

Best Practice in Work-related Stress Management Interventions

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Introduction

Work-related psychosocial risks concern aspects of the design and management of work and its social and organisational contexts that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm. They have been identified as one of the major contemporary challenges for occupational health and safety and are linked to such workplace problems as work-related stress. Work-related stress is experienced when the demands of the work environment exceed the employees' ability to cope with (or control) them. It is among the most commonly reported causes of illness by workers (European Foundation, 2007) affecting more than 40 million individuals across the European Union. It is estimated that work-related stress costs an estimated € 20bn a year in lost time and health bills; 3-4% of the GNP for Europe. An agreement on work-related stress was concluded by the European social partners in 2004.

Aim

This guidance sheet summarises the key principles of best practice concerning work-related stress management interventions as defined through the European framework for psychosocial risk management (PRIMA-EF). It aims at providing a reference point for organisations, social partners and experts who wish to implement such interventions across the EU and internationally.

Approaches to Work-related Stress Prevention and Management

Three main types of work-related stress management interventions have been identified in the scientific literature and are broadly termed primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. *Primary prevention* approaches seek to combat work-related stress by changing elements in the way work is organised and managed. *Secondary prevention* approaches aim to combat work-related stress by developing individual skills in stress management through training. *Tertiary prevention* approaches aim to reduce the impact of work-related stress on workers' health by developing appropriate rehabilitation and 'return-to-work' systems and enhanced occupational health provisions.

Preventing and Managing Work-related Stress: Best Practice Guidelines

As part of PRIMA-EF, a pan-European review of risk management approaches and evidence-based best practice interventions for work-related stress was conducted. On the basis of this review, key



aspects and best practice principles for strategies to prevent and manage work-related stress, reflective of the European perspective, are outlined. These best practice principles relate to the content, the implementation and the evaluation of work-related stress management interventions.

Intervention content: Key components

- The content (key elements of focus, tools and implementation) of the intervention should be derived from evidence-based practice, based on sound scientific theory.
- Psychosocial risks to employees' health and well-being in the work environment should be identified by way of conducting a proper risk assessment.
- The intervention components and tools should be adapted and tailored to the given occupational sector and should meet the unique needs of the respective organisation.
- The intervention should be designed to be implemented in a systematic and step-wise manner with the aims, objectives, and implementation strategy of the intervention clearly defined and outlined.

Intervention context: Successfully implementing

- Raising awareness and educating managers and employees on the causes and consequences of work-related stress is essential.
- Knowledge, competencies and skills on continuous psychosocial risk prevention and management at the workplace should be developed through appropriate training for managers and workers.
- The intervention aims and its overall importance should be clearly understood and agreed upon by both management and employees.
- The overall support and commitment of the organisation (e.g. allocation of resources) and the active participation of management throughout the intervention – in its design, implementation and evaluation – should be determined.
- Employees should participate actively and be consulted in the development of the intervention strategy.
- Continuous and active communication among all key stakeholders in the intervention process (e.g. employees, managers, occupational physician and/or other occupational health experts, trade unions) should be developed.

Intervention evaluation: Effectiveness and sustainability of intervention effects

- An evaluation strategy should be developed, clearly linked to the outlined intervention aims, goals, and identified problems.

- A variety of methods should be used to evaluate the intervention (e.g. survey, interviews or group discussions); methods utilized will be dependent on the size and the available resources of the company.
- The intervention's impact and overall effectiveness on employee well-being and organisational outcomes (e.g. cost-effectiveness, productivity, absenteeism) should be systematically evaluated at several time-points, both directly following the intervention and over the long-term.
- The quality and effectiveness of the implementation process of the intervention should also be systematically assessed.
- The impact of the intervention within different groups (e.g. by worksite, department, gender) within the organisation should be assessed to identify and, in turn, address any differential effects of the intervention.

Lessons Learned: Key Issues for Success

Organisations and experts that wish to implement work-related stress management interventions should bear in mind the following issues for the implementation of successful and effective intervention strategies.

Organisational readiness to change

Organisational readiness and resistance to change will impact on the success and effectiveness of the intervention. As such it is important to develop and retain organisational commitment and support of the intervention initiative from the beginning.

Realistic intervention strategy

Addressing all the problems and issues identified through psychosocial risk assessment would result in a resource-heavy and complicated intervention initiative that would be unlikely to succeed. The intervention strategy should outline achievable solutions that can be incorporated into daily business practices, thus facilitating easier, and more successful, implementation over the longer term.

Comprehensive intervention strategy

Traditionally, stress prevention and management initiatives have exclusively focused on one type of intervention. To successfully prevent and manage work-related stress, intervention strategies should comprehensively incorporate elements from all three intervention levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Specifically, they should address the root causes of work-related stress (primary prevention); provide training to managers and employees on stress management in order to reduce its impact (secondary prevention); and, for those that have suffered ill health as a result of work-related stress, provide them with resources to manage and reduce their respective effects (tertiary prevention).

Supporting continuous improvement

Efforts to effectively address psychosocial risks, and work-related stress should not be viewed as 'one off activities' but rather, should be incorporated into daily business practices. In so doing, a continuous improvement cycle promoting a better psychosocial working environment will be supported.

More Information

www.prima-ef.org

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