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Preventing and Managing Psychological Injuries in the Workplace

Managers' Guide



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Work Related Psychological Injury

A Guide for Managers

This booklet answers some common questions about work related psychological injury (which is sometimes referred to as ‘stress’). It explains what it is, and what you, as a manager, can do about it. The booklet does not introduce any concepts that are different from good management. Good management can reduce the incidence of psychological injury where it is already occurring and can help to prevent it in the first place.

What is stress, and what is work related psychological injury?

‘Stress’ is a generic term that is widely used in society to describe the feeling that some people might have in response to pressures that they face in their lives. In the workplace context, it is a term often used to describe the responses that may develop when people are subjected to demands and expectations that are out of keeping with their needs, abilities, skills and coping strategies.

If stress is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill health. The form of injury generally associated with work related stress is called ‘psychological injury’ and such injuries may be compensable under the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* (the SRC Act).

The majority of psychological injury claims are not the result of a major traumatic event or critical incident. Most such claims develop over long periods, often in response to the interaction of a number of work related and other factors. The final section of this booklet outlines some of the pressures at work (or ‘workplace stressors’) that might be relevant contributing factors.

As a manager, is it my concern?

It’s your responsibility under the *Occupational Health and Safety (Commonwealth Employment) Act 1991* to do as much as is reasonably practicable to protect the health and safety of employees whom you manage at work. This responsibility extends to risks of psychological injury that the employees might face at work.

You should also be aware that employees affected by stressors may be more likely to make mistakes that may result in other forms of injury. Acute stress reactions can lead to increased muscular tension which, combined with static work posture or repetitive movements, can contribute to occupational overuse syndrome (or OOS).

Action to reduce psychological injury can be cost-effective. The effect of unmanaged workplace stressors on your organisation may show up as high staff turnover, an increase in unplanned absence, workplace conflict, reduced work performance, customer complaints, staff replacement costs, and costly workers' compensation claims.

Psychological injury claims, while relatively small in number, have a significant impact on an agency's workers' compensation premium. Their cost is the highest of any claim type—average psychological injury claim costs can be four times greater than the cost of other types of claims. This is because they usually involve extended periods of time off work, and higher medical, legal and other claim payments compared to other types of claims.

Under health and safety law, what must I do?

Where work may pose a risk of injury or illness to an employee, an employer (through its managers) must assess that risk. A risk assessment for psychological injury should involve:

- looking for pressures at work (risks) that could cause psychological injury;
- deciding who might suffer the effects of such risks; and
- developing management strategies to control or eliminate the risk.

The assessment should be reviewed from time to time to ensure it remains valid.

Isn't psychological injury also caused by problems outside work?

Under the SRC Act, it is necessary for work to make a 'material contribution' to psychological injury for it to be compensable. A material contribution means that some event or occurrence in the course of employment, or some characteristic of the work performed, or the conditions under which it was performed must have been a real, contributing cause to the condition. Essentially, there needs to be a close connection between the condition and employment. However, an individual's susceptibility to stressors, or the fact that pressures outside of work may also have contributed to the condition is, in almost all cases, not sufficient to avoid liability.

An employer is not under a duty to prevent ill health caused by pressures outside work, such as financial or domestic worries. But personal problems can make it difficult for employees to cope with the pressures of work, and their performance at work might suffer. So recognising that staff may find

themselves in this position, and assisting them to deal appropriately with such issues where possible, will benefit both the employer and the employee.

What if reasonable management action causes an individual to submit a claim for psychological injury?

The fact that psychological injury has arisen from reasonable management action is, in almost all cases, not sufficient to avoid liability for a claim.

Exclusionary provisions of the SRC Act state that liability is precluded if it is established that an injury or disease has resulted from 'reasonable disciplinary action' taken against an employee. But it is now established as a result of judicial interpretation that 'disciplinary action' does not commence until such time as the employee is charged with an offence under the relevant disciplinary code. Investigatory procedures leading up to the laying of formal charges are not covered by the exclusion. Regular performance appraisal sessions will not generally be covered, although in the circumstances of particular cases, performance review interviews and counselling leading to a warning about unsatisfactory conduct may be found to be 'disciplinary action'.

Are some people more susceptible than others?

