of *Taking Safety Seriously*. It is essential that agencies obtain copies of and have an understanding of the Acts and Regulations relevant to their business along with any supporting guidance material.

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## Part 2 - Guidelines

### What is Occupational Stress?

Occupational stress is often used as a term to denote the emotions people feel in upsetting circumstances. In some situations, people are distressed to the extent that they may be diagnosed as suffering from a range of disorders including anxiety, depression and other stress-related conditions.

For the purpose of this document, sustained emotional upset in some situations might lead to diagnosed physical, psychological, or psychiatric illness or disease which has been substantially caused or aggravated as the result of work circumstances.

In these guidelines the term *stressor* is anything that results in a stress response or reaction by a person. *Distress* is the term given to an individual's negative stress response. For example, if an employee is bullied, abused or the subject of a violent act they may show distress. This may be observable through behavioural changes, such as anger or withdrawal and in many cases a significant increase in sick leave.

Employees' reactions or responses to the same stressor can vary on different occasions and be further influenced by their own perception of either a single, cumulative or series of stressors in the workplace.

Recent research on occupational stress indicates that there is a range of related variables which define 'stressful' work. In summary, stressful work is characterised by:

- high levels of job demand (work load)
- low levels of job control (decision making latitude)
- high levels of task uncertainty (technical knowledge and skill)
- low organisational support (personal recognition and reward)

Importantly, these are not independent variables - the relationships between the variables are crucial. For example, the dot points as presented above represent the worst combination of work factors. However, it is possible for people to work in very demanding jobs and yet cope well and even thrive on the challenge of the task. This is because other work factors, particularly job control, ameliorate the effect of workload.

Similarly, people may cope well with carrying out dangerous and distasteful work if they know the work is valued and appreciated. For example, emergency workers undertaking sandbagging to prevent property loss during floods may effectively work in very demanding circumstances for long periods but not feel 'stressed'.

Consequently, a more desirable set of work factors might read as follows:

- moderate levels of job demand (work load)
- high levels of job control (decision making latitude)
- low levels of task uncertainty (technical knowledge and skill)
- high organisation support (personal recognition and reward)

### Workplace Safety

This strategy is integral to the improvement and maintenance of an effective OHS system. As a consequence of *Taking Safety Seriously – Improving workplace safety management in the NSW public sector* and *Taking Safety Seriously – A systematic approach to managing workplace risks in the NSW public sector*, agencies will be expected to consult with employees and unions in the development and implementation of their OHS management system.

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This consultative arrangement will provide agencies with a further opportunity to broaden input into understanding the causes of occupational stress at a local level, and to develop effective preventative strategies to manage and reduce its incidence.

The objects of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000* are outlined at Appendix A. The relevant section of the *Workers Compensation Act 1987* is provided at Appendix B.

### Local Management and Prevention Strategies

The management of causes of occupational stress should be undertaken in consultation with employees and unions and should involve a process of:

- hazard identification to determine actual and potential hazards;
- an assessment of identified or potential risks to the health and safety of employees; and
- development and implementation of a risk management strategy designed to eliminate or control hazards.

Successful prevention and management of stress-related problems will depend on effective local management strategies. Such strategies should be thoroughly planned, adequately resourced and linked to agency corporate directions and performance. They should address identified organisational stressors and incorporate improvements in work organisation, job design, quality of supervision, OHS directions and general management practices.

It is recognised that some jobs / tasks require a greater physical or psychological demand on individuals than others. Agencies are strongly encouraged to carry out appropriate risk identification and assessment processes to cater for these demands and develop strategies accordingly.

Plans that focus on individual behaviour alone may fail to address the underlying causes of stress-related problems. They may result in individual blame or victimisation and may not address organisational, systemic and operational causes.

As part of any agency local management strategy:

- effective communication at local level between staff and supervisors through performance/feedback structures should be encouraged. (This might assist to address such matters as workload issues that arise from time to time and which might in the long term reduce stressors in the workplace. In any event, recognition of the issue is an important step for all concerned);
- appropriate training and provision of information to all agency staff (for example the agency's OHS policy framework and risk management strategy for occupational stress) needs to be undertaken;
- effective grievance procedures need to be implemented and promoted in the workplace;
- rehabilitation policy and procedures must facilitate an early return to work for employees; and
- employee assistance programs and counselling services should be available to employees.

