Guideline

Stress Management Program

Abu Dhabi Occupational Safety and Health Center

Be part of our stress management program

www.oshad.ae
Don’t let stress control you.
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OSHAD’s Stress Management Booklet

This booklet exists to provide information and guidance about work-related stress. It is a vital part of OSHAD’S role in helping create safe and healthy workplaces throughout Abu Dhabi and the Emirates.

Work-related stress is one of the most frequently reported health problems in the industrialised world. In the EU alone, around half of all employees describe their workplace as stressful. It is in all our interests to keep stress levels in the workplace to a minimum. For employees, if left unchecked, excessive stress can impact on overall wellbeing, both physically and mentally. While for organisations stress can lead to low workforce morale and reduced productivity – some 50-60% of all lost working days can be attributed to work-related stress.
Employee’s Guidelines

What is stress?

Stress is a natural physical response to any situation that makes us feel threatened. The instant we sense danger of any kind, our bodily defences respond automatically by putting us into a heightened state of alertness; it’s a condition known as the ‘fight-or-flight-or-freeze’ response, or ‘stress response’.

Physical effects of the stress response include rapid heartbeat and breathing, a tightening of the muscles and raised blood pressure.

In moderation, of course, the stress response can be a positive thing – it sharpens the concentration and drives us forward to meet life’s challenges, such as when we’re focusing on a complex task or working to a deadline. Stress only becomes a problem when we exceed our limits.

Managing workplace stress

While it may not be feasible to eliminate work-related stress altogether, by making certain lifestyle / workplace adjustments it is possible to manage stress effectively. It is of course impossible to control everything that might contribute to your levels of stress. Therefore when tackling stress it is best to begin with those things that are within your control.
Top tips for managing stress at work

Nurture a positive outlook
Maintaining a positive outlook makes you better able to deal with stress, as the ability to keep your emotions in check means you are much more likely to solve the problem. A negative attitude simply adds to any stress you may be experiencing.

Communicate effectively
It isn’t always what you say that makes the difference, but how you say it. Taking a step back and examining the way you communicate can go a long way towards improving your relationships with colleagues and managers.

Eat healthily
To help minimise stress, it is important that you eat regular healthy meals. Low blood sugar caused by not eating properly can make you feel anxious and irritable, while eating too much can make you lethargic. By eating small but frequent meals, and ensuring that you eat a balanced diet, low in sugar, caffeine and processed carbohydrates and rich in fruit and vegetables, you enable your body to maintain a healthy level of blood sugar. This in turn prevents you from becoming tired and poorly focussed, which can lead to errors of judgment and mood swings.

Get enough sleep
When you are well-rested following an unbroken night’s sleep you are more focussed and better able to cope with stressful situations. However, stress and worry can lead to insomnia, meaning you go to work tired, which in turn can add to your stress levels. It’s a vicious circle. If possible, keep to a regular sleep schedule. This enables the body to adapt to a routine and you will find it easier to fall asleep. Aim to sleep for eight hours a night. If you are regularly having trouble with sleeping, see your doctor.

Stay fit
Taking regular exercise is a powerful antidote to stress, while aerobic activity is beneficial to cardiovascular health. Ideally you should be getting at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity most days of the week. If this is difficult to fit into your schedule, divide your physical activity into two or three longer workout sessions.
Take time to relax
This means making a conscious effort to set aside time for relaxation. Activities such as yoga, meditation and controlled breathing can place the body in a state of deep relaxation and work as counter to the stress response. Reading and walking are also good forms of relaxation. Allow time for socialising and pursuing your interests and hobbies.

Take regular breaks
Taking regular short breaks throughout your working day is an effective way of dealing with stress. Stepping away from a problem and doing something else, even for just a few minutes, can often help you arrive at a solution. Getting up from your desk periodically and moving around is good for both body and mind, and can make you more, rather than less, productive.

Delegate
If you are in a management or supervisory role, rather than attempt to do everything yourself, where appropriate, delegate the task. Many managers are poor delegators, preferring to oversee every task themselves. But consciously letting go of control and resisting the urge to micromanage can free you to focus on other things, while also reducing your stress levels. It also demonstrates to employees that they are trusted to work independently.

Be flexible
If a deadline needs to be pushed back due to unforeseen circumstances or if a colleague is overworked and needs more time to complete a task, being flexible about it not only reduces stress levels for all involved but, ultimately, can also be more productive.

