STRESS AND MENTAL FATIGUE GUIDELINES
MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Introduction:

Mental illness or harm caused by work-related stress is an important issue. The University of Otago recognises the need to manage this hazard within legislative and best practice guidelines.

It is intended that the same generic approach is used for Stress as for any other work related hazard.

The University of Otago aims to provide a healthy workplace.

When individual employees identify workplace stress as affecting their health, a rehabilitation programme will be developed.

OSH Guidance & Legislative Requirements

The OSH publication, 'Healthy Work: Managing Stress and Fatigue in the Workplace' is the most current documentation (2003) providing advice and guidance on this issue in the workplace. This OSH publication provides the following definitions of stress and fatigue:

Stress – defined in terms of the interaction between a person and their (work) environment and is the awareness of not being able to cope with the demands of one's environment, when this realisation is of concern to the person, in that both are associated with a negative emotional response. Stress itself is not an illness but an awareness that a person is not coping, and that this is a negative feeling, which may need to be conveyed to the employer.

Fatigue – defined as the temporary inability, or decrease in ability, or strong disinclination, to respond to a situation, because of previous over-activity, either mental, emotional or physical.

The HSE Amendment Act 2002 repeals the definition of a hazard Section 2 (1) of the principal act the terms of harm or hazard, and substitutes the following definitions:

"**harm**-

"(a)   means illness, injury, or both; and
"(b)   includes physical or mental harm caused by work-related stress

"**hazard**-

(a)   means an activity, arrangement, circumstance, event, occurrence, phenomenon, process, situation, or substance (whether arising or caused within or outside a place of work) that is an actual or potential cause or source of harm; and

(b)   Includes-
a situation where a person's behaviour may be an actual or potential cause or source of harm to the person or another person; and
Without limitation, a situation described in subparagraph (I) resulting from physical or mental fatigue, drugs, alcohol, traumatic shock, or another temporary condition that affects a person's behaviour.

To comply with the legislation, hazards must be systematically identified in the place of work, and the hierarchy of controls applied (from elimination, isolation and finally minimisation). Where an employee at a place of work sustains an injury, an investigation must be conducted to identify if a significant hazard was the cause of the harm. As stress and mental fatigue are identifiable as hazards, then the same process must be applied.

For the University of Otago a three stage management process is recommended.
1. Primary Prevention – Identifying Hazards
2. Secondary Prevention – Recognising stressed employees and workplaces
3. Tertiary – Intervention and management strategies

1. PRIMARY PREVENTION – IDENTIFYING HAZARDS

Stressors as defined by the OSH guidelines "*are events or circumstances, which may lead to the perception that physical, or psychological demands are about to be exceeded (or are being exceeded). Stressors can be physical in nature, and/or how an individual perceives situations.*"

 The primary prevention strategy is recognising the potential or actual hazards or sources of harm (stressors). The hazard identification process should identify both physical and/or potential stress/mental fatigue events and hazards.

Stressors can include the physical work environment, such as climate, light and noise levels, and workstation design. These issues should be managed as a part of the hazard identification process, and controls implemented.

Psychological stressors are not as easy to identify, and people react differently to similar situations. Circumstances that lead to an improved performance in one individual may cause a decreased performance in another. This makes psychological stressors difficult to identify and measure, as the effect that a stressor has is largely dependent on the individual. (If the individual is not stressed, then the external factor is not a stressor).

It is well recognised that stressors exist outside of the workplace (family, relationship) which can impact on work performance. External stressors may affect work performance or an individual's behaviour, which has the potential to create a hazard for other employees. Employees have a responsibility to be aware of external stressors and consider the work place impact. Such situations may need discussion with the employer for management in the workplace. (The employer is responsible for being aware of impaired performance at work even though the cause maybe external factors).

As stressors are identified, management of these hazards must be implemented as per the Health and Safety in Employment Amendment Act. Some examples of potential stressors and possible management strategies include the following. (This is not intended to be a fully comprehensive list. Derived from the OSH Guidelines).

Potential Work Stressors	Controls
Excessive hours of work, inadequate breaks from work	Late finishes and early starts or working weekends do not allow sufficient restorative rest time. Repetitive, on-going over time. Encourage annual leave to be taken in reasonable breaks (2+ weeks taken in one lot to allow a break to the work cycle)
Person-job fit	Ensuring the job description adequately reflects the position - scope of the job is defined, reporting lines are clear; the skill set is clearly identified. This should be

	accompanied by orientation to the organisation, department, and the position with a specified period of review to identify any issues.
Increased workloads during work colleague absence.	Replace staff on extended leave (sick leave, annual leave, sabbatical leave). Plan for annual and other leave to ensure that replacement staff are available before leave is taken. Distribution of essential work tasks to minimise impact where possible.
Anticipating workload peaks	The academic calendar allows peak workloads to be anticipated, such as the start of the academic year, enrolments, examination time, etc. Additional staff and/or reallocation of work tasks may assist.
Fieldwork: Being on call 24 hours a day, and responsible for students in the field.	Training, support, backup and reviewing fieldwork procedures, etc. Fieldwork H&S Management plan developed and documented for all field trips.
Driving to and from work sites	Work related driving constitutes work and adds to the hours worked during the day. Hours of work-related driving should be considered as working hours.
Staff/Student positions	Staff who are completing study (masters, PhD) - work and study may present a conflict for time management, particularly around critical deadlines (work or study deadlines).
Shift Work	Shift work is a recognised potential stressor in the place of work. Safe rosters and adequate breaks are essential. Regularly monitor and liaise with staff on shiftwork.
Physical activities – diving, boating, field work	Such activities are more physically demanding and therefore potentially tiring. Fitness levels and hours of work should be considered.
Critical events	Specific critical events can be stressful. Critical incident management should include a process for the recognition of stressful effects and assistance offered to staff.
Work environment	Climate, lighting levels, noise, dust, heat and cold. Assessments can be made of a work environment to identify causative stressors of this nature for control.
Interpersonal Relationships	Difficulties in interpersonal relationships

	are well recognised source of dysfunction and unhappiness at work.
Job Insecurity	A recognised stressor for those on fixed term appointments or limited duration grants who are uncertain if there will be further employment after the current time period.

