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### **Creating A Healthy Workplace**

Source: *Mental Health In the Workplace:  
Tackling the Effects of Stress* booklet

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Any employer who wishes to create a healthy work environment for their staff will need to develop policies and procedures to ensure that their approach is systematic and thorough, and its results are tangible. A specific policy relating to mental health at work is advisable. Effective stress prevention and management require tackling the problem at several levels simultaneously:

- Preventing problems by eliminating or minimising stress at source
- Minimising the negative effects of stress via education and management strategies
- Assisting individuals who are experiencing the effects of stress

#### ***Preventing or minimising the causes of stress***

Eliminating or reducing sources of stress may be achieved by improving physical working conditions, redesigning jobs, and/or allowing more flexible working arrangements, such as job sharing, job rotation, flexible working hours, or the provision of nursery facilities. Changes in personnel policies, e.g. to improve communication, can also be helpful, as can strategic planning to allow more decision-making and autonomy among staff 'on the ground', e.g. by encouraging groups of workers to review and recommend changes to system practices to reduce stress.

Since the sources of stress will vary between and even within organisations, these must first be identified by some kind of 'stress audit'. In larger companies, this might take the form of a self-report questionnaire administered to employees on an organisation-wide or site or department-specific basis. The most widely used diagnostic tool of this type is the **Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI)** developed by three of the world's leading authorities on occupational stress. It is a non-threatening, cost-effective method of assessing the causes and effects of stress both in groups and individuals. It includes scales to measure job satisfaction, mental and physical health, coping, and support strategies, in addition to identifying sources of stress. Smaller companies may find it more appropriate to develop checklists, which can be administered on a more informal basis, or to organise discussion groups involving small numbers of staff.

In either case, the agenda should cover the following issues:

- Work content and scheduling
- Physical working conditions
- Terms of employment and expectations of different employees within the organisation
- Working relationships
- Systems for communication and reporting

The results can be used as a lever for organisational change and a guide to where resources need to be directed to achieve change in preventing stress. Regular auditing can also provide a means of monitoring stress levels and evaluating the effects of changes in policies and practices at work.

Stress prevention strategies should also involve the development of a supportive work ethos and climate, in which staff can feel free to be open about stress they are experiencing, in the knowledge that they will be helped and supported to deal with their issues. This may require setting up more open communication channels within an organisation, and actively discouraging behaviours that contribute to stress, such as routine late working, taking work home at weekends, and competitive behaviour.

### ***Helping people cope with unavoidable stress***

A number of interventions can help individuals to deal with sources of stress that cannot be changed, and thus avoid their negative effects. Such initiatives generally involve skills training and education.

- Stress education and stress management courses can help people to recognise signs of stress and develop their coping skills and resilience.
- There are a wide variety of skills training options under the stress management umbrella, including assertiveness training, leadership skills training, time management skills, interpersonal skills training, and relaxation techniques. These types of courses can be particularly valuable in training managers to recognise the early warning signs of stress in their staff and review their management style and its impact on people they manage.

Another approach is the direct promotion of positive health behaviours which aim to keep staff fit to cope with the pressures of work. These may include provision of exercise and keep-fit programs, and the introduction of healthy lifestyle management initiatives, such as health screening programs, smoking and alcohol cessation programs, and dietary advice.

### ***Early intervention and support***

Early recognition of the signs of stress, anxiety and depression is the crucial first step in dealing with such problems and preventing them from becoming more serious. Most

people make a full recovery, often without needing to take any time off work. However, individuals should be encouraged though to seek help as soon as possible, via their doctor if no workplace program or occupational health service is in place. Attention should be given to removing or reducing further sources of stress at work and supporting the individual through any short-term crisis.

Access to professional counselling services can be an invaluable help in assisting the recovery and rehabilitation of stressed employees, and the number of organisations providing such services is currently increasing. Such services are ideally provided either by an independent outside agency, or form part of a broader employee assistance programme (EAP), which may sometimes be sourced in-house. Counselling programs have substantially reduced staff absenteeism and other indicators of mental ill-health. EAPs provide information and referral to appropriate support services, including counselling support, for employees and sometimes their family members. Other provisions may include a 24-hour telephone counselling/help line for staff support.

A particular advantage of EAPs is that they can be used to provide feedback to employers, on a confidential basis, about recurring problems within an organization, thus helping to identify sources of stress and areas of intervention for stress management and prevention programmes.

## **Developing a mental health policy**

A mental health policy should be an integral part of any organisation's health and safety policy. Some large companies have developed policies that successfully address the issue of mental health in the workplace. Analysis of such model policies has defined certain key elements of good practice in relation to promoting mental well-being at work. As a first step, it seems that organisations need to recognise and accept that mental health is an important issue. Introduction of a mental health policy embodies such an organisational commitment to mental health.

There are three key stages in establishing a mental health policy:

- 1.) **Audit** – to provide information on existing levels of stress and mental ill-health within an organisation, and in what ways organisational structure and function may be contributing to these, or otherwise. The process will identify areas for intervention via a mental health policy.
- 2.) **Development** – to produce a mental health policy tailored to the needs of an organisation. The policy document may include:
  - **An introduction**, outlining the negative effects of mental ill-health on sickness absence and work performance, and defining the aims and objectives of the policy. Core aims might be to promote mental well-being, reduce the stigma associated with mental ill-health, and provide assistance to employees suffering from stress or more serious mental health problems.
  - **Health, safety, and welfare** policy of the organisation.

