ECI Briefing Note:
Managing Stress

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European Construction Institute

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Introduction

What is stress?

Every individual has a differing capacity to deal with challenging circumstances. A person is suffering from stress when the demands exceed a person's capacity to cope.

Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them. There is a clear distinction between pressure, which can create a 'buzz' and be a motivating factor, and stress, which can occur when this pressure becomes excessive.

Stress affects the way people think and behave when they believe that they cannot cope with the demands that have been placed upon them. Stress is not an illness but exposure to prolonged and excessive stress can lead to both mental and physical ill health.

One in seven people say that they find their work either very or extremely stressful   (HSE, 2007a)

Stress is different to pressure. Most people respond to increased pressure in a positive way. Some pressure can lead to improved performance, greater innovation,

increased and better-directed energy and improved morale and motivation. However, when levels of pressure exceed the individual's perceived ability to cope, stress develops, which is negative and damaging to performance.

This note should be used in conjunction with the Safety Health & Environment (SHE) Management Guide and the Leadership and Motivation in Safety, Health and Environment, both available from ECI.

What are the causes of stress?

What one person finds stressful can be 'ordinary' to another person. For the affected individual, perception is the reality; therefore, their perception of the issue is important. Work-related stress is a reaction to events or experiences at work, e.g.:

- Poor communication
- Task overload
- Periods of change within an organisation
- Lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities
- Poor instruction or insufficient training

Problems can arise through external factors such as:

- Bereavement
- Divorce
- Moving house
- Financial problems
- Fear of failure etc.

Examples of causes of stress:
- If you give a member of your team a tight deadline on a project they feel they have neither the skills nor ability to do well, they may begin to feel undue pressure which could result in work related stress.
- Stress can also result from having too few demands, as people will become bored, feel undervalued and lack recognition. If they feel they have little or no say over the work they do or how they do it, this may cause them stress.

A person can experience excessive pressure and demands outside work just as much as they can at work. Stress tends to build up over time because of a combination of factors that may not all be work-related. Conflicting demands of work and home can cause excessive stress.

What is the reaction to stress?

Stress is a significant cause of illness and disease and is known to be linked with high levels of sickness absence, staff turnover and other indicators of organisational underperformance - including human error.

When stress leads to absence, the average length of sick leave is 30.1 days. This average is much higher than the average length of sick leave for work-related illness in general (21.2 days)   (HSE, 2007b)

Recent statistics confirm that work related stress is widespread in the working population and is not confined to particular sectors or high risk jobs or industries.

A total of nearly 11 million working days were lost to stress, depression and anxiety in 2005/06   (HSE, 2007a)

What are the signs of stress?

Stress can result in physical and mental symptoms, as well as causing emotional and behavioural effects. In some cases there are clear signs that people are experiencing stress at work and if these can be identified early, action can be taken before the pressure becomes a problem. This may make it easier to reduce and eliminate the causes.

Examples of the physical effects of stress include:
- Elevated heart rate, trembling
- Increased blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Indigestion, stomach upsets
- Pain in neck and / or lower back
- A lowering of resistance to infection
- Changes in appetite or sleep pattern

Examples of the mental symptoms of stress include:
- Becoming more indecisive
- Issues with concentration
- Memory loss
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Low self esteem

Examples of the emotional and behavioural effects of stress include:
- Increased anxiety and irritability
- Verbal or physical aggression
- Competitiveness and impatience
- Increased hypersensitivity

Depression and anxiety are the most common stress-related complaints seen by family doctors, affecting 20% of the working population of the UK   (HSE, 2007a)

People under stress may also show a tendency to consume more alcohol, smoke more and use excesses of caffeine or other stimulants.

The following are indicators of stress within a workforce:

- Inability to cope with demands of the job or changes in level of demand
- Long hours and reluctance to take leave
- Breakdown of workplace relationships
- Problems with management style

Why should we manage stress?

