

WE KNOW

HUMAN RESOURCES

MANAGING WORKPLACE STRESS

QUICK GUIDE

This quick guide provides summarised information on how to recognise and manage workplace stress.

WHAT IS WORKPLACE STRESS?

Workplace stress can be present in a number of situations:

- Intrinsically stressful work – for example, work that is emotionally challenging, requires intense prolonged concentration or has very high consequences for error.
- Badly organised work – for example, where employees are not adequately supervised, where long and/or unsociable hours are worked, where work is repetitive, working schedules are inflexible and where deadlines and time pressures are common.
- Self-generated stress – where the person creates their own stressors, because of personal choices. For example holding multiple jobs, agreeing to unreasonable demands or refusing to ask for help.

WHAT ARE AN EMPLOYER'S OBLIGATIONS?

An employer has an obligation to take all practicable steps to prevent their employees from suffering harm in the workplace. 'Harm' includes physical or mental harm caused by work-related stress. Therefore high blood pressure, a nervous breakdown, heart attack or depression caused by workplace stress could lead to liability for the employer if it has not taken all practicable steps to deal with the issue.

WHAT CAN AN EMPLOYER BE LIABLE FOR?

A failure by an employer to provide a safe and healthy workplace may found a personal grievance. It can also be grounds for a prosecution under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992. Employers will generally be liable for employees who have suffered harm in the workplace if:

- The employee has suffered harm caused by stress; and
- The stress is work-related, rather than resulting predominantly from personal issues; and
- The employer knew, or should have known about the employee's difficulties because the employee has reported the claim or because the nature of the work is inherently stressful; and
- The employer did not take all practicable steps to prevent the employee from suffering harm.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO MINIMISE THE RISK OF A STRESS CLAIM IN THE WORKPLACE?

There are a number of steps employers can take to minimise the risk of stress claims and absences due to stress:

- Ensure that employees are properly supervised and managed and that managers are trained to recognise potential workplace stress situations and deal with them.
- Ensure that annual leave is taken on a regular basis and that a reasonable proportion is taken in one uninterrupted period
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- Monitor employees' sick leave records. A sudden increase in sick leave, or drop in performance levels can be an indication of an employee suffering from stress.
- Take all complaints of workplace stress seriously and investigate them.
- Establish a clear process for considering and responding to complaints and concerns from employees. See the Employers' Chamber Stress Evaluation and Reporting Sheet.
- Consider whether the stressors are work-related or whether there are significant other causes.
- If stressors are work-related, consider what steps can be taken to reduce the risk of harm being suffered.

For further information regarding Managing Workplace Stress or other aspects of Employment Relations, please contact The Chamber, email Keith Woodroof: keithw@cecc.org.nz or call (03) 366 5096.