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## Early Intervention

Managers and supervisors need to be vigilant in the early identification of any indicators of occupational stress and associated occupational health and safety problems. They need to be skilled in making referrals to appropriate Employee Assistance Programs or counselling services and in encouraging employees to self refer when necessary. The provision of support to affected staff is a critical element of an effective risk management strategy.

Where appropriate, agencies should undertake a risk assessment as outlined below to determine what strategies can be developed to reduce stressors and assist employees in these circumstances.

This type of early intervention strategy is imperative, as some illness and disease associated with occupational stress may involve long recovery periods prior to return to work or, in extreme cases, medical retirement. In addition, early intervention is critical for the successful introduction of prevention or control strategies and also to the success of work based rehabilitation.

## Privacy and Confidentiality

It is essential that at all stages of development and implementation of local management and prevention strategies, the strictest codes of privacy and confidentiality be adhered to with regard to all employees. It is important that staff understand, for example, that the results of any surveys or focus groups conducted by agencies in developing local management and prevention strategies are anonymous and confidential, and that individuals will not be identified. Protocols should be established in consultation with unions and employees to ensure that any issues arising will be dealt with appropriately.

## A Risk Management Approach

Risk management is about eliminating or reducing the risk of injuries and illness associated with work. It is a continuous process that takes into account changes in technology and developments in options for the control of risk. Agencies should adopt a risk management approach to occupational stress in the same way they would manage other OHS hazards.

A step towards the effective prevention and management of occupational stress in the workplace is the knowledge of the nature and extent of any problems that exist.

The following approach combines the risk management methodology outlined in:

- *Taking Safety Seriously Policy and Guidelines* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2002, Premier's Department (see [www.premiers.nsw.gov.au](http://www.premiers.nsw.gov.au)) and
- *Six Steps to Occupational Health and Safety*, WorkCover, 1997 (see [www.workcover.nsw.gov.au](http://www.workcover.nsw.gov.au))

together with basic project management principles.

This approach also draws on a publication by Comcare Australia:

- *The Management of Occupational Stress in Commonwealth Agencies: - Implementing an Occupational Stress Prevention Program* (see [www.comcare.gov.au/publications/](http://www.comcare.gov.au/publications/)).

The methodologies outlined in the above mentioned publications should be explored in conjunction with the processes outlined in the following pages in order to design the most effective risk management approach to meet the agency's needs.

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As indicated previously, consultation with employees and unions is integral to this approach. Consultation with employees as individuals and groups may be appropriate when identifying and assessing risks and developing control measures.

An effective approach to dealing with this issue can include the following stages:

- gaining senior management commitment and responsibility
- hazard identification processes
- risk assessment
- developing, implementing and resourcing the risk management strategy including any specific control measures
- regular review, evaluation and or auditing of the risk management strategy.

It is important that agencies be familiar with the provisions outlined in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000* and *Occupational Health and Safety Regulation 2001* when addressing the risk management strategy outlined below.

### **Stage 1 - Senior Management Commitment and Responsibility**

For this process to be successful, senior management commitment and accountability is essential. The identification of key stakeholders, their expertise, skills, proposed roles and training needs should also be considered at the time of developing the strategy. Key stakeholders include unions, employees, OHS managers, OHS committees and human resource practitioners within the agency.

The strategy should be supported by a written proposal which outlines the scope, its purpose, expected outcomes, consultative arrangements, timeframe, resources required and reporting lines (eg steering committee/project team) – essentially general project management principles should be followed.

It is recommended that agencies use existing OHS structures and allocate responsibilities by establishing a project team or appointing a project coordinator who is competent to take responsibility for the task.

### **Stage 2 - Hazard Identification Process**

A hazard may be defined as anything with the potential to harm life, health or property. In the context of this document, hazard identification is the process of determining the hazards associated with the working environment and/or the way in which the work is done. For example, violence in the workplace by clients might be identified as a hazard.

The purpose of this stage of developing a risk management strategy is to identify hazards associated with occupational stress. This process will assist the organisation to:

- establish a baseline of the indicators of occupational stress in the workplace;
- establish how the organisation identifies and manages people experiencing a stress response;
- obtain data that can be used to assess the nature and scope of the risk of occupational stress; and
- identify stressors (eg through staff survey).

Appendix C lists a range of potential OHS hazards which may be found in workplaces, compiled from extensive research. This appendix may be useful in the hazard identification process.

