MANAGING STRESS ARISING FROM WORK

What Is Workplace Stress?

People experience stress in many parts of their lives. Although stress is an essential element of many activities at work and at home, stress becomes harmful when it reaches an intensity that begins to impair daily activities.

The focus of this brochure is *harmful* stress that arises from work situations, as opposed to stress that is generated by an employee's personal life.

Harmful workplace stress has been associated with:

✔ Jobs that demand a lot from the employees while allowing them little control over how the job is performed,

✔ Work environments that are unsafe and/or uncomfortable, and

✔ Organizational practices that exclude employee participation or input.

This brochure offers suggestions for reducing the potentially harmful effects of work-related stress on employers and employees.

Is Workplace Stress Costly?
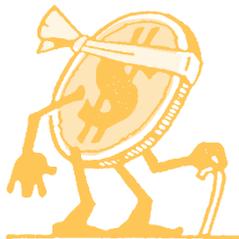
While the number of compensated, work-related stress claims may have decreased in California as a result of the 1993 reform of the workers' compensation insurance rules for injury causation, the costs of workplace stress remain high. Stress that arises from work activities is a contributor to such costly problems as low business productivity, occupational injuries and illnesses, absenteeism, poor employee morale, and high health care expenditures.

What Is the Competitive Impact of Workplace Stress?

In addition to the financial cost of workplace stress, employers should also be concerned about the adverse impact of workplace stress on a business' ability to compete in the marketplace. Investing in workplace stress reduction can yield significant payoffs in business productivity and competitiveness.

What Can Be Done About Workplace Stress?

There are many ways to reduce the level of workplace stress. Implementing successful workplace stress-management measures depends on:

- Valuing your employees' well-being while they are at work,
- Being flexible when tackling any workplace stress problem, and
- Creating and maintaining open lines of communication between you and your employees.

By fostering two-way conversations with your employees about stress issues, employers can encourage employees to suggest solutions to the problems they experience on the job. Your employees' knowledge of the workplace should be considered in evaluating any suggested solution to workplace stress problems.

Just as workplace activities can produce stress in an employee's life, personal factors can do the same, because an employee's personal stress can magnify the effect of harmful workplace stress. It is difficult to say where one ends and the other begins. While this brochure offers *employers* a practical approach to identifying and reducing harmful workplace stress, it also recognizes that *employees* must take responsibility for reducing harmful stress that arises from their personal lives. This brochure also assists employers by focusing on the workplace factors they *can* control, an approach that can lead to a reduction in the influence of factors that employers *cannot* control.

How Can Employers Take "AIM" at Managing Workplace Stress?
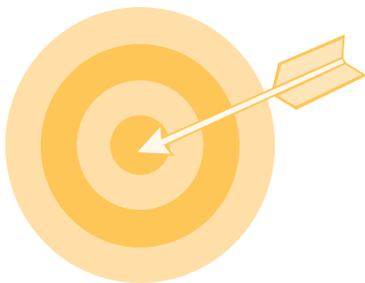
Cal/OSHA recommends that employers consider using the following three-step approach to managing workplace stress:

STEP 1 **Assess** whether your workplace has jobs, environmental conditions, or organizational practices that contribute to harmful workplace stress.

STEP 2 **Implement** stress-management measures that you and your employees believe will be effective in your workplace.

STEP 3 **Monitor** your progress and implement adjustments as appropriate.

Assess

Begin the assessment of the "stress profile" of your workplace by reviewing your business records. As you conduct this review, consider the questions in the Records Review Checklist or develop your own customized checklist.

Records Review Checklist

A "yes" answer to any of the following questions does not necessarily indicate that you have a workplace stress problem, but it does suggest that the situation warrants further investigation:

Yes	No	
____	____	Has your workplace recently experienced an increased number of stress-related workers' compensation claims?
____	____	Does your Cal/OSHA Log 200 contain workplace injury and illness entries that refer to stress?
____	____	Have you had any employee complaints or grievances in which stress was listed as a contributing factor?
____	____	Have you had any customer complaints describing your employees as "irritable" or "stressed"?
____	____	Have there been recorded incidents of verbal or physical conflict among any of your employees?
____	____	Have you noticed an increase in absenteeism associated with the filing of stress claims?
____	____	Do you have unusually high employee turnover rates that could be related to workplace stress?