As with any effective Health and Safety initiative, the recognition of the issue at a senior management level is critical. The cultural attitude of recognising, valuing and respecting staff needs to be fostered as a primary preventative step to allow discussion of workplace issues (or stressors) that may generate stress in individuals. In particular, effective communication needs to be maintained to assist with the recognition of workloads, managing resource and budgeting constraints, effective change management process, etc. Management strategies such as ensuring that staff have the skills, training and resources they need, know what to do, confident that they can do it and receive credit for it will assist with minimising the stress potential. Managers who have an open and understanding attitude to what people say to them about the pressures of their work are more likely to recognise issues early and manage appropriately.

The recognition of workplace stress is a relatively new development within New Zealand legislation. The United Kingdom Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have had work place stress included in their legislation for sometime, and have developed strategies for the management of stress in the workplace. These strategies identify 6 critical areas for potential workplace stressors:
- Work demands
- Work control
- Support at work
- Relationships at work
- Role clarity
- Workplace change

Full documentation of the United Kingdom Health and Safety Executive Stress Management Standards are available at
http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/sitemap-ld.htm?hseid=aHR0cDovL3d3dy5oc2UuZ292LnVrL3N0cmVzcy9zdGFuZGFyZHMvaW5kZXguaHRt .

2. SECONDARY PREVENTION – RECOGNISING STRESSED WORKPLACES AND STRESSED EMPLOYEES

The secondary prevention strategy is recognising when workplaces or individuals are exhibiting signs of stress, and looking to identify the cause.

Stress presents differently in different individuals, and as identifying stress is a specific requirement of management/supervisory positions, training is available for the recognition of stress and appropriate intervention.

Indications of stress may include high turnover of staff, increase in absenteeism, decrease in performance indicators, increase in disciplinary problems, inappropriate behaviour or changes in behaviour, and disputes.

If such markers indicate that there maybe a problem, then an investigation needs to be conducted to identify any work related stressors. This includes reassessing the hazard identification process to ensure that hazards have been identified and that the controls are adequate and have been implemented. Where there has been a hazard control failure or omission, review of work processes may be indicated.

A person's behaviour may also be a hazard within the place of work. Where the behaviour of staff or others has the potential to cause harm (includes physical and mental harm) action must be taken to manage the effect. This includes strategies for managing aggressive persons, persons under the influence of drugs or alcohol, traumatic events, etc. In some areas, behaviour of the public (particularly aggression) has prompted the provision of de-escalation and recognising stress training to provide staff with skills to manage such situations. This is encouraged where staff are frequently in conflict or confrontational situations.

As with all hazard management processes there is also an employee responsibility to recognise and report hazards, including stress or stressors. Training is currently provided for staff on recognising stress and how to individually manage some stressors. The HSE Amendment Act has revised the definition of all practical steps to include the employer duty to take all practical steps only in respect of circumstances that the employer knows, or ought reasonably to know about the situation. This means that an employee has the responsibility to report to the employer that they are feeling unable to cope so that the employer can take the appropriate action to identify and control the stressors. .

3. TERTIARY – INTERVENTION AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The University of Otago has responsibilities both under legislation and also as a good employer to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to assist an employee who is reporting excessive stress.

Where an individual reports as stressed, or when a sick leave certificate is received as stress related leave due to work, then the University has the obligation to investigate the matter. The process must be transparent and involve all parties as for any other work place investigation process.

The usual process will be to develop an individual rehabilitation programme which will be based on the assessment of the
- The employee
- The workplace
- The work

Representatives from the University's Health and Safety Office and from Human Resources will normally have a series of meetings with the employee, management, and others as required. These meetings are to identify and clarify the issues, and to develop appropriate corrective processes. The employee may wish to have a representative and/or support person at any meetings.

Common areas of concern are work demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. Support mechanisms such as EAP and mediation are available to the employee.

The University may request the employee to undergo a medical examination in accordance with the employee's employment agreement.

Protocol for the Management of Employees Reporting work related Stress

This protocol is activated when:

A   An official request is made to Human Resources, by management or the employee for intervention because of workplace issues that have arisen. Human Resources will arrange for a workplace and work assessment and, when deemed necessary, an employee medical assessment. A remedial action plan will be developed with the employee and the department to manage any stressors/risks.

B   A medical certificate is received identifying stress as the cause of the employee's problems.

The following outline the proposed steps for assessment

Step One:

When a Department receives a medical certificate identifying stress as a diagnosis for an employee, a copy should be forwarded to the Divisional HR Manager, Human Resources.
Time: within two working days

Step Two:

The Divisional HR Manager will contact the employee explaining the assessment process (verbal or written).

Time: Within five working days

Step Three

When all assessments are completed a workplace and individual rehabilitation plan should be agreed to, monitored and completed. This will involve the Department, the Divisional HR Manager and the H&S Office.

Step Four

a. Depending on the level of contribution of work to their illness, Divisional HR Managers with Health and Safety will co-ordinate appropriate workplace intervention. The situation will be assessed by Health and Safety to identify if notification to OSH as serious harm is required.

b. If there is no contribution due to work then the Divisional HR Manager and the Department will manage this in the same manner as any other non- work caused illness, with sick leave as entitled and rehabilitation as agreed.