There are several important reasons for managing stress by tackling the underlying causes of stress:

The Business Case
Research has shown work-related stress to have adverse effects for organisations in terms of:

- staff commitment to work
- staff performance and productivity
- injuries and accidents caused by human error
- staff turnover and intention to leave
- attendance levels
- staff recruitment and retention
- customer satisfaction
- organisational image and reputation
- potential litigation

HSE research in 2003 into offshore work found approximately 70% of common work-related stressors are also potential root causes of accidents when they were caused by human error. (HSE, 2003)

By taking action to manage the causes of stress in your workplace, you can prevent or reduce the impact of these problems on your organisation and bring about business benefits.

The Moral/Ethical Case
Prolonged periods of stress, including work-related stress, have an adverse effect on health. Stress has been linked to:

- Physical effects such as heart disease, back pain, headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances or various minor illnesses
- Psychological effects such as anxiety and depression, loss of concentration and poor decision making

Stress can also lead to other behaviours that can have an adverse effect on psychological and physical health and well-being, for example, social withdrawal, aggressive behaviour, alcohol/drug abuse, eating disorders and working long hours.

The Legal Case

Employers have duties to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities and to take measures to control that risk, e.g. Framework Directive 89/391/EEC as amended, particularly Articles 5 & 6, and; Temporary Workers Directive 91/383/EEC as amended. Different countries have different regulations that apply, for example[1]:

- **UK**: The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, and The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974;
- **Belgium**: Arrêté royal du 14/09/1992 portant exécution de la directive du Conseil des Communautés européennes du 12/06/1989 www.employment.belgium.be/defaultTab.aspx?id=556

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[1] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52004DC0062:EN:NOT

- **Germany**: Verordnung über bergbauliche Unterlagen, Einwirkungsbereiche und die Bergbau-Versuchsstrecke vom 11/11/1982, Bundesgesetzblatt Teil I vom 30/11/1982 Seite 1553.
- **France**: Loi n° 91-1414 du 31/12/1991 modifiant le code du travail et le code de la santé publique en vue de favoriser la prévention des risques professionnels et portant transposition de directives européennes relatives à la santé et à la sécurité du travail ref: JO du 07/01/1992, page 319.
  www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000020581815&dateTexte=&categorieLien=id
- **Italy**: Decreto legislativo del 19/09/1994 n. 626, attuazione delle direttive 89/391/CEE, 89/654/CEE, 89/655/CEE, 89/656/CEE, 90/269/CEE, 90/270/CEE, 90/394/CEE e 90/679/CEE riguardanti il miglioramento della sicurezza e della salute dei lavoratori sul luogo di lavoro ref: Supplemento ordinario n. 141 alla GURI - Serie generale - del 12/11/1994 n. 265.
- **Netherlands**: Arbeidsomstandighedenwet, Staatsblad nr 757.

Personal problems and home-related stress can have a big effect in the workplace. Although you are not legally responsible for stress that originates in the home, well-managed organisations will have work-life balance arrangements which allow these factors to be addressed. This might include such things as access to counselling services, adaptations to the work or changes to working hours.
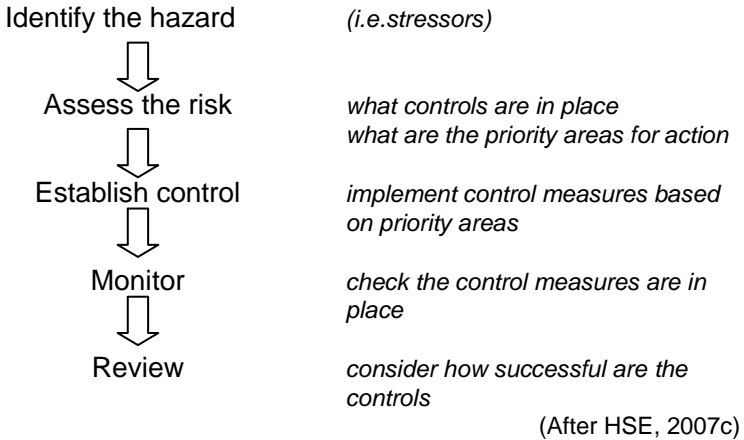
How can we manage stress?