Inventory Checklist

The next step is to assess the situation in more detail. Learn about job characteristics, uncomfortable or unsafe aspects of the work environment, and current organizational practices that may contribute to workplace stress. The best way to do this is to perform an inventory. Start by answering these sample questions:

Assessing Job Characteristics

Do your employees' jobs:

Yes	No	
____	____	Place a lot of performance demands on the employees but give them little decisional control?
____	____	Have to be repeated over and over again without any task variety?
____	____	Always have to be done at a hurried pace?
____	____	Require much less skill than the employees have to offer?
____	____	Require employees to provide service to demanding or difficult customers, clients, or other employees?
____	____	Require a high degree of vigilance?
____	____	Involve nontraditional hours or rotating shift work?
____	____	Require substantial overtime?

Assessing the Work Environment

Does the work environment:

Yes	No	
____	____	Include unsafe or uncomfortable conditions?
____	____	Pose a high risk of violence?

Assessing Organizational Practices

Yes	No	
____	____	Is there a lack of effective communication guidance about how to resolve workplace problems?
____	____	Do managers fail to recognize employees for jobs done well?
____	____	Are opportunities for skill development and advancement limited?
____	____	Are job expectations unclear or conflicting or are employees accountable to more than one supervisor?
____	____	Are job and assignment distributions done fairly and based on merit, business need, or some other appropriate criteria?
____	____	Have there been incidents of verbal, sexual, or other types of harassment?
____	____	Has downsizing or job insecurity affected workplace morale?

Now that you have reviewed these questions and perhaps thought of others you feel apply to your workplace, find out how your employees would answer the same questions. Learning about your job activities, work environment, and organizational practices from your employees' point of view can often lead to the development of solutions to workplace stress problems. Tell your employees that *all* of the members of your organization share in the responsibility for working together to address workplace stress.

Gathering information from your employees can be done informally by you or your supervisors, either individually or in small group meetings. Because some employees may be concerned about privacy or possible reprisal, you may need to ask employees for their views anonymously. For instance, you could request your employees to complete an anonymous questionnaire about job characteristics, work environment, and organizational practices. Whatever means you choose, customize the questions to get answers that are specific to your workplace.

Just making an effort to assess the problem signals to your employees that you value their well-being. These actions can improve morale and reduce stress even before you implement any formal measures.

Implement

Now that you have completed Step 1, you should have a clear picture of the kinds of jobs, work environments, and organizational practices that can contribute to workplace stress. If you or your employees answered "yes" to any of the questions in Step 1, consider implementing one or more of the suggestions in Step 2.

The following suggestions are based on recommendations made by managers, psychologists, and human resource professionals who have extensive experience in the field of workplace stress. These suggestions have been implemented by other employers and have been incorporated into many successful stress-management plans.

Job Characteristics

Jobs Characterized by High-Demand/Low-Control, Repetition of Simple Tasks, or Hurried Pace

Consider varying the tasks and/or rotating employees through different jobs. When feasible, place employees who cannot handle repetitious tasks in other types of jobs or encourage retraining. Consider giving selected employees in high-demand/low-control jobs some decisional responsibility.

Some fast-paced jobs may keep an employee's interest and be perceived as less stressful than a slow-paced job. Always ask your employees about their jobs before assuming they are stressed.

Low-Skill Jobs

Some people are comfortable performing low-skill jobs; others are not. If an employee is unhappy with the tasks that he or she has been assigned, you might have a mismatch between the employee's abilities and the level of skill required to do the job. Consider reorganizing the job to include other tasks and skills. If an employee wants to perform at a higher level of responsibility or skill, encourage him or her to apply for such jobs. You may also consider retraining programs or experimenting with increases in responsibility that provide the employee a means of demonstrating his or her capabilities. Encourage and support education and skill development of all your employees.