### **Stage 3 - Risk Assessment**

The purpose of risk assessment is to determine the level and extent of an identified risk or risks and includes careful analysis of the issue to determine all contributing factors. Any risk assessment process should determine priorities based on the frequency and severity of injury or illness posed by the hazard. A table to assist in this process is outlined at Appendix D – Prioritising Identified Hazards..

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The degree of risk may also vary between individual employees exposed to a hazard. Factors that may contribute to the variation include skills and experience, level of training and the environment in which the work is being conducted, for example an environment with poor work systems and practices. All factors contributing to the risk need to be eliminated or their impact minimised through the risk control process.

It should be emphasised that the nature and pattern of exposure to stressors are not as readily quantified as exposure to physical hazards. A stressful situation may be a constant feature of an organisation's day to day functions and operations, but individuals' reaction to it may vary and alter over time. There may be a number of factors which contribute to the probability and degree of injury or illness from a particular hazard.

**Agencies may refer to Appendix E – Research Findings as a way of targeting strategies to issues relevant to occupational stress in the workplace. Agencies can assess their performance against the indicators provided in this Appendix to determine the potential for risk exposure in relation to occupational stress.**

#### **Stage 4 - Developing, Implementing and Resourcing the Risk Management Strategy**

Once the range of hazards and the level of risk they pose have been identified, risk control measures can be developed. Effective risk control involves a commitment to resource the process. Given that resources are finite agencies need to allocate them on a priority basis.

A hierarchy of risk controls which ranks control strategies from the most effective to least effective is a useful guide in introducing these measures. The most effective strategy is elimination, followed by minimisation of the hazard.

Additional risk control measures can be classified as:

- Design (workplace equipment and work practices)
- Engineering
- Administrative
- Personal protective equipment

Elimination or control of a hazard may involve a combination of risk control elements. Measures may include redesign of existing work environment and systems (engineering controls), providing information and training on safe working procedures or staff rotation to reduce the frequency or duration of exposure (administrative controls), and safety screens, duress alarms and security access (personal protective equipment).

Research into the causes of occupational stress, and associated workers compensation claims, has found that the causes of occupational stress may be associated with poor or ineffective management systems, technology, work practices and work organisation in environments of considerable change. In many instances poor or inadequate communication and exchange of information between senior management and employees in this environment was also identified as a significant contributing factor to occupational stress.

It is recommended that risk management strategies be developed in consultation with key stakeholders as previously identified. This will ensure that the recommended strategies are given full consideration by senior management.

Appendix F – Issues for Consideration provides information on key organisational, OHS and people management practices that maybe useful in developing risk management strategies.

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## **Stage 5 – Evaluating and Reviewing the Risk Management Strategy**

The role of the project coordinator or team will be to assist those staff implementing the strategy to understand its rationale, impact on the organisation and business unit and to provide relevant information gathered so far. It is important that managers integrate the relevant strategies into their workplans and provide regular progress reports both to management and staff.

Evaluating the risk management strategy involves review of the efficiency of its implementation and effectiveness of individual strategies. Evaluating outcomes involves establishing performance indicators, measuring outcomes against performance indicators and reporting the results to senior management.

By establishing performance indicators to measure changes in the working environment (including positive and negative indicators) the organisation will be able to monitor the outcomes of the prevention strategies. As is customary, performance indicators should be developed at the time of strategy development. Agencies should avoid basing indicators solely on a reduction in workers compensation claims and focus on broader improvement indicators.

In measuring the success of the risk management strategy, agencies will need to consider introducing a system for reviewing and monitoring any changes to individual jobs, the organisation of work and the working environment which are identified as causes or potential causes of occupational stress, in addition to the strategies for dealing with the stressors themselves.

Regular monitoring, reviews or audits of an agency's occupational stress risk management strategy will assist in complying with their occupational health and safety legislative obligations. The stakeholders in the development and implementation of the risk management strategy should determine an agreed process for this task.

Regular evaluation will show whether the risk management strategy does in fact eliminate or control the assessed risk. Following a review or audit of the risk management strategy it may be necessary to repeat the hazard identification, risk assessment and risk control process until all risks from a particular hazard have been controlled as far as practicable.

