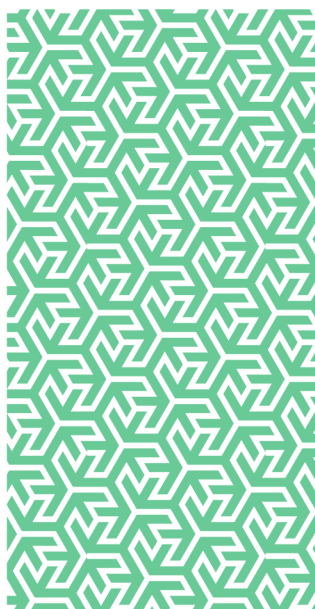




Risk control

Stress Risk Management for Emergency Services



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Risk Control

Stress Risk Management for Emergency Services

Introduction

With the last decade of cuts to emergency services funding and increasing demand for service delivery, emergency services frontline staff constantly find themselves being stretched.

The emergency services environment can be inherently challenging, with the additional burdens of public scrutiny and belt-tightening potentially pushing some workers to breaking point.

What is Stress

Stress is a major cause of sickness absence in the workplace. It affects individuals, their families, and colleagues by impacting on their health. Stress also impacts on employers with incurred costs including sickness absence, replacement staff, lost production, reduced efficiencies, and increased accidents¹.

Stress has been defined in different ways over the years. Originally stress was believed to be caused by the environment in which one found themselves in, then later as a 'strain from within'. Today the definition focusses on both the situation and the individual. Basically, stress results from a lack of ability to cope with the demands and pressures of a situation.²

At one time or another most of us will experience stress in some form. Some individuals find stress motivating whilst for others it can be debilitating.³

This document will focus on work related stress, its causes, signs and symptoms, as well as management responsibilities to meet legal requirements.

Work-Related Stress

Work-related stress is one of the most reported causes of occupational ill health in Great Britain. In 2023-2024 work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 46% of all new and long-standing work-related ill health.⁴

Work-related stress can be understood as a harmful reaction that people experience to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work.

There are six main areas that can lead to work-related stress if they are not managed properly. These are: demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change.

For example, employees may say that they:

- Are not able to cope with the demands of their jobs
- Are unable to control the way they do their work
- Don't receive enough information and support

- Are having trouble with relationships at work, or are being bullied
- Don't fully understand their role and responsibilities
- Are not engaged when a business is undergoing change

Stress affects people differently – what stresses one person may not affect another. Factors like skills and experience, age or disability may all affect whether an employee can cope.⁵

The Emergency Services

Over the years the emergency services have used various means to manage work-related stress. These have included processes designed to normalise emotional responses such as group debriefings. Critical Initial Stress Debriefing (CISD) was developed to provide a safe, open, and non-judgmental space for trauma survivors, enabling each participant to share their initial reactions and emotions following a critical incident. Emergency and rescue workers, police officers, firefighters, and military personnel can also benefit from this debriefing. While it's important to provide relief to the victims, service providers who experience trauma are often forgotten. CISD was initially created to provide help for these individuals⁶.

It has long been recognised that trauma and exposure to critical incidents can lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD has had a substantial impact on employer liability for workplace psychological injury. The emergency services are an example of high-risk workforces that demand clear policies and procedures within an organisation. The challenge is to minimise the injury to individuals and lessen the cost to organisations through the optimal application of preventative strategies. Organisations need to anticipate the possible traumatic exposures that may affect the workforce and have strategies to deal with the effects in the workplace, particularly the negative mental health outcomes in some personnel. This domain is relevant to all employers as accidents and violence are possible in most workplaces.

Screening should be considered for high-risk individuals, particularly following a major traumatic event or cumulative exposure, such as in the emergency services. While psychological debriefing has no demonstrated benefit, the benefits of early intervention necessitate ready access to evidence-based treatments that have minimum barriers to care. Managers within the emergency services should be aware that distress may present indirectly in a similar way as conflict with management, poor performance and poor general health.⁷

Signs and Symptoms

These can be divided into two distinct areas for the workplace. There are team signs but also individual ones.