Prioritise your time
Make a list of tasks in order of importance. If there are any tasks that you especially dislike doing, get these out of the way first. Break larger tasks into small steps, and focus on achieving one step at a time. You also should make sure you schedule a gap between tasks. This way you allow time for the unexpected.

Seek support
If you are experiencing problems at work, don’t be afraid to speak with family or friends. You may also wish to see a counsellor or speak to your doctor or occupational health professional, because talking them through with a sympathetic listener can often help you arrive at a solution.
Symptoms of stress

It is vital that you are able to recognise when your own stress levels are becoming unmanageable.

In this case it is vital that you bring it to the attention of your employer. If stress issues are addressed early on, it is more likely that you will stop them spiralling out of control and becoming a serious problem.

Below is a list of symptoms associated with stress. The greater the number of symptoms you recognise in yourself, the greater the likelihood that you are suffering excessively from stress.

Some common symptoms of stress

- Unexplained aches and pains
- Muscle tension or headaches
- Agitation
- Anxiety attacks
- Apathy and loss of interest in job
- Inability to concentrate
- Frequent days off work
- Changes in eating habits
- Disrupted sleep
- Chest pain and / or rapid heartbeat
- Confusion
- Indecisiveness
- Persistent worrying
- Depression
- Diarrhoea / constipation
- Self loathing
- Constant tiredness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Irritability
- Frequent colds
- Tearfulness
- Lonely or socially withdrawn
- Feeling unmotivated and / or lacking in confidence
- Forgetfulness
- Mood swings
- Irrational behaviour
- Nausea and / or dizziness
- Nervous ticks
- Nail biting
- Poor judgment
- Negative attitude
- Stomach problems
A word of caution...

It is important to remember that the symptoms of stress can also be indicative of other psychological or physical problems. If you’re experiencing what appear to be stress symptoms, it is vital that you visit your doctor to determine whether they are stress-related or the result of another underlying health issue.

Causes of stress

Work-related stress most commonly occurs when a person is unable to cope with the demands being placed on them. Stress can of course affect anyone at any level of the business, and no one is immune. Ultimately it is the responsibility of the employer to ensure that adequate measures are in place to minimise and manage work-related stress. However, all employees have a personal responsibility to look out for the symptoms of stress, and take steps to manage stress if it occurs, as well as managing stress at home.

Some common causes of work-related stress

- Adverse working conditions
- Poor management
- Inability to cope
- Organisational change
- Excessive workload
- Personal problems
- Persistent worrying
- Conflicting demands
- Conflicting work and family commitments
- Fear of losing one’s job
- Money problems
- Bullying and harassment

- Aggression and violence
- Poor communication
- Lack of clarity over one’s role
- Lack of training and / or support
- Ill health
- Too much overtime due to staff shortages
- Negative attitude
- Lack of time
- Interpersonal relationships
- Lack of job satisfaction
- Lack of a career path
- Unrealistic expectations

Personal stress

If you are experiencing problems in your personal life, and you feel they may be affecting your performance at work, it is important that you tell your employer. This way they are more likely to understand and take a supportive view. You may also wish to see a counsellor or speak to your doctor or occupational health professional.
Employer’s Guidelines

Managing stress – the employer’s responsibilities

In most cases, work-related stress is an organisational issue and not the fault of the individual employee. Common factors contributing to stress include poor management, excessive workloads, conflicting demands, lack of employee support, organisational change, interpersonal relationships and bullying and harassment. It is the employer’s responsibility to identify the signs and tackle the causes of stress before they develop into a serious problem. Not only is it the responsibility of employers to help minimise workplace stress, it is also in their best interest, as the business case for managing stress effectively is compelling. Absences resulting from work-related stress, and the associated psychosocial problems, tend to be longer than those arising from other causes and also contribute to a higher incidence of early retirement. The cost to businesses is estimated to run into billions.

Tackling the causes of stress

Taking all reasonable steps to minimise the causes of work-related stress are a responsibility of the employer.

To maintain a healthy workplace it is vital to keep stress to a minimum.
Management standards

There are six key management standards known to be effective in the control of workplace stress. These are: Demands, Control, Support, Relationships, Role and Change. Addressing these factors collectively and systematically helps simplify the risk assessment process and acts as a benchmark against which you can measure your organisation’s stress management performance. When conducting a stress management risk assessment, you should begin by asking the following six questions:

1. **Demands**
   Are employees able to cope with the demands placed upon them?