### Objects of Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000

The objects of this Act are as follows:

- to secure and promote the health, safety and welfare of people at work
- to protect people at a place of work against risks to health or safety arising out of the activities of persons at work,
- to promote a safe and healthy work environment for people at work that protects them from injury and illness and that is adapted to their physiological and psychological needs,
- to provide for consultation and cooperation between employers and employees in achieving the objects of this Act,
- to ensure that risks to health and safety at a place of work are identified, assessed and eliminated or controlled,
- to develop and promote community awareness of occupational health and safety issues,
- to provide a legislative framework that allows for progressively higher standards of occupational health and safety to take account of changes in technology and work practices,
- to protect people (whether or not at a place of work) against risks to health and safety arising from the use of plant that affects public safety.

### Workers Compensation Act 1987

#### **11A No compensation for psychological injury caused by reasonable actions of employer**

(1) No compensation is payable under this Act in respect of an injury that is a psychological injury if the injury was wholly or predominantly caused by reasonable action taken or proposed to be taken by or on behalf of the employer with respect to transfer, demotion, promotion, performance appraisal, discipline, retrenchment or dismissal of workers or provision of employment benefits to workers.

(3) A psychological injury is an injury (as defined in section 4) that is a psychological or psychiatric disorder. The term extends to include the physiological effect of such a disorder on the nervous system.

(4) This section does not affect any entitlement to compensation under this Act for an injury of a physical nature even if the injury is a physical symptom or effect of a psychological injury, so long as the injury is not merely a physiological effect on the nervous system.

(5) (Repealed)

(6) This section does not extend the definition of injury in section 4. In particular, this section does not affect the requirement in section 4 that a disease is not an injury unless it is contracted by the worker in the course of employment.

This section does not affect section 9A (No compensation payable unless employment substantial contributing factor to injury).

(7) In the case of a claim for weekly payments of compensation in respect of incapacity for work resulting from psychological injury, the medical certificate required to accompany the claim must (in addition to complying with the requirements of section 65 of the 1998 Act) use, for the purpose of describing the worker's condition, accepted medical terminology and not only terminology such as

"stress" or "stress condition".

(8) If a claim is deficient because subsection (7) has not been complied with and the insurer or self-insurer concerned notifies the worker in writing of the deficiency (including details of what is required to comply with that subsection) as soon as practicable after receiving the deficient claim then (unless the insurer or self-insurer waives that requirement):

- (a) the claim is not considered to have been duly made for the purposes of section 93 of the 1998 Act until subsection (7) is complied with, and
- (b) court proceedings cannot be commenced in respect of the claim until subsection (7) is complied with.

# APPENDIX C

## Hazard Identification

Agencies may find the following checklist useful when identifying potential OHS hazards:

<b>Physical environment</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exposure to excessive heat or cold</li> <li>• inadequate lighting</li> <li>• physical isolation</li> <li>• badly designed office layout</li> <li>• poor air-conditioning or ventilation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• irritant noise or fumes</li> <li>• physical hazards</li> <li>• crowded office spaces</li> <li>• unsafe equipment or furniture</li> <li>• lack of adjustable equipment</li> </ul>
<b>Organisational factors</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• poor organisational communication</li> <li>• little opportunity to participate</li> <li>• unclear goals and policies</li> <li>• lack of clear information</li> <li>• lack of training in safe procedures</li> <li>• no access to flexible work practices</li> <li>• retrenchment or redundancy programs</li> <li>• low levels of trust and openness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• inadequate staffing levels</li> <li>• poor organisational structure</li> <li>• poorly managed organisational change</li> <li>• inadequate pay</li> <li>• unsatisfactory working conditions</li> <li>• conflicting goals and priorities</li> <li>• recurring procedural changes</li> <li>• unfair recruitment/selection practices</li> </ul>
<b>Job design</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work overload</li> <li>• nature of work</li> <li>• lack of control over work</li> <li>• work demands exceed skill level</li> <li>• excessive work hours</li> <li>• replacement of job by new technology</li> <li>• unrealistic deadlines</li> <li>• lack of job satisfaction</li> <li>• little work variety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work underload</li> <li>• lack of appropriate training</li> <li>• isolation</li> <li>• delays in filling vacant positions</li> <li>• limited understanding of job process</li> <li>• limited input into decision-making</li> <li>• constant interruptions</li> <li>• lack of authority and influence</li> <li>• exposure to threat of violence</li> </ul>
<b>Management practices</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little say in decision making</li> <li>• absence of constructive advice</li> <li>• poor management of change</li> <li>• lack of clarity of roles, goals and policies</li> <li>• lack of direction</li> <li>• unsatisfactory relationships with supervisor</li> <li>• negative performance appraisals</li> <li>• management style</li> <li>• poor handling of grievance or disputes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of support and advice</li> <li>• disciplinary procedures</li> <li>• little scope for participation</li> <li>• discrimination</li> <li>• bullying or harassment</li> <li>• lack of recognition</li> <li>• conduct investigations</li> <li>• poor communication</li> <li>• lack of feedback about performance</li> </ul>
<b>Career development</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limited prospects for promotion</li> <li>• poor job security</li> <li>• under-utilised skills</li> <li>• insufficient progress on job</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no opportunity for skill development</li> <li>• lack of development opportunities</li> <li>• no access to job rotation</li> </ul>
<b>Social stressors</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of social support</li> <li>• isolation from other employees</li> <li>• difficulty balancing work and family</li> <li>• bullying and harassment</li> <li>• negative attitudes of clients</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unsatisfactory relationships with peers</li> <li>• unrealistic expectations of self</li> <li>• tension with management</li> <li>• negative self esteem</li> <li>• negative public image of agency</li> </ul>

