

MORALE, DISTRESS AND HEALTHY WORK – INFORMATION SHEET

We all experience stress at different times, to varying degrees. But we need to tell the difference between two types of it – **challenging and threatening**.

When we feel that work is leading to concrete, achievable and worthwhile goals, we almost always rise to the occasion, even with severe difficulties. Where there are urgent deadlines, work overload, poor relationships or where other things cause stress, we mostly cope – if there is a return to 'normal' in a reasonable time.

But, when a 'stressful' situation is ongoing and/or severe and/or causes mental or physical illness, then it becomes a concern. In these extremes the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 Act requires the situation to be managed.

KEY IDEA:

Morale and distress... are more precise words than 'stress', and thus more likely to result in precise ways to make use of opportunities and deal with problems.

MORALE & CHALLENGE

Morale is valuable in every workplace. It comes when we feel a sense of purpose in our work, where there is enthusiasm, a supportive team climate, when work is interesting and rewarding and where realistic challenges exist.

Challenges – 'opportunities to win' – motivate us to accomplish things, and can be a 'good' kind of stress.

When morale is high, we tend to get on with the job, persist until the challenge is met and have positive thoughts. Optimism, self-restraint and humour are also present and we enjoy others' company at work.

Morale seeps downwards, so it is the CEO's responsibility.

KEY IDEA:

Threats include:

- **something a person thinks they can't cope with**
- **a challenge – but one that can't be met with the resources available**
- **a barrier to meeting a challenge.**

DISTRESS AND THREAT

A threat at work – 'an opportunity to lose' – is the opposite of a challenge and can be unpleasant. When we face a threat we *tend* to avoid and delay dealing with it, have negative thoughts, and think of leaving. Of course, this spurs a lot of people into taking creative and productive action to turn the threat into a challenge.

However, if the threat is large, goes on long enough or is never spoken about, **low morale and distress** can result. Morale can exist alongside distress and can help people ride over it, but only so far.

Distress and low morale can come from two main sources:

- WORK EXPERIENCES – THINGS LIKE:
 - physically, mentally or emotionally tiring work
 - having little control over how to do the job

- THE ORGANISATIONAL CLIMATE – THINGS LIKE:

- poor feedback about performance
- unfairness, being ignored etc

HEALTHY WORK

Consistently, people say that the second type of work problem – the organisational climate – 'or the bureaucracy and red tape' – causes more difficulties than the first.

Fortunately, we know how to make unhealthy work healthy – and there is good evidence that healthy work results in better productivity and personal health.

What does **healthy work** look like?

- a balance of effort and rest
- some variety in my tasks
- a sense of control (some control over how I do my tasks) – some autonomy
- communication and collaboration
- rewards and support... and so on

Nobody pretends that all work can have all these features all the time. However, **dialogue between employers and employees** can lead to ideas on making work healthier.

STRESS – WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

You would want to know when distress is beginning to affect your employees and the signs and symptoms of stress.

A stressed workplace might look like this:

- Low morale
- High absenteeism or turnover
- Customer complaints
- Loss of business
- Low productivity
- Poor relationships internally

Signs and symptoms of stress in individuals:

Physical: headaches, tummy upsets, poor sleep, raised blood pressure, chest pains.

Mental: anxiety, depressed mood.

Behavioural: irritable, alcohol/drug use.

Cognitive: difficulty concentrating and making decisions, increased reaction times.

Interpersonal: relationships go sour.

WHAT MIGHT CAUSE THESE THINGS?

Many aspects of work are linked to **reports of stress:**

Relations: conflict between staff, bullying, aggressive/difficult customers, no participation, poor support/supervision

Work timing: long hours, shiftwork, time pressures, working alone

Role: task ambiguity, reporting to two bosses



Tasks: unfamiliar tasks, no training or feedback on performance, little variety, no control over work pace, hazardous work

But you can't assume that removing these stressors, if they are present, will automatically make things better!