This website shows how everyone in an organisation has a responsibility for the health and well being of themselves and their colleagues
www.hse.gov.uk/stress/roles/index.htm?ebul=hsegen/28-jun-2010&cr=27

Taking action and developing strategies to manage stress effectively can have a positive effect for the organisation. Employees will be more committed to your business and productivity is likely to increase. Steps can include:

1. Be aware of your legal responsibilities
2. Create an awareness of the causes and symptoms of stress
3. Establish a policy for stress management that has the commitment and resources from senior management for a stress management program
4. Carry out a stress audit and/or risk assessment to identify the causes of stress and to conduct first stage of a stress management program.
    Risk assessment includes looking at the likely causes of stress in the workplace and evaluating the consequences.

A risk assessment system includes the following steps:

Identify the hazard   *(i.e.stressors)*

⇩

    Assess the risk   *what controls are in place*
what are the priority areas for action

⇩

Establish control   *implement control measures based*
on priority areas

⇩

     Monitor   *check the control measures are in*
place

⇩

     Review   *consider how successful are the*
controls

                                         (After HSE, 2007c)

5. Once the causes of stress within an organisation have been identified, a stress action plan can be put in place to manage the causes of stress. The action plan should set objectives and targets followed up by a programme which identifies who is responsible and dates for completing actions

Hints and tips for tackling stress at work

Often individuals don't recognize that they are stressed. Your early actions can help prevent them from becoming more unwell.

Line manager action
In confidence, ask open questions to find out what is happening, how they are feeling, and what solutions they think there might be.

Let them know about sources at support that exist at work (e.g. occupational health). With their agreement, you may also find it useful to contact their representative in occupational health or human resources.

Agree with them what will happen next, who will take what action, which colleagues will be told and who will say what.

Colleague action
If a colleague is suffering from stress, it will be helpful for you to discuss in confidence with their line manager what you have noticed. He/she may not know the individual as well as you, and may be unaware of their condition.

Hints and tips for individual stress management or coaching individuals

Become stress aware
Be aware of what causes stress
Recognise your own stress reactions
Take action when symptoms develop

Stress is a process that builds and builds until you feel like you are going to explode. It is more effective to intervene early in the process rather than later. Try to become aware of the signs that suggest the process has begun.

Keep things in proportion
Rationalise fears – your fears are usually worse than reality. Accept things you can't change and change things you can

Avoid extra stress
Whenever possible, plan to avoid too many big changes at the same time, e.g. new job, marriage, new house, exams

Plan your work
Tension and anxiety build up when work seems endless. Plan tasks to use time and energy more efficiently. Set long-range goals and daily priorities - identify your number-one priority and get it done first
Say no when/if necessary. Identify & eliminate your personal "time-wasters"

Be realistic
People who expect too much of themselves can get tense and anxious if things don't work out. Set practical goals and expect to be successful

Take a break
A change of pace and/or a break, no matter how short, will help prevent stress

Talk it over
When tension builds up, discuss the problem with a close friend or with the people involved
Ask for help with work when/if necessary
Seek help from a stress counsellor

Exercise regularly and eat healthily
Swim, walk, bike, jog – any favourite exercise will help let off steam and work out stress
Eat a well balanced diet, with plenty of fruit and vegetables

Learn to relax
Everyone can learn to relax. Just a few minutes of peace and quiet every day can make a big difference
Try to get plenty of sleep; fatigue can make you less able to cope with stress

Seek medical advice
Recognise and act upon the symptoms of stress
A check-up is always a good guide – if stress symptoms go on for an extended period, there could be other causes to the way you are feeling

References

Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (c.37) The Stationery Office 1974. ISBN 978 0 10 543774 1.

HSE (2003). *Development of internal company standards of good management practice and a task-based risk assessment tool for offshore work-related stressors* RR107 HSE Books 2003 ISBN 978 0 7176 2225 2 www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/index.htm

HSE (2007a). *Psychosocial working conditions in Britain in 2007* HSE 2007 www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/pdf/pwc2007.pdf

HSE (2007b). *Self-reported work-related illness and workplace injuries in 2005/06: Results from the Labour Force Survey* HSE 2007 www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/lfs/lfs0506.pdf

HSE (2007c). *Managing the causes of work related stress. A step-by-step approach using the management standards.* ISBN 978 0 7176 6273 9. Available at:
http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/hsg218.pdf

Management of health and safety at work. Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Approved Code of Practice and guidance L21 (Second edition) HSE Books 2000. ISBN 978 0 7176 2488 1.