2. **Control**
   Do they have a level of personal control and a say over what they do?

3. **Support**
   Do they have adequate support from management and /or colleagues?

4. **Relationships**
   Are they treated fairly and respectfully by other members of staff – such as freedom from bullying or harassment?

5. **Role**
   Do they fully understand their role and responsibilities?

6. **Change**
   If your organisation is undergoing change, are they properly consulted and kept informed of developments?

It is important to understand how these six factors are related, how they impact on employees. When assessing risk it is therefore important that you take into account factors such as age, experience, capacity and gender.

In addition, there are other questions to consider when conducting your stress management risk assessment, plus some main steps to follow when assessing risk. To know more about this subject, please visit OSHAD’s stress management website through the following link: www.oshad.ae
**Employee involvement**
Involving everyone in the decision-making process will ensure that any stress management program that is put in place is fit for purpose.

**Personal stress**
If you suspect an employee is experiencing problems in their personal life, and you feel it may be affecting their performance at work, it is important that you invite them to talk about it. And, if appropriate, take steps to help.

*Download the OSHAD Employers' Stress Management Toolkit from the following link: www.oshad.ae*

**Why it’s important to your organisation – the benefits at a glance**

- Higher productivity
- Fewer days lost to sickness and absenteeism
- Reduced costs of sick pay, sickness cover, overtime and recruitment
- Lower staff turnover and improved retention
- A motivated and committed workforce
- Improved performance – leading to higher earning potential for employees
- Happier employees – who are less likely to move on
- Better management-employee relations
- Improved absence management
- Better understanding and tolerance among staff of problems related to stress
- A reduction in workplace accidents and injuries
- Improved customer care and client / supplier relations
- Enhanced corporate image and reputation
- Higher return on investment in training and career development
- Improved legal compliance and lower risk of litigation
- Becoming seen as a preferred employer due to effective stress management policies
- Playing your part in the national agenda of improving the lives of Emiratis
Signs of work-related stress within an organisation

- Disputes and division within the workforce
- An increase in staff turnover
- A rise in complaints and grievances among employees
- Increased reports of stress
- Difficulty in attracting new staff
- Customer dissatisfaction
- A drop in productivity
- Increased sickness leave and absenteeism
- A reduction in performance
- Poor management-employee relations
- An increase in workplace accidents and injuries
- Negative publicity in the media

Stress management in the codes of practice

Under the (OSHAD-SF - CoP 9.2 - Managing Work Related Stress) all employers with more than 50 employees (or as defined by risk assessment) are required to implement the following measures:

i. Develop a programme that documents employer commitment to manage work-related stress, establish a risk assessment approach to stress management and define roles and responsibilities of managers, OSH staff, human resources staff and employees.

ii. Identify workplace stressors and conduct periodic risk assessments to eliminate stress or manage the risks from stress using a risk assessment approach.

iii. Implement control measures to manage risks that can increase stress among employees.

iv. Provide training for OSH professionals, managers and supervisory staff in appropriate work-related stress management practices.

v. Provide appropriate resources to enable managers to implement the company’s agreed stress management strategy.

vi. Define roles and responsibilities of managers, occupational health and safety staff, human resources staff, employees, safety representatives and safety committees (as applicable).

Download full Code of Practice through the following link: www.oshad.ae
Managing stress – case study

The employer
An established regional wholesale outlet, employing around 200 staff, had been taken over by a large international group.

The issue
A problem was identified by the new owners concerning high staff turnover in the sales department. However, people were not leaving the organisation, but were instead changing roles by moving to a different function within the company – e.g. from sales to marketing or accounts. This trend was seen by management as resulting from a management consultant’s report, some years earlier, which singled out the sales function as being a key contributor to a drop in company profits. Sales had since been under constant pressure to improve performance, resulting in a high-stress environment for employees.

The solution
Following a stress analysis, the company opted to redesign the way the sales department functioned. In particular, they worked to improve internal communications and relax the strictly formal management structure. This included the introduction of team building and communication exercises. Steps were also taken to improve attitudes among other departments towards sales, and an interdepartmental task force was set up to improve relations.