
Model of organisational stress for use within an occupational health education/promotion or wellbeing programme – A short communication

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Abstract

This paper introduces a simple model of organisational stress which can be used to educate or inform employees, personnel and health professionals about the relationship between potential work-related stress hazards, individual and organisational symptoms of stress, negative outcomes and financial costs. The components of the model relate directly to a recent Health and Safety Executive publication¹ which focuses on improving and maintaining employee health and wellbeing.

Key words: work-related stress, Health and Safety Executive, stress prevention, stress management, risk assessment

Introduction

During the 1990s, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) published a number of documents which provided information for health and safety practitioners and employers on stress, stress research and stress prevention^{2,3,4}. However, the guidance for employers lacked a structured approach for work-related stress prevention programmes although the publications highlighted many possible strategies, such as staff training and improving communication⁵.

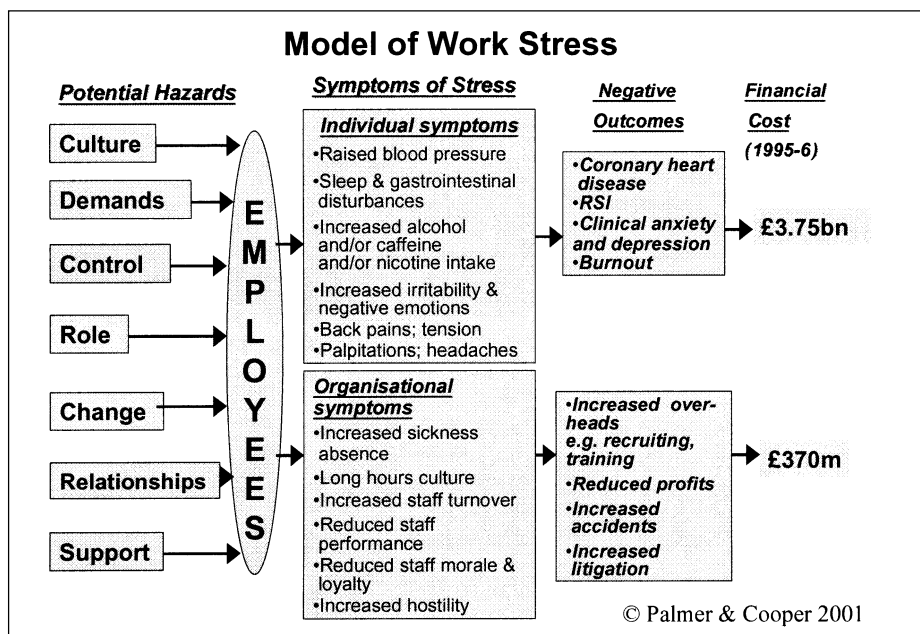
In 2001, the HSE¹ published a guide for managers running units or departments with 50 or more staff (*see endnote*). The guide¹ focused on the application of a structured approach to stress prevention by providing a five-step work-related stress risk assessment to aid diagnosis of the problem(s) and provide a framework for intervention. Unfortunately, from an educational viewpoint, the document did not include a model

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of stress to underpin the theory and practice advocated by the document. To help explain the new guidance to managers, personnel and health professionals, the authors of this paper developed a simple model of stress,⁶ based on earlier ‘engineering’ models of stress, which includes the main stress-related hazards and outcomes discussed in the HSE document¹. This model of stress was later launched at a major annual conference of personnel and development professionals⁶.

Model of Stress



The overall model of stress is self-explanatory. However, in the authors’ experience, the HSE have chosen seven key hazards that usually require further explanation depending upon the level of knowledge of the employees or professionals involved (see below). It is worth noting that 1995–96 figures for the financial cost of stress have been used in the model as these were the figures provided by the HSE in the document¹. More recent figures provided by other organisations suggest that these are an under-estimate but the more conservative financial costs provided by the HSE were chosen to avoid any discord.

Further information

The HSE¹ recommended a five-step stress risk assessment focuses on assessing and then addressing seven major hazards: **Culture**: of the organisation and how it deals with stress (for example, long hours culture); **Demands**: exposure to physical hazards and workload (for example, volume and complexity of work; shift work); **Control**: employee involvement with how they do their work (for example, control balanced

against demands); **Relationships**: includes all work relationships (for example, bullying and harassment); **Change**: its management and communication to staff (for example, staff understanding why change is necessary); **Role**: employee understands role; jobs are clearly defined (for example, conflicting roles avoided); **Support, training and factors unique to the individual**: support from peers and line managers; training for core functions of job; catering for individual differences.

The HSE¹ assert that a proactive approach, as opposed to the more usual reactive approach, should be undertaken to tackle work-related stress. Therefore the focus should be on stress prevention by assessing and subsequent removal of the hazards and not stress management, pressure management training or employee stress counselling. Qualitative assessment methods to find out whether work-related stress is a problem can include performance appraisals, informal discussions with staff, focus groups, and return-to-work interviews. Quantitative methods include productivity data, sickness/absence data, staff turnover and questionnaires¹. However, the HSE do not recommend commercially available questionnaires as they may not be reliable or valid tests for work-related stress. The emphasis is on organisations developing their own audit tools with appropriate guidance. The risk assessment process in this document¹ follows the principles explained in an earlier HSE publication⁷.

Conclusion

The simple model of organisational stress proposed in this paper can be used as a training resource to educate and inform employees and key personnel about work-related stress and can help to explain the new HSE guidelines on tackling work-related stress¹.

References

- 1 Health and Safety Executive, *Tackling Work-Related Stress: A Managers' Guide to Improving and Maintaining Employee Health and Well-being*. Sudbury: HSE, 2001.
- 2 Cox T. *Stress Research and Stress Management: Putting Theory to Work*, CRR61. London: Health and Safety Executive, 1993.
- 3 Health and Safety Executive, *Work-Related Factors and Ill Health: The Whitehall II Study*, CRR266. Sudbury: HSE, 2000.
- 4 Health and Safety Executive, *Stress at Work: A Guide for Employers*. Sudbury: HSE, 1995.
- 5 Sutherland V, Cooper CL. *Strategic Stress Management: An Organizational Approach*. London: Macmillan Books, 2001.
- 6 Palmer S. *Managing Stress*. Conference paper given at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Harrogate, UK, 25th October 2001.
- 7 Health and Safety Executive, *5 Steps to Risk Assessment, INDG163 (rev)*. Sudbury: HSE, 1998.

Endnote: According to the document¹ the HSE guidance is not compulsory for employers. However, if employers adhere to the guidance then they are normally doing enough to comply with the law.