

## Identifying Stress

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide guidance to Principals and Managers in identifying possible signs of stress in employees and providing appropriate support.

### WHAT IS STRESS?

Everyone experiences stress at some stage in their life. Stress is often referred to as the harmful physical, psychological and emotional responses that occur when an individual is exposed to perceived environmental pressures. Harmful responses to these pressures, known as 'stressors', occur when the requirements of a situation do not match the perceived capabilities, resources or needs of the individual.

How an individual responds to stressors will depend on their personality, perceptions and past experiences. Some stress is positive in that it assists us in achieving our work and personal goals. However, when exposed to prolonged or repeated stress, this may potentially lead to a number of adverse reactions including psychological injury.

Exposure to stress can produce feelings of depression or anxiety that can be relieved through psychological and/or psychiatric treatment.

### IMPACTS ON THE WORKPLACE

When an individual experiences stress, it not only impacts on their work behaviour but also the broader work environment. Indeed, psychological injury is recognised as the most costly type of workers' compensation claim.

#### The impact of stress in the workplace may be manifested in:

- Increased or excessive absenteeism
- High or increased accident rates or WorkCover claims
- Reduced morale
- Poor interpersonal relations in the workplace
- Poor or reduced work output and performance
- Increased staff turnover

### RECOGNISING THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Identifying the signs and symptoms of employee stress, and working proactively to address and resolve problems, can reduce the impact that these issues have on the individual and the workplace.

As a Principal/Manager, you are in an ideal position to recognise the early warning signs indicating an employee is experiencing stress and/or requires support.

The information you use in assessing an employee's situation may come from a variety of sources. Sometimes individuals will clearly communicate that they are experiencing personal or work related difficulties - they may even approach you directly. Often, however, it is through observing an individual's behaviour and non-verbal communication, that you can identify this issue.

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## SOME EARLY SIGNS OF STRESS

- increased absenteeism
- altered performance
- changes in attitude, mood or behaviour
- becoming irritable, volatile or aggressive
- conflict with others
- diminished work relationships
- tiredness/lethargy/lack of interest
- difficulty in concentrating or making decisions
- changes to appearance or personal hygiene
- becoming withdrawn or isolated
- demonstrating unrealistic standards or expectations for self or others
- uncharacteristically labile

## RESPONDING TO A TROUBLED OR STRESSED EMPLOYEE

Approaching an employee to discuss performance and emotional issues can be one of the most challenging yet important responsibilities as a Principal or Manager. Many feel apprehensive and unsure about confronting a troubled or stressed employee. Some are simply uncomfortable with the possible employee response or reaction – resistance, defensiveness, hostility. Others may find it difficult to display objectivity in the face of the many disruptions an employee may have caused. However, if left unaddressed, these issues can magnify.

Some general guidelines that may be of assistance when approaching and dealing with stressed employees include:

### Be Prepared –

1. Take the time to prepare. Gather relevant notes, documentation and organise your thoughts. Mentally rehearse your approach and be clear on the employee's work performance history.
2. Consult with your local Employee Assistance Service or HR personnel for suggestions on supportive and non-threatening language you might use when raising issues with an employee.
3. Consult with your relevant Human Resource Officers to ensure the meeting is consistent with the Department's procedures and practices.
4. Approach the employee at the earliest indication of the issue. Do not wait until an identified issue has escalated into something more complicated and entrenched.
5. Arrange a suitable time and location for a private meeting and invite the employee to bring a support person if they wish.

### Conducting the interview/conversation

6. Use active listening skills throughout the discussion.
7. Be welcoming and relaxed, whilst showing concern. Be open about the reason for the discussion and be honest about your concern for the employee's well-being and the impact on others in the workplace.
8. Convey your observations of the signs/situations that brought the matter to your attention. Be specific, provide examples and make references to date, time and place.
9. Focus on relevant work performance issues: avoid making judgements. Do not use labels, opinions or inferences about personal issues.
10. Be objective, fair, and consistent and always be respectful of the employee's privacy.
11. Balance the discussion with positive feedback.
12. Be prepared for emotional reactions. Give the employee an opportunity to express any feelings of stress or frustration and wait until they have run out of momentum.
13. Remain empathetic and demonstrate genuine concern for their well-being.



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## Generate a plan and follow up -

14. Consider possible solutions – seek suggestions from the employee.
15. Solutions may involve temporary adjustments to work duties or acceptance of a referral to the Department's confidential Employee Assistance Service for advice or counselling.
16. Arrange a follow up meeting to assess progress on your agreed solutions and decisions.

## THE IMPACT OF NOT TAKING ACTION

Increased absenteeism, reduced morale, increased staff turnover and deterioration of interpersonal relations are only some of the impacts of stress in the workplace.

Ignoring obvious signs and symptoms of workplace stress can have serious implications for the workplace, employees and the broader community. Lack of effective intervention and early resolution strategies will escalate issue(s) and cause the situation to become more complicated and entrenched.

Early intervention strategies such as conflict resolution, mediation, changes to workload or referral to the Department's Employee Assistance Service (EAS), are effective interventions that can assist to resolve the identified issue(s).

## SUPPORT YOUR EMPLOYEES AND COLLEAGUES

At a local level, middle managers and other colleagues can play a fundamental role in identifying and providing assistance to employees experiencing work related or personal stress. Work colleagues can assist in the:

- Early identification of employees with signs or symptoms of distress;
- Early notification and referral to the Department's EAS or rehabilitation personnel;
- Maintaining regular communication with stressed employees;
- Identifying suitable duties, where required;
- Providing support in maintaining or returning the employee to work.

## EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE SERVICE REFERENCES

The Department's Employee Assistance Service (EAS) provides a range of proactive and supportive psychological health services to employees. Services include free short-term confidential counselling, training and development programs, critical incident debriefing, coaching and team building activities. These services assist individuals and workplaces to increase psychological resilience, improve communication, develop positive work relationships and enhance wellbeing.

The Department's Employee Assistance Services are performed by qualified psychologists, counsellors or social workers. For information on how to access the EAS visit the [Creating Healthier Workplaces](#) website. This site also provides links to general information relating to mental health problems through [Psychological Health Links](#).

## ARTICLE REFERENCE

Assure Programs (2003), *'Employee Assistance Program: Leader Guide'*. Assure Programs Pty Ltd