An individual's personality and coping style will influence the way they react to the demands placed on them. But anyone may be vulnerable to stressors, depending on the pressure they're under at any time—even people who are usually able to cope.

An individual's susceptibility to psychological injury is, in almost all cases, not sufficient to avoid liability for a workers' compensation claim. As a manager you're responsible, as far as is reasonably practicable, for making sure that work doesn't injure your staff or make them ill. If you become aware that someone is particularly vulnerable because of their circumstances, look at how their work is organised, and consider options to relieve any undue pressures (such as those outlined in the final section of this booklet).

Are there early warning signs of psychological injury?

Many of the outward signs of the impact of stressors on individuals are noticeable. In particular, you should look for changes in a person's mood or behaviour, such as deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness, absenteeism, reduced performance or increased mistakes. Be aware that employees who make workers' compensation claims for

psychological injury generally take two to four times more unplanned leave than other employees prior to making a claim. Those suffering from stress may also smoke or drink alcohol more than usual, or even turn to drugs. They might also complain about their health (for example, they may complain of frequent headaches, lack of sleep or nausea).

Will employees tell me that they are feeling stressed?

Employees may be reluctant to admit they are feeling stressed by work. This may be because they feel that such an admission could be seen as a sign of weakness. Or it may be that they see management as being part of their problem. You can help by making it easier for your staff to discuss such feelings. Reassure them that the information they give you will be treated in confidence. Show your preparedness to listen to their concerns and discuss solutions.

If I do find out that workplace stressors are, or could be, a problem for a member of my staff, what can I do about it?

There's no single best way of tackling work related stressors. What you do will depend on your work practices and the causes of the problem. Simply providing training or help for those affected may assist them to cope in the short term, but won't necessarily be enough if it does not tackle the source of the problem. The final section of this booklet outlines some of the pressures at work that might be relevant and provides some suggestions about what you may be able to do.

Most of the 'things to do' boil down to good management practices:

- show that you take your staff seriously when people admit to being under too much pressure
- ensure that your staff have the skills, training and resources they need, so that they know what to do, are confident that they can do it and receive credit for doing it well
- if possible, provide some scope for varying working conditions and for people to influence the way their jobs are done. This will increase their interest in, and sense of ownership of, their work
- ensure that people are treated fairly and consistently in line with the policies and practices in your agency and that bullying and harassment aren't tolerated at work, and
- ensure good two-way communication, especially at times of change.

What should I do if an employee complains about being under too much pressure?

First, listen to them. If they believe that they are affected by workplace stressors:

- try to identify and address the source(s)
- involve the employee in decisions
- if necessary, encourage them to seek further help through their doctor, health and safety representative, or employee assistance program (if available)
- if you are not their line manager, ensure that their manager treats the employee with understanding and maintains confidentiality, and
- if unsure about what to do, seek further advice.

If one of your employees is affected by workplace stressors, this may represent the tip of an iceberg. Find out whether others might also be experiencing similar problems.

Will stress management training help?

Stress management training comes in various forms. It usually teaches people to cope better with the pressures they may come across at work and outside work. Because it focuses on the individual, it may not be sufficient to tackle all of the relevant stressors (such as those that might arise, for example, from work organisation or workplace culture). However, it can be useful as one part of a more comprehensive plan to avoid psychological injury.

What about an employee assistance program?

An employee assistance program can provide various services (eg counselling, performance management, financial advice, legal assistance). Because these services must protect the confidentiality of the individual, the information they can give you may not help you identify and address workplace stressors. On the other hand, like training, such programs can be useful as part of a more comprehensive plan to avoid psychological injury.

What should I do if an employee puts in a workers' compensation claim?

If one of your staff puts in a workers' compensation claim for a psychological injury treat the claim in the same way as you would a claim for any other type of injury. At all cost, be supportive and avoid adopting an approach that

apportions ‘blame’. The SRC Act provides a ‘no fault’ scheme. Essentially, this means that an injured employee does not have to show that the employer did anything wrong in order to be eligible for compensation. And the employee is generally covered provided that their injury did not arise from their own ‘serious and wilful misconduct’ or was not intentionally self-inflicted.

If a period of time off work is recommended, keep in touch with the employee while they are off work and, as appropriate, their doctor. Remember that the employee may be able to return to work to do part of their pre-injury duties, work reduced hours, or do different duties before they are ready to return to their pre-injury duties.