Legal references
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52004DC0062:EN:NOT

Useful resources

Good practice and research findings
eg FACTS sheet Nos 8 & 22. European Agency for Safety and
Health at Work. Available at: http://agency.osha.eu.int

EASHW produce a number of facts sheets on various occupational safety &
health issues, including stress. These are not specifically linked to
construction.

*European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working
Conditions* (2005). Work Related Stress www.eurofound.eu.int

*European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working
Conditions* (2008). Review of Working Conditions in the EU 2007-8.
www.eurofound.europa.eu

Managing the causes of work-related stress.
A step-by-step approach using the Management Standards. Health
and Safety Executive, 2007.
http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/hsg218.pdf

This is a free-to-download, web-friendly version of HSG218 (Second edition,
published 2007). This version has been adapted for online use from HSE's
current printed version.

Work related stress case studies
http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/casestudies.htm

To discover how stress impacts on individuals and how this can be managed
have a look at the Individual Experiences Case Studies. To find out more
about how businesses have dealt with the issue of Stress see the Business
Solution Case studies.

Stress Solutions Discussion Group
http://webcommunities.hse.gov.uk/inovem/inovem.ti/group/stress_solutions/gr
ouphome

This group is for people to discuss approaches to tackling stress in the
workplace, and to provide feedback on HSE's developing approach. Here
you can share your ideas, experiences and questions with other interested
organisations and individuals and is ideally suited to those professionally
interested in, or responsible for the reduction of stress.

Stress tools and templates
http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm

There are a number of tools associated with the UK Management Standards process provided across this website which are free for you to use or share with your colleagues. There are also a number of templates for you to use as a starting point.

Causes of stress at work (NIOSH USA)
http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/99-101/

Publication No. 99-101 was prepared by a NIOSH. This publication highlights knowledge about the causes of stress at work and outlines steps that can be taken to prevent job stress.

An analysis of the prevalence and distribution of stress in the construction industry
http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr518.pdf

Prepared by the Health and Safety Laboratory for the Health and Safety Executive 2007 RR518

Preventing stress at work
Conditions of work digest 2/92) – ISBN 9221082652

Related occupational diseases
List of occupational diseases annexed to Rec No. 194, 2002
2.4.   Mental and behavioural disorders
2.4.1. Post-traumatic stress disorder
2.4.2. Other mental or behavioural disorders not mentioned in the preceding item where a direct link is established scientifically, or determined by methods appropriate to national conditions and practice, between the exposure to risk factors arising from work activities and the mental and behavioural disorder(s) contracted by the worker'

www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---safework/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_125137.pdf

www.ilo.org/global/What_we_do/Publications/ILOBookstore/Orderonline/Books/lang--en/docName--WCMS_PUBL_9221082652_EN/index.htm

Further useful web links

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/CheckSymptoms/SATs/mentalhealth

www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress/Pages/Introduction.aspx

www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress/pages/treatment.aspx

www.stressmanagementtips.com/

http://helpguide.org/mental/stress_management_relief_coping.htm

www.csreurope.org/solutions.php?action=show_solution&solution_id=230

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14605422

joh.med.uoeh-u.ac.jp/pdf/E45/E45_1_01.pdf

www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=868993&show=abstract

www.well-minds.com/

www.stress.org.uk/Stress-at-work.aspx?gclid=CPeOxfSEm6UCFVD-2AodvCsDHg

www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a782427422~frm=titlelink

www.workstress.net/con09/isabellepres.pdf

www.etuc.org/

www.etuc.org/spip.php?page=recherche&lang=en&recherche=Stress

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For further information about the SHE task force and SHE publications please visit

http://www.eci-online.org/taskforces/she