

# STRESS...WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Workplace stress has a negative impact on the organisation, clients, staff and most importantly on the individual employee. As reactions to stress will vary from one individual to another – and may also vary at different times of our lives – it's important that we learn to recognise stress and understand what to do to reduce it.

Stress is not just confined to upper management and the people that make the major decisions. Stress is found at all levels of work and life. What we need to do is teach ourselves and our employees how to stay positive about job and personal life situations. We need to learn philosophies in critical situations to prevent stress, burn-out, depression and anger. We also need to recognise the onset of stress symptoms in order to take preventative measures.

Whilst tackling personal stress is an individual's responsibility; employers and managers have a responsibility to help reduce stress which may arise in their employees as a result of their work.

## DID YOU KNOW?

The 3 most valued work conditions (if available) identified by the respondents to the NT Community Sector Staff survey were:

1. Higher rates of pay
2. Portable long service leave across sector
3. Less stressful work environment

Source: NT Community Sector Staff Survey 2007

## IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

How do you know if you, or a colleague, or someone who reports to you is suffering from stress or burnout (chronic stress)?

Here are some early warning signs<sup>1</sup>.

- ★ Exhausted, tired and physically run down
- ★ Feel annoyed or irritated towards clients and co-workers
- ★ Cynical and negative towards work
- ★ Couldn't care less about doing a "good job"
- ★ A sense of being besieged
- ★ Increased absenteeism and reduced performance – easily distracted
- ★ Increased incidence of minor accidents
- ★ Frequent headaches and/or gastrointestinal disturbances
- ★ Weight loss or gain
- ★ Difficulty sleeping
- ★ Difficulty thinking logically and making decisions
- ★ Unable to relax and concentrate (at home and/or work)
- ★ Feeling weepy or tearful.

If you recognise 2 or 3 (or more) of these symptoms, then you or your colleague or staff member may be at risk of stress, and potentially burnout.

But do keep in mind, there is no such thing as a stress-free work environment and without sufficient challenges, workers run the risk of "rust out", in which they get bored and start clock-watching – this can be stressful in itself.

<sup>1</sup> This material is based on the following source: Roche, A. & Skinner, N. (2005). Stress and Burnout A Prevention Handbook for the Alcohol and Other Drugs Workforce. National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA), Flinders University.



## TAKING ACTION<sup>2</sup>

As an employer or manager you have an important role to play in:

- ★ assessing and controlling workplace factors identified as potentially associated with work-related stress
- ★ identifying and encouraging employees to report concerns at an early stage, and
- ★ providing a supportive environment that allows employees to seek help.

**Remember:** Some workplace stress factors are simply beyond our control. Rather than focus on the things we can't change, employers and managers should **focus on areas** where we can have a **positive impact**.

Workplace causes of stress:	What you can do about them:
<b>Demands:</b> employees often become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do.	Pay attention to the way the job is designed, training needs and whether it is possible for employees to work more flexible hours or job share.
<b>Control:</b> employees can feel disaffected and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work.	Work with employees to reduce the impact by making adjustments to the work role or place of work, or providing additional training or resources. Review job descriptions.
<b>Support:</b> levels of sick leave and absenteeism often rise if employees feel they cannot talk to managers about issues that are troubling them.	Give employees the opportunity to talk about the issues causing stress, provide a sympathetic ear and keep them informed. Provide advice on external support services.
<b>Relationships:</b> a failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying.	Check the organisation's policies for handling grievances, unsatisfactory performance, poor attendance and misconduct and for tackling bullying and harassment. Build an effective working relationship with your staff.
<b>Role:</b> employees will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them,	Review the induction process, work out an accurate job description - provide appropriate information and training necessary for all employees to undertake their role with confidence. Provide constructive feedback to your staff.
<b>Change:</b> change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to huge uncertainty and insecurity.	Plan ahead so change doesn't come out of the blue. Consult with employees so they have a real input, and work together to solve problems. Change is a constant - support your staff in dealing with it.

**The bottom line:** Workplace stress creates emotional, financial (staff turnover and retention issues) and safety concerns for employers and managers - workplace stress management and reduction makes sense and **it is simply the right thing to do!**

<sup>2</sup> Note: This is not intended to be a clinical analysis of stress in the workplace – rather a common-sense approach to recognising and reacting to the symptoms of stress.