Experience shows that the longer it takes for the employee to return to work, the more likely it is for the employer/employee relationship to deteriorate and for the case to become entrenched in medical and legal arguments. The best return to work outcomes are generally achieved where injured employees are supported by their supervisors and work colleagues in recovery.

Work Related Stressors—Checklist of What Management Can Do

Psychological injury may develop as a result of a critical incident or traumatic event, or it may develop over a long period, often in response to the interaction of a number of work related and other factors. This section outlines some of the pressures at work (or ‘workplace stressors’) that might be relevant contributing factors, as well as possible management responses.

1. Culture

Factors that could contribute to psychological injury

- lack of communication and consultation between management and staff
- a culture of blame when things go wrong, denial of potential problems
- an expectation that people will regularly work long hours or take work home with them.

What management can do

- provide opportunities for staff to contribute ideas, especially in planning and organising their own jobs
- introduce clear business objectives, good communication, and close employee involvement, particularly during periods of change
- be honest with yourself, set a good example, and listen to and respect others

- be approachable—create an atmosphere where people feel it is OK to talk to you about any problems they are having
- avoid encouraging people to regularly work long hours.

2. Demands of the job

Factors that could contribute to psychological injury

- too much to do, too little time
- too little training for the job
- boring or repetitive work, or too little to do
- the working environment

What management can do

- prioritise tasks, cut out unnecessary work
- establish clear and realistic deadlines
- try to give warning of urgent or important jobs
- make sure individuals are matched to jobs
- provide training for those who need more
- consider whether it is possible to redesign jobs to reduce risk (for example, increasing the variety of tasks, or providing individuals or groups with some clearly defined scope to decide how their work should be completed and how problems should be tackled)
- where redesign is impractical, consider using job rotation for employees working at a fast pace in areas with heavy workloads, or where work is monotonous or repetitive
- make sure workplace hazards, such as noise, harmful substances and the threat of violence, are properly controlled.

3. Support and the individual

Factors that could contribute to psychological injury

- lack of support from a manager or co-workers
- not being able to balance the demands of work and life outside work

What management can do

- encourage employees to recognise when they are feeling stressed and provide training in coping strategies

- support and encourage staff, even when things go wrong
- encourage a healthy work-life balance
- consider the scope for more flexible work schedules (eg flexible working hours, working from home)
- take into account that everyone is different, and try to allocate work so that everyone is working in the way that helps them work best
- if available, encourage the use of employee assistance programs
- ensure that employees are appropriately counselled and supported following a critical or traumatic incident.

4. Control

Factors that could contribute to psychological injury

- lack of control over work activities

What management can do

- give more control to staff by enabling them some scope to plan their own work, make decisions about how that work should be completed and how problems should be tackled.

5. Relationships

Factors that could contribute to psychological injury

- poor relationships with others
- bullying, racial or sexual harassment

What management can do

- provide training in interpersonal skills
- set up effective systems to prevent bullying and harassment (for example, a policy, agreed grievance procedure and proper investigation of complaints)

6. Change

Factors that could contribute to psychological injury

- uncertainty about what is happening
- fears about job security

What management can do

- ensure good communication with staff
- provide effective support for staff throughout change processes.

7. Role

Factors that could contribute to psychological injury

- staff feeling that the job requires them to behave in conflicting ways at the same time
- confusion about how everyone fits in

What management can do

- talk to people regularly to make sure that everyone is clear about what their job requires them to do
- make sure that everyone has clearly defined objectives and responsibilities linked to business objectives, and training on how everyone fits in.

Remember:

- involve your staff and health and safety representatives before making decisions about workplace stressors—they are certain to have good ideas you could use
- follow up any changes you make to ensure that they're having the effect you intended
- review the situation when major changes are made in your workplace (eg organisational change, new equipment, work systems or processes) to make sure that the impact of workplace stressors hasn't increased
- lead by example—as a manager, you can communicate powerful signals about the importance of avoiding psychological injury.

Where can I get more information or help?

More detailed advice in relation to these and other issues is available on Comcare's internet site at www.comcare.gov.au or by contacting Comcare on 1300 366 979.

For further information contact

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