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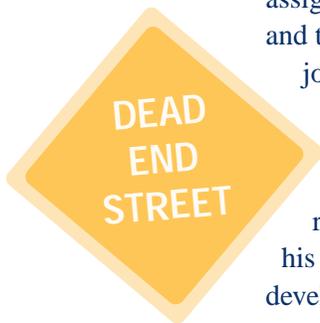
Jobs Involving Interaction with Demanding Individuals

Provide training to supervisors and employees in general communication skills, and ensure that the training includes ways to handle difficult people and defuse hostile situations. Ensure that employees know that they can refer an angry individual to their supervisor if they are unable to handle an unpleasant situation. Encourage employees to attend group meetings during which they can share their experiences with handling demanding individuals.

Jobs Involving High Vigilance

Provide employees with support and recognition for good work, and ensure that employees take required breaks if they have a habit of working through them. Encourage employees to participate in planning and implementing job changes to reduce the level of vigilance that may be required for certain jobs.

Jobs Involving Nontraditional Work Schedules

Consider selecting employees for nontraditional shifts on a voluntary basis. Avoid scheduling an employee for an involuntary work shift on a regular basis (i.e., give employees a chance to regulate their sleep cycles to minimize the negative effects on their health and personal lives).

Encourage employees to participate in planning and implementating work scheduling changes when it is necessary to switch them from traditional to nontraditional work hours.

Jobs Requiring Substantial Overtime

Since substantial overtime may intensify workplace stress, consider whether overtime is the best business option for your organization. To the extent possible, consider making overtime a voluntary activity. If voluntary overtime is not possible, arrange for more flexible overtime hours to accommodate the needs of your employees' personal lives.

Organizational Practices

Participation

Value your employees' contributions to the workplace. Provide them with ways to participate directly in evaluating and possibly reorganizing the ways in which their jobs are performed. Train your managers and supervisors to be effective communicators, coaches, and facilitators.

Communication

Keep channels of communication open between supervisors and their employees, and encourage employees to discuss their concerns with their supervisors. Make sure your supervisors don't sweep stress problems "under the rug", so that you only hear about them when they have become almost unmanageable! Convey to employees that you understand every human being has limitations, each person should be aware of his or her limitations, and each person should alert the appropriate supervisor when those boundaries are approached.

Ask for employees' opinions when job changes are planned. Before job changes are made permanent, review the job-related effects of the changes with employees. Avoid the shock of reorganization; give employees time to adjust to major changes in the work routine. Encourage anonymous feedback by means of a suggestion box or a toll-free telephone number.

Recognition

Train supervisors to recognize employee achievement and reward positive employee performance. Consider holding employee recognition events and granting "perks" for special performance (e.g., an "Employee of the Month" award).

Work Environment

Risk of Workplace Violence

Develop a workplace violence-prevention plan if there are security risks present in your workplace. Use Cal/OSHA's *Model Injury and Illness Prevention Program for Workplace Security* as a guide.

Opportunities for Skill Development and Advancement

Encourage and support your employees efforts to pursue education and skill development. Offer your employees the opportunity to participate in job training activities that are designed to improve the employees' skills.

Unclear or Conflicting Expectations

Ensure that employees are fully informed about specific duties or tasks. Define the lines of authority in your organization and encourage employee participation. If an employee reports to more than one supervisor, consider simplifying the supervisory relationship. Give appropriate training to supervisors in being aware of the challenges and problems faced by employees who report to more than one supervisor.

Favoritism

Be consistent in issuing assignments and have clear policies about hiring, promotions, and disciplinary actions. Offer benefits and privileges equally to all employees.

Verbal, Sexual, or Other Types of Harassment

Make sure your employees know that you do not tolerate any type of harassing behavior in the workplace. Educate all employees about the consequences of such behavior for them and the organization. Make sure your employees are aware of their legal rights and what steps the organization will take to address harassment situations.