- **Human resources policies**, e.g. on mental health and recruitment, sickness absence and rehabilitation, and alcohol abuse.
- **Organisational philosophy** on health promotion and mental-ill health prevention.
- **Draft strategies** for stress prevention and management, based on identification of mental health needs via the process of audit.
- **Details of staff training programs**, including management training and stress management courses, specific training for personnel managers on mental health, and health education of the workforce, e.g. mental health education within induction training programs for new employees.
- **Descriptions of the roles and responsibilities** of employees at all levels of the organisation in respect of promoting mental health, including senior managers, line managers, personnel managers, occupational health services, staff associations and trades unions, and employees (for themselves and their colleagues).
- **Details of the processes of auditing, monitoring and evaluation.**
- **Estimated costs and time schedule for implementation.**

Crucial to the success of a mental health policy is that it should be developed by a working group that includes representatives from all levels and sections of the organisation, including personnel/human resource managers, health professionals such as occupational health nurses, physicians or psychologists, senior management, and employee representatives. It should also be applicable to all staff, regardless of age, sex, ethnic origin or grade.

**3.) Implementation** – to convert the policy into practice throughout the organisation. This relies on the commitment and cooperation of all employees, headed by management at the most senior level. Any mental health policy should be reinforced by regular monitoring and evaluation against performance indicators, such as reductions in sickness absence and improvements in staff satisfaction as demonstrated by regular auditing. Revision of the policy in line with review findings should permit its continual improvement, alongside a parallel improvement in the mental well-being of staff.

## **Employing people with mental health problems**

There remains a great deal of stigma attached to mental ill-health despite the widespread prevalence of mental health problems.

*A survey carried out by Mind in 1996 found that 778 people with mental health problems, 39% said they had been denied a job, 15% had been denied promotion, and 34% had been dismissed or forced to resign because of their illness. A further 38% reported being*

*teased, harassed, or intimidated at work, while 69% had been put off applying for jobs because of unfair treatment.*

Apart from reducing the employment prospects of people with mental health problems, negative, stigmatizing attitudes can be a significant stumbling block to the development and implementation of a mental health policy, and thus to improving the mental health of all employees.

*In a 1999 research survey of 270 company line managers, 69% said they thought that staff would either be hesitant to talk about feeling under stress, or would not talk about it or ask for help, so their work might suffer.*

A culture of openness and acceptance of mental distress as a normal part of all people's lives at some time is thus an essential basis on which to build a workable strategy for improving mental well-being among the workforce.

### ***The Disability Discrimination Act***

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) may contribute to improving the acceptance of mental health problems. The Act makes it unlawful for employers of 15 or more people to discriminate on the grounds of disability. Disability is defined as *a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities*. 'Mental impairment' in this context refers to a clinically recognised illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, panic disorder, or a depressive condition, while 'long-term' means having lasted, or likely to last, for at least a year.

The Disability Discrimination Act places a duty on employers to make 'reasonable adjustments' to prevent disabled job applicants and employees being placed at a substantial disadvantage in relation to others in respect of:

- the physical environment, e.g. building, fitting, and equipment
- recruitment and selection procedures
- any other aspect of employment, including training, career development, and retention

Many people with mental health problems will not require any adjustments to be made. Often, however, the most difficult aspect of having a disability – physical or mental – is other people's attitudes. Implementing an equal opportunities policy on disability to cover people with mental health problems, and raising staff awareness about issues of mental ill-health and distress by means of training and a management commitment to a mental health policy, can make a considerable impact on these. Other adjustments may include:

- opportunities for flexible hours and working arrangements
- additional support and supervisions
- provision of a quiet room

- use of email if direct contact is a problem
- allowing a gradual return to work after illness.

People with long-term mental health problems may be eligible for help with such adjustments under the Government's Access to Work Scheme.

### ***Equal opportunities***

An equal opportunities policy that seeks to overcome barriers to recruitment and retention of people with mental health problems is an excellent further step towards overcoming stigmatization on the grounds of mental health. Job advertisements, application forms, and company policy may be used to state and reinforce a commitment to equality of opportunity for those with mental health problems. Further commitments that may also be included:

- **To identify positions** where personal experience of mental health problems actively enhanced a person's ability to provide mental health care. In these posts, experience of mental health problems was a desirable part of the selection criteria.
- **To identify positions** where specific accommodation could be made or help given to support people with marked disabilities due to mental health problems to gain and sustain employment. For such posts, experience of mental health problems was an essential part of the selection criteria, and support was offered by a specifically funded user employment project team.
- **To establish** a system for monitoring the success in recruitment and retention of people who have experienced mental health problems, and progress towards a percentage target of the workforce being mental health service users.
- **To include** an equal opportunities statement on mental health in its advertisements for posts.

### ***Returning to work after stress-related absence***

Returning to work after a stress-related absence requires careful thought and planning by all parties. Persistent sources of stress will need to be addressed via audit, prevention, and management strategies. Ongoing support, particularly in the early stages, can be vital.

Rehabilitation to work after a longer-term absence due to stress or other mental health problem will usually be more cost effective than early retirement and recruiting and training a replacement. A return-to-work interview will be useful in determining whether an employee is happy to resume all aspects of their job, or whether they want a phased reintroduction to it, or for some parts of their work to be changed. Follow-up interviews will help to monitor progress. **Liaison between the employee, their line manager, and occupational health services, where these are available, will play an important role in the success of a person's return to work and further years of productive service.**