TIP SHEET 7

Support from supervisors and/or co-workers regarding work-related stress

The way workers are supported is key to reducing or moderating work-related stress. Support provided by supervisors and peers can cushion the stress responses people might otherwise experience when their jobs are demanding and they feel they do not have control over those demands.

Possible solutions

Decisions need to be made about what practical solutions (control measures) will be used in the workplace to prevent, eliminate or minimise the effect of work-related stressors on worker health.

> At the organisational level, controls target the work itself and focus on job design, work environment and working conditions.
>
> For the risk factor 'poor support', organisational level solutions address practical assistance, the provision of information, emotional support and positive feedback.

Organisational structures

There are many approaches a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) can take to ensure its workers feel supported:

- Ensure that management structures across the organisation and reporting lines within work teams are clear. This will help workers know who they are accountable to (either overall or for particular tasks) and where they can go for help with work problems.
- Provide new workers with a proper induction to the organisation and work unit.
- Provide and promote an employee assistance service that responds to individual issues or concerns, both work and non-work related.
- Promote a culture that values diversity in the workplace.
- Provide and promote flexible work practices that best suit individual and business needs. This may include working from home or flexible working hours.

Practical support

There are various types of assistance that a supervisor/manager or colleague can provide:

- Assist with work demands, including clear work goals.
- Provide all workers with adequate information.
- Provide workers with training and development opportunities.
- Conduct performance reviews and include constructive feedback.
- Provide additional assistance when workers are undertaking challenging tasks, such as new duties or roles.
- Where possible, ensure adequate backfilling of roles or redistribution of work when workers are out of the office or away on leave.

Information provision

- Hold regular team meetings that include discussions about pressures and challenges within the work unit. Assist workers to come up with practical solutions for any task-related issues that arise.
- Provide sufficient information to enable workers to perform tasks competently, particularly when workers are taking on new work.

Training and development

- It is important workers feel confident and capable of undertaking assigned tasks. Make sure they receive enough training for them to be competent in their roles.
- Training can be both task-specific and more general including, for example, training in ethics and behavioural expectations (code of conduct), mental health and cultural awareness.
- Develop training refresher sessions to ensure competencies are up to date.
- Make training available to part-time, casual and shift workers and those in remote locations.

- All workers, contractors and labour hire workers should be made aware of the policies concerning acceptable behaviour in the workplace.
- When appropriate, give workers managerial responsibilities to encourage a wider understanding of their tasks. This could include:
    - managing workload and resources
    - health and safety
    - performance management
    - managing conflict
    - interpersonal skills
    - emotional intelligence, including empathy and expressing and managing own emotions
    - effective communication.

Constructive feedback

- Provide regular feedback on task performance.
- Formally or informally congratulate workers/team members when tasks have been done well and be specific about what was done well.
- Give workers practical advice and guidance on areas that need improving.
- Use performance reviews to provide constructive advice for future performance, and include opportunities for skill development.

Emotional support

Emotional support from co-workers or supervisors can have a protective effect and may reduce worker strain, particularly in situations of high demand and low control.

Ways to do this are:

- Support open communication and encourage workers to share their concerns about work-related stressors at an early stage.

- Try to be aware of non work-related stressors that might be present in workers' lives and allow flexible work arrangements where practicable.
- Promote a team culture in which workers assist each other and provide support when required.
- Provide the time to talk through problems with workers and try to promote an 'open door' policy.
- Deal sensitively with workers who are experiencing problems.
- Pay attention to a team member who is behaving out of character.
- Hold formal and informal team-building activities to improve team cohesion.
- Establish a peer support system and a mentoring/buddy program for new starters.
- Take an interest in workers' lives beyond the workplace whilst being respectful of personal and professional boundaries.

At the individual level, solutions are aimed at assisting individuals to cope or build resilience. Appropriate activities to be considered at this level of intervention include:
- corporate induction programs
- access to employee assistance programs
- training about resilience
- health and wellbeing programs
- counselling/therapy for people experiencing distress from sources both in and outside of the workplace.

This tip sheet is one of 12 that refer to work-related stress. For more detail, go to workcover.nsw.gov.au

1. Overview of work-related stress
2. A risk management approach to work-related stress
3. Implementing a work-related stress risk management process
4. Risk factors for work-related stress
5. Work demands and work-related stress
6. Levels of control and work-related stress
7. Support from supervisors and/or co-workers regarding work-related stress
8. Role clarity, role conflict and work-related stress
9. Managing relationships and work-related stress
10. Recognition and reward – minimising work-related stress
11. Managing change and work-related stress
12. Organisational justice and work-related stress