Effects of Downsizing and Job Insecurity

Since uncertainty is stressful for everyone, promptly provide employees with information about the timing, scope, and reasons for downsizing. During uncertain economic times for the business, consider providing all employees with a stress-management workshop.

A Note on Personal Stress

Although the boundary between workplace and personal stress can be difficult to pinpoint, workplace stress can aggravate personal stress and vice versa. Factors outside of your workplace can cause stress for your employees and adversely affect their ability to do their jobs. Personal problems involving family, child care, or health matters can intensify an employee's perception of workplace stress. Caring about and taking steps to improve your employees' overall well-being can help to reduce the stress level in your workplace.

Stress may be caused or exacerbated by personal factors such as:

✔ Financial worries
✔ Housing problems
✔ Family or health problems
✔ Illness or loss of a loved one
✔ Spousal separation or divorce
✔ Worries about the future
✔ Child care problems

Personal stress levels depend on lifestyle, environment, and a person's ability to cope with life's various demanding situations. Employees should be encouraged to make a continuous effort to cope with personal stress problems. If an employee appears to need help in coping with personal stress problems, consider suggesting that the employee contact an employee assistance program, if one is available.

Remember that every workplace is unique. Some of the suggestions in this brochure may not be appropriate for your particular business. Speak with your employees and involve them in "customizing" solutions to your workplace stress problem. Without employee involvement, you have very little chance of succeeding at reducing workplace stress. In fact, you might inadvertently increase it. Be considerate of your employees' concerns about general economic conditions that may be affecting your business, even though such matters may be beyond the control of both you and your employees.

Above all, communicate that you are genuinely concerned about workplace stress so that your employees will know you are trying to provide them with a healthy work environment. Just as no one expects to have a stress-free home life, your employees do not expect a stress-free workplace. You are likely to see their appreciation, and more importantly, the benefits of their appreciation, when they realize that their employer is responsive if the workplace stress level becomes harmful.

Some Suggestions on How to Manage Personal Stress

❏ Learn what causes your stress and make a list of situations or events that usually make you angry or upset. Write down how you have felt about these situations in the past and how you handled each event.

❏ Make a list of your expectations and how you plan to meet them.

❏ Recognize that every human being has limitations.

❏ Rank and prioritize your problems. Take on one problem at a time.

❏ Discuss concerns and problems with friends and people you trust.

❏ Seek professional help when appropriate.

❏ Exercise regularly and get enough sleep.

❏ Eat right to stay healthy and have enough energy to handle the demands of your daily life.

❏ Balance your day by prioritizing your tasks in the morning. For example, make a list of your deadlines, bills to pay, and errands you need to run.

❏ During your work break, try to do the opposite of whatever you do at work. For example, if you stand all day, sit down during your break. If you have an indoor job, go outside to get fresh air.

❏ Make time to enjoy an activity outside of work.

❏ If you dislike something at home or work, try to change those things that bother you. "Griping" doesn't solve much.

❏ Know when you have too much to do and ask for help.

❏ Share responsibilities with others. Can co-workers, your children, your spouse, or others take over some tasks?

❏ Maintain a positive attitude; this will make it easier to live and work with others.

❏ Learn about the various relaxation methods available to help you ease your daily tensions.

❏ Do activities that help you feel relaxed and content (e.g., taking a brisk walk, stretching, or imagining you are in a favorite place).

STEP 3 ⬤ **Monitor**

As indicated earlier in this brochure, reducing the levels and effects of harmful workplace stress is the goal of a workplace stress-management plan. Monitoring is essential to determine your progress toward achieving that goal and provides information that may lead to necessary adjustments in the implementation of the plan. After you and your employees have assessed current job conditions and practices and have begun to make changes, keep written records of the outcome.

First, review the questions in Step 1 again. Did any of the answers change?

Were the changes you made positively received by employees?

Were you able to measure whether the perceived level of workplace stress decreased?