Team

Teams can experience stress at times where there could be heightened or just simply unusual activity which removes them from their usual workplace. Some simple signs can include:

- Arguments
- Increased staff turnover
- Increased cases of stress
- Increased sickness absence
- Decreased performance
- Decreased morale
- Increased complaints and grievances

Individual

With individuals it is important that we look at the person to see how behaviour and attitude may have changed. Individual stress can manifest itself in various forms such as:

- Mood swings
- Becoming withdrawn
- Loss of motivation, commitment and confidence
- Increased emotional reactions – being more tearful, sensitive or aggressive
- Becoming nervous or ‘twitchy’

Or they may seek to remove themselves more from the workplace by:

- Increased absences
- Being late and / or leaving work earlier

Stress Management Standards

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE)⁸ have laid out six key areas to support organisations in their task of managing stress in the workplace and failing to do so can negatively impact on employee's health and wellbeing.

The six areas are:

- 1 Demands:** Includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

- 2 Control:** How much say do the people have over the way they work.

- 3 Support:** Includes encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

- 4 Relationships:** Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

- 5 Role:** Do people understand their role within the organisation and does the organisation ensure roles are not conflicting.

- 6 Change:** How organisational change is (large and small) managed and communicated.

It is important that each of these areas is identified and that systems are in place to respond to any group or individual concerns. It is important that those involved in the Management Standards approach understand the need to focus on prevention and on managing the root causes of work-related stress, rather than trying to deal with problems only after they occur, and people are suffering from exposure to excessive pressure. This will stop the problem from developing to the position where people are negatively affected.

The HSE has developed a stress risk assessment template to be used in managing this area of business which is available from their website.⁹ These standards are equally applicable to any emergency service and provide a useful framework allowing the vast variety of differing stressors to be assessed.

Management Intervention and Support

Managers should be expected to identify potential traumatic or stressful situations and support staff through such events.

Furthermore, managers should be trained to identify and support workers who may be having difficulties not just through those unusual and traumatic events but to general day to day issues. Employees should as a minimum have awareness training, needs-based interventions and access to independent counselling support services via the Occupational Health team or Employee Advisory Service.

Some instances may require that the organisation has in place a system for on-going support for events that may be protracted and / or unusual. It is important that all employees should have access to an Occupational Health Service or Employee Advisory Service.

It is vital that, where managers have themselves identified or had such events or issues brought to their attention, they ensure that wherever possible mitigating factors are put in place. Any person or persons identified as possibly being affected by such incidents should have properly trained interventions to assess what support their needs.

Most emergency services have a tradition of recognising and responding to employees who experience traumatic situations. Most utilise Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) approaches and have identified staff members who have been properly trained and can deliver such interventions locally. However, services also need to have identified processes that go beyond TRiM interventions to support staff who develop issues.

Services should have identified within any Stress Management Policy the following three principle intervention types; primary, secondary and tertiary (see below table). Organisations need to be proactive to demonstrate compliance with the Health and Safety Executive's Management Standards to protect their own employees from harm.

Intervention Type	Response Type	Orientation	Focus	Example
Primary	Proactive	Prevention and Awareness	All employees/ Organisation wide	Conflict-management training, work management awareness, wellness programmes. TRiM awareness
Secondary	Proactive and potentially reactive	Prevention - Removal of risk	At risk employees and/or Organisational risk factors	Coping skills training, job redesign, employee fitness assessments, targeted attention on known risks. TRiM intervention
Tertiary	Reactive		Employees in need of support/assistance	Personal Cognitive behavioural intervention sessions, post illness support programmes, external independent counselling

References

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- 3 Stress, available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/understanding-stress>
- 4 Health and safety at work Summary statistics for Great Britain 2024, available at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/assets/docs/hssh2324.pdf>
- 5 Work-related stress and how to manage it, available at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/causes.htm>
- 6 The Seven Steps Of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing To Support Trauma Recovery, available at: <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/stress/the-7-steps-of-critical-incident-stress-debriefing-and-how-they-support-trauma-recovery/>
- 7 Post-traumatic stress disorder in occupational settings: anticipating and managing the risk: Occupational Medicine 2007;57:404–410, available at: <https://academic.oup.com/occmed/article-abstract/57/6/404/1376894>
- 8 Managing risks and risk assessment at work, available at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/risk-assessment-template-and-examples.htm>
- 9 Example risk assessment on work-related stress for small businesses, available at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm>

Further information

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Get in touch

For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.



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