This is because different people may view a stressor positively or negatively. In fact, there seems to be universal agreement about just two aspects of work.

See the idea in the box, and then consider these examples:

- Some staff find 'difficult customers' a challenge (they are good at turning them into satisfied customers). Others can't cope with them at all.
- Some people are challenged by a task – others give up
- Some people prefer to work alone. Others like contact with lots of people every day.

KEY IDEA:

There is general agreement on just two aspects of work:

- **Work overload is toxic. No-one finds it a challenge.**
- **Nobody reports negatively when they meet and master a challenge.**
- **This gives employers two, very clear and simple things to do to help employees prevent distress: look out for work overload and make sure staff have some challenges they feel are worthwhile.**

WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO?

In a nutshell – (a) take active steps to make work healthy, (b) build morale, (c) identify stressors, talk with staff and then (d) deal with the stressors and respond to reports of stress.

Morale and Motivation

Morale seeps downwards, so it is the CEO's responsibility. Find out your staff's views on things like:

- Fairness, consistency, leadership and direction
- Appraisal, feedback, rewards and goal clarity

If problems are found, leadership development is key. Money is better spent on this than stress management.

Identifying and dealing with stressors

Decide what **category** of work your work falls into.

1. **Healthy work** – stimulating, enjoyable and rewarding – contains genuine challenges.
2. **Stress is self induced** – staff contribute to their difficulties by such as – not asking for help – refusing reasonable change or saying 'yes' when they should say 'no'.
3. **Work is badly organised** – Work is free of the stressors in Category 4 – but is organised so that a number of people find it hard to cope with.
4. **Work is** – emotionally challenging, draining or repugnant, needs intense prolonged concentration and effort or has high consequences of error.

➔ To learn more, go to our website and look at each topic marked here as highlighted text.

www.osh.govt.nz/order/catalogue/stress/index.shtml

Tailor prevention to suit the category. There are **three ways** to do this:

Primary: Make work healthy – remove stressors – acknowledge, appreciate and reward staff contributions.

Secondary: Improve the fit between the person and the job by – selection – training – feedback and the application of ergonomics.

Tertiary: Helping affected people – so called 'stress management' . [There is no evidence that 'stress management' has any effect on anything other than a short increase in personal reports of well-being.]

Ask your staff

Asking staff or using a **questionnaire** are ways to identify stressors. The results need to be discussed with employees, otherwise you might remove something from a person's work that they actually find challenging, interesting and/or stimulating.

But — look out specifically for work overload. Everyone regards it as toxic and there is good evidence it can cause mental health problems.

Distinguish between the stressors people say are challenging (an opportunity to win) or threatening (an opportunity to lose). When people need help in these two situations, deal with them differently, as explained below.

How far do I need to go?

Employers are required to find a balance between the risks employees face and the safeguards they put in place. However, they are not required to 'cocoon employees from stress and upset' or to be the 'guarantor of health and safety'.

When staff report stress

DOL suggests you take such reports seriously. There are many ways to do this – **one is shown in the web link.**

WHAT CAN EMPLOYEES DO?

The key is to seek or get help. Even when people face quite serious threats, getting the right sort of help can result in satisfaction with outcomes.

Help may need to be of two sorts –

- **Emotional support** —when facing emotional difficulties— E.g. when threats are being faced.
- **Practical help** – for example, when a challenge is being worked through. Provide resources and help to overcome specific barriers.

FREE PUBLICATIONS ON WWW.OSH.DOL.GOV.T.NZ

1. Healthy Work – Managing Stress and Fatigue in the Workplace. 2003.
2. Stress and Fatigue: Their implications for health and safety in the workplace. 1998.
3. Healthy Work: Managing shifwork to minimize fatigue. 2007.
4. Healthy Work: Morale, Distress and Productivity. DOL, 2008.

See: www.osh.govt.nz/order/catalogue/stress/index.shtml