If the situation did not improve, do not give up. Review with your supervisors and employees what changes were made, determine why the changes were not effective, and try something different. Always keep in mind that successful stress-management is a "trial-and-error" process. Do not expect instant success. If you record on a regular basis how well your selected measures are working, and you make adjustments as necessary, you should eventually be successful.

Important Things to Remember
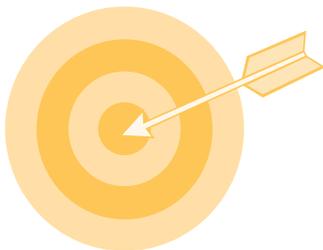
- You cannot address or reduce every employee's workplace or personal stress problem.

- Do not set unachievable goals for your stress-management measures.

- "AIM" at improvement—one step at a time.

A Final Note about "Solving" Workplace Stress Problems

Stress is a part of everyday life; we all experience it to one degree or another. When you look for workplace stress, do not be surprised if you find it. Remember, just because stressful conditions are present, this does not, by itself, mean that your workplace has a stress problem. What counts is the degree to which you and your employees perceive that jobs, conditions, and practices are hampering performance.

Do not try to eliminate all stress from workplace life. It cannot be done—in the workplace or anywhere else. Focus on only those job characteristics, conditions, and practices that appear to have a substantial impact on performance and can realistically be improved. A few "quick fixes" can make a big difference in performance. The best way to focus on the "real" stress problem in your workplace is to get feedback from your employees.

Situations that are stressful for everyone may be unavoidable (e.g., downsizing, layoffs, and plant closures). Even in these situations, respectful and considerate management of your employees can help everyone get through the difficult time with a manageable level of stress.

Resources

Additional Readings on Workplace Stress

Karasek, R., and T. Theorell, eds. *Healthy Work: Stress, Productivity, and the Reconstruction of Working Life.* New York: Basic Books Inc., 1990.

Matheson, M. T., and J. M. Ivancevich, eds. *Controlling Stress: Effective Human Resource and Management Strategies.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc, 1987.

Quick, J. C., L. R. Murphy, and J. J. Hurrell, eds. *Stress and Well-Being at Work.* Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1992.

Riley, A. W., and S. J. Zaccaro. *Occupational Stress and Organizational Effectiveness.* New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987.

Sauter, S. L., J. J. Hurrell, and C. L. Cooper, eds. *Job Control and Worker Health.* Chichester, England: John Wiley Sons Ltd., 1989.

Cal/OSHA Consultation Service

The Cal/OSHA Consultation Service can provide assistance to employers at no charge. See the back page of this brochure for the address and telephone number of the Consultation Service office nearest your business.

Other Resources (Referrals and Literature)

California Psychological Association
1022 G Street
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 442-0271

California Society for Clinical Social Work
720 Howe Ave, Suite 112
Sacramento, CA 95825
(916) 923-0255

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)
Mailstop C-13
4676 Columbia Parkway
Cincinnati, OH 45226
1-(800) 356-4674
Fax (513) 533-8573

Internet; www.cdc.gov/niosh/homepage.html

Cal/OSHA Consultation Service Offices

For assistance call our toll-free number: 1-800-963-9424

Northern/Central Valley
2424 Arden Way, Suite 410
Sacramento, CA 95825

Southern California
3550 West 6th Street, Room 309
Los Angeles, CA 90020

San Francisco Bay Area
1515 Clay Street, Suite 1103
Oakland, CA, 94612

- **Voluntary Protection Program**
  San Francisco, CA 94142
  (415) 972-8517

- **Education and Training Unit**
  Sacramento, CA 95825
  (916) 574-2528

- **High Hazard Assistance Unit**
  Fresno, CA 93727
  (209) 454-0615

- **Special Emphasis Program Unit**
  Sante Fe Springs, CA 90670
  (562) 903-1446

San Diego/San Bernardino
7827 Convoy Court, Suite 406
San Diego, CA 92111

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For more information, please contact any of the offices identified above.

Your call will in no way trigger an inspection by Cal/OSHA.

Internet: www.dir.ca.gov