## Prioritising Identified Hazards

Provided below are some examples of hazards that agencies may identify. For each hazard identified, an assessment of its frequency and impact using the data captured will need to be made. This process will inform an agency of its priorities in the development of local management and prevention strategies.

Examples of the types of hazards that can be prioritised using this model are workplace bullying, forced relocation or restructuring, workload pressure and deadlines, and interpersonal conflict with supervisor.

Frequency	Severity – Impact		
	Permanent personal injury, eg trauma	High levels of absenteeism	Disruption to individual concentration and quality of work
Very likely – could happen regularly	1	2	3
Likely – could happen occasionally	2	3	4
Unlikely –only rarely	3	4	5
Very unlikely to occur	4	5	6

1 = Top Priority – do something immediately

6 = Low Priority – do something where possible

### Use of Hierarchy of Controls in the Development of Strategies for Identified Hazards

The following example attempts to outline the use of hierarchy of controls in developing strategies to reduce hazards:

*An agency, following a risk assessment, has identified workplace bullying as a major hazard in the workplace. The agency in question has recently undergone significant restructuring. Strategies and triggers to consider in using engineering and administrative control measures are identified below.*

#### **Engineering Controls:**

- *can existing workplace layout, systems or equipment be re-designed or modified to prevent and control risks? Eg safety screens, adequate space.*

#### **Administrative Controls:**

- *review of compliance with OHS and Anti-Discrimination Legislation*
- *confirm that effective grievance procedures are in place and that grievances are effectively managed*
- *target communication strategies*
- *develop an appropriate workplace culture where staff are encouraged to report incidents of workplace bullying and related harassment issues*
- *counsel alleged perpetrators of bullying regarding workplace and legal consequences of their actions and monitor their behaviour*
- *target training in performance management issues for supervisors and staff*
- *ensure access to, and provision of, support systems such as employee assistance programs, post incident professional counselling services and peer support programs*
- *review internal/external security provisions*
- *workplace practices – job rotation/rostering in jobs where there is greater physical or psychological demands on some individuals than others*

## Research Findings

This Appendix summarises findings from research into occupational stress.

### Claims

The following are frequently stated causes of workers compensation claims for occupational stress:

- interpersonal conflict with supervisors/peers
- bullying, victimisation, whistleblowing and workplace harassment
- workload, pressure and deadlines
- lack of role clarity
- inadequate performance counselling or other management processes
- anxiety caused by organisational change
- fatigue in the workplace (long hours, short breaks)
- forced relocation and restructuring
- recruitment and selection processes
- introduction of new technology without adequate employee consultation, information, familiarisation and training
- trauma, client aggression and assault
- poor, inadequate or lack of communication between all levels of management with employees

### Indicators

An agency with employees at risk from occupational stress is likely to have:

- low morale and staff dissatisfaction
- high number of staff and client complaints
- poor work performance
- high rates of grievances and disputes
- high levels of absenteeism and sick leave
- high accident and injury rates
- high incidence of workers compensation claims involving occupational stress
- increased staff turnover
- industrial unrest
- evidence of dysfunctional behaviour (eg misuse of alcohol or other drugs)
- high rates of medical and early retirement
- poor occupational health, safety, injury and rehabilitation management

### Data sources

Data may be gathered from the following sources and analysed to identify hazards:

- absenteeism and sick leave records
- grievances, disputes and complaints
- accident, injury and incident reports
- workers compensation claims
- staff turnover statistics
- exit interviews
- medical and early retirement records
- safety audits
- workplace inspection reports
- results of consultations with staff including confidential surveys
- health and environmental monitoring
- observations

This process should be considered in discussion with key stakeholders. If employee surveys are conducted, focus groups can be used to validate the information gathered. Analysing the information by factors such as age, length of service, gender, workplace level, role and locality can assist agencies to develop targeted prevention strategies.

### Reactions

Numerous factors determine an individual's behavioural, physiological or psychological reaction to stress. These include levels of home/social support, physical and emotional health, personality, previous experience of stress, coping behaviours, and the individual's perception of their ability to cope. Perceived or actual lack of support in the workplace is also relevant to this issue. Some common reactions to occupational stress in the workplace are:

<b>Behavioural reactions</b>	<b>Physiological reactions</b>	<b>Psychological reactions</b>
<p>Individuals reacting to distress may display the following behaviours:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increased alcohol, tobacco and other drug use</li> <li>• decline in work performance</li> <li>• behavioural changes such as aggression, withdrawal, anger</li> </ul>	<p>Exposure to distress may impair the body's immune system leading to a greater susceptibility to illness. Physiological changes may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• change in appetite</li> <li>• transient increases in blood pressure</li> <li>• sleeping difficulties</li> <li>• transient increases in heart rate</li> <li>• muscle tension and tremors</li> <li>• feeling of fatigue</li> <li>• gastrointestinal problems</li> </ul>	<p>Psychological distress can be caused by the cumulative effect of ongoing adverse circumstances or by a single traumatic incident. Emotional or psychological reactions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• difficulty in concentration and, sometimes, effects on short term memory</li> <li>• decreased self esteem and lowered morale</li> <li>• anxiety and/or depression</li> </ul>

## **Conditions**

Illness and diseases that are associated with occupational stress include:

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- coronary heart disease
  - hypertension
  - stroke
  - trauma, post trauma and mental illness
  - migraine
  - trauma induced diabetes
  - obesity, eating disorders
  - substance abuse and addiction
  - skin diseases
  - occupational overuse injuries

Employees who are continuously exposed to stressors at work can be potentially at risk from an injury, illness or disease associated with occupational stress. Furthermore, the deterioration of an employee's health caused by occupational stress may directly or indirectly contribute, through no fault of the employee, to other workplace injuries (eg manual handling, motor vehicle accidents, moving/stationary plant accidents).

### Issues for Consideration in the Development of Strategies

The prevention and management of occupational stress is part of a manager's human resource management responsibility and should not be regarded as an additional function. Management activities that are essential in preventing and managing occupational stress include:

- analysing jobs and skills to match activities to people
- providing meaningful and relevant work
- encouraging team work with realistic and non-competitive performance criteria
- communicating and clarifying expectations of work standards and deadlines including key management issues that may occur ie conduct investigations, disciplinary matters.
- monitoring individual and group workloads
- allowing employees some control over their own work and how it is performed
- assisting employees to prioritise work to meet realistic deadlines
- providing feedback on performance
- recognising efforts
- providing equitable and appropriate learning and development opportunities
- dealing promptly, efficiently and fairly with workplace grievances
- informing employees of impending change in sufficient time to ensure their full participation in the change process
- developing an environment of mutual respect and treating employees with fairness and equity
- developing human resource procedures and practices that are fair and equitable
- ensuring that all employees understand their agency's Code of Conduct obligations concerning the treatment of other employees.

Specific management activities that agencies should consider when developing their occupational stress management strategy include:

- early recognition and support
- identification of stressors and elimination or control of their impact
- intervention strategies including employee assistance programs
- provision of information and training
- development of local procedures to prevent or manage critical incidents.

#### **Early Recognition and Support**

Employees suffering from occupational stress may be reluctant and fearful to seek assistance from a supervisor or manager. Reasons for this reluctance or fear will vary from employee to employee but may involve:

- the employee's fear that job security will be affected by reporting the condition
- fear that reporting of stress will be seen by managers and peers as weakness or poor performance
- fear that a workers compensation claim will be perceived as a means of avoiding work
- peer pressure that any prolonged absence from work will be perceived as a means of avoiding work or will result in an additional workload for colleagues
- a negative workplace culture that is prejudicial to employees with work-related injury and illness
- poor injury management and work-based rehabilitation.

Agencies need to positively address these and similar employee perceptions, inappropriate management behaviour and cultural barriers in order to assist employees with genuine occupational

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health and safety concerns or work related injury or illness, including occupational stress. If these issues are not addressed, early intervention and support programs will be ineffective.

### **Intervention Strategies including Employee Assistance Programs**

Intervention strategies can assist employees to remain at work provided that the program specifically deals with those stressors that the employee can have some control over. This type of program is not successful in resolving stressors involving structural, management, broader working environment and working conditions issues.

Programs such as coping skills training need not be restricted to just ‘treating’ the symptoms. While individual employees themselves cannot eliminate many of the causes of occupational stress they can minimise and manage some of the risks.

The actions of managers in the early identification of problems and in actively seeking assistance for employees who are experiencing occupational stress can be invaluable in helping the employee. Such actions prevent or minimise stress-related problems and assist in preventing absence from work and the need for workers compensation claims. Managers may require training and guidelines to help them identify troubled or distressed employees.

A major component of an early intervention strategy is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or similar service. EAPs assist with both personal and work-related problems. They provide access to confidential counselling services, to information and educational material and referral to self help groups or specialist services. Employees can self-refer, or a manager can offer them the option of attending.

Agencies should evaluate EAPs to assess their added value. Information outlined in Appendix C may be useful to agencies that are reviewing or developing an EAP. Contracted EAP providers should not use the confidential nature of their service to avoid the same scrutiny as any other organisation to which services are outsourced.

### **Information and Training**

If, after conducting a risk assessment, an agency identifies areas where employees may be exposed to significant potential or actual risk of occupational stress, the agency should consider developing an education program to inform employees of occupational stress and to promote preventative strategies. It is important that potential areas of risk are identified.

Training programs can assist individuals to cope with stress through relaxation, both physical and mental, exercise, meditation, assertiveness, improved diet and sleep patterns, and enhanced problem solving and coping skills.

Training in these techniques may be incorporated in the general training program and offered on a regular basis by the agency and/or offered to employees experiencing stress-related problems. Risk identification and assessment will help agencies identify the need for such training.

The type of information and training that would benefit both managers and employees includes negotiation and communication skills; dealing with workplace harassment and victimisation; conflict and grievance management and resolution; management of aggression; customer contact skills; safe job design and change management skills.

Additionally, training for employees should be multi-faceted including adequate training in: how to perform their work and meet their responsibilities; how to access support systems within and outside the organisation; and what action to take when exposed to unacceptable stress levels or if

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they start to develop signs of stress reactions. For those staff involved in critical incidents, the training should include the types of reactions to expect within themselves after such an incident and the types of support services available.

Managers' training and development should include:

- refresher and/or training in general management and supervisory skills, where appropriate;
- competency to exercise OH&S responsibilities in relation to occupational stress;
- support services and how to access them; and
- a knowledge of local policies and procedures.

These might include the skills and strategies needed to identify, intervene and manage occupational stress in the workplace eg critical incident procedures and grievance procedures. Good management practices and management support are intrinsic to the successful management of occupational stress and cannot be overemphasised.

### **Prevention and Management of Critical Incidents**

A critical incident is a situation that may cause strong reactions with potential to interfere with the individual's ability to function either in the workplace or in their personal environment, through post-traumatic stress. Examples of critical incidents are:

- situations that threaten life or health
- situations that result in physical injury
- serious injury or death of a colleague in the line of duty
- work situations that attract undue or critical media attention
- verbal or physical abuse
- sexual harassment or assault.

There are three stages of critical incident management:

- prevention strategies (eg client risk assessment, access control, safety screens, training in aggression management)
- incident management (what happens during an incident to minimise its impact including means of signalling a duress situation and provision of duress response)
- post-incident treatment, support and counselling.

Agencies employing staff who are at risk from critical incidents must develop and implement appropriate policies and procedures on critical incidents, which are incorporated in the agency's overall risk management strategy for occupational stress.

Procedures will include an early intervention response plan to manage risk. The plan should identify, establish and promote a range of measures to minimise or eliminate the potential for a critical incident. It should specify the action to be taken in the event of a critical incident, including the support to be given to employees and others who have been exposed to a critical incident.