

### **M8-EN.3 STRESS AT WORK**

In this chapter, we will attempt to deal with the very important aspect of stress at work, with emphasis in the banking sector. The aim of this chapter is to approach the subject of stress in a spherical manner so that one can have the necessary tools for effective management of stress at ones workplace.

The following is an extract from a report of the European Union, *Guidance on work stress*, 2000, p. 71

*“One of the ‘sins’ in the area of work related health is the carrying out of isolated extensive research on the causes and the results of stress at work and the lack of any further actions: the diagnosis without therapy and prevention. This attitude not only prolongs the damage on the health of the employees, but constitutes an insult towards them.”*

**The seriousness of the problem of stress at work makes it necessary for taking measures for its timely resolution.**

#### **M8-EN.3.1 Definition of stress**

- Stress at work is the reaction that the employees may have when the work requirements do not correlate with their knowledge and competence and this has an effect on their ability to face up to problems or to adjust to the working conditions in such a manner so that they are effective and productive members in their workplace
- Stress may lead to health problems and in some extreme case to injuries
- Stress is a negative emotional experience – reaction to unwanted responsibilities and to unwanted working conditions
- It depends on the way the employee understands his work and his responsibilities
- It is linked to the changes in the mental and physiological behaviour – this has an impact not only to the employee but also to he organisation as well

#### **M08.03.01**

#### **M8-EN.3.2 APPROACHES FOR THE STRESS AT WORK PROBLEM**

- **Primary prevention:** identification and reduction of the sources of stress at work and outside work
- **Secondary prevention:** The reduction of the extent of the effects of stress before they lead to serious health problems (‘stress management’)
- **Tertiary prevention:** Provision of therapeutic services to employees

In this chapter we will deal only with the primary prevention aspect because it can be identified and managed by the employees themselves.

In order to better understand stress at work we will provide its different symptoms when an employee goes through a stressful condition. These symptoms are easily identifiable.

When the human body is in a condition of stress a number of different changes occur such as:

- The rate of breathing is increased and it usually causes ‘loss of breathe’
- The retina of the eye is dilated and the eyes are adjusted so that one can see far
- Increased sweating
- Reduced excretion of peptic fluids
- Increased heart rate
- Dilution of the blood vessels in the heart muscle and the muscles of the hands and legs and contraction of the vessels in the rest of the body
- Reduced intestinal activity

### **M8-EN.3.3 Stress symptoms**

#### **A) Physiological**

Chest pains, frequent colds (influenza), muscle pains (neck and back), inability to go to sleep, reduced appetite, increased sweating, incompetence, apathy, loss of consciousness, nausea, diarrhoea or constipation, reduced libido, intense or continuous sense of fatigue, frequent dyspepsia, getting tired easily, neural spasms, frequent cramps and muscle spasms, headaches, migraines, colic ulcers, period problems, itching, palpitations, terror and anxiety, lower temperature of the hands and feet, loss of weight

#### **B) Mental**

Inability to concentrate, reduced memory, confusion, loss of sense of humour, empty mind syndrome, inability to take decisions, inability to complete a task, reduced efficiency.

#### **C) Behaviour**

Excessive drinking of alcohol, neurotic behaviour (e.g. Nail biting, chewing of hair), breaking of things, crying, hypersensitivity to other colleagues, claustrophobia, hypochondriac attacks, accident prone, addiction to pharmacological substances, marriage problems, continual irritation, loud noise and shouting, inappropriate behaviour and swearing, physical violence, partly or total loss of control, loss of interest, unpredictable mood changes, extreme optimism/ pessimism, increased absenteeism, neglecting external appearance, extreme appetite or loss of it, increased intake of caffeine, inability to face the daily problems in life

## **D) Emotional – Psychological**

Hypersensitivity with others, anger (real or depressed), depression, feeling of helplessness, pessimistic attitudes, disappointment, resigned, continual and undefined fear, sense of guilt and or shame, inability to express emotions, personality disturbances, lack of interest for life, fear for the future, paranoia and a feeling of loneliness, failure, animosity and incompetence.

Not all the above symptoms will be observed in one person under stress but some of the symptoms, depending on the internal resistance of each individual as well as the way each person experiences the intensity of stress.

### **M8-EN.3.4 Examples of stressful factors at the workplace**

- Contradiction or asymmetry between responsibility and authority
- Confused instructions and role: e.g. a departmental head asking a clerk to make sure that a loan is 'offered' to a client
- Discrimination and mishandling of employees and clients, incompetence: e.g. acceptance of work that is not compatible with the employee's competence and competencies
- Mistakes that result in financial loss e.g. loss making loans
- Confused organisational and personal targets.
- Lack of appreciation or award: e.g. the absence of award for an exceptional performance creates the feeling that the whole effort was not worth or was not adequate.
- Limiting the scope of activity: e.g. the manager delegates the work to an employee but the manager limits the ability of the employee to act independently in order to carry out the work. The manager decides how the work is going to be carried out.

### **M8-EN.3.5 Stressful work characteristics – Work content**

#### **Work environment and work equipment**

Problems with the provision, reliability, adequacy and maintenance of the equipment and infrastructure e.g. bad quality VDUs or software that cannot meet the needs of the work carried out.

**Possible action:** Inform the people responsible about the problems asking for the necessary corrective actions

#### **Design of responsibilities**

Lack of job enrichment, short cycle times, isolated work responsibilities or work with low value, with limited exercise of expertise, job insecurity.

**Possible action:** Suggest for job rotation, or move to another department or a better combination of responsibilities in order to enrich the work carried out.

**Load and rate of work**

Excessive workload, lack of work, lack of control on the rate of work, time pressure

**Possible action:** Suggestion for assignment of duties that correspond to the experience and competence. To provide adequate time for completion of work with no strict time limit

**Organisational culture and operation**

Lack of communication, lack of support for the resolution of problems and the development of employees, lack of defined company objectives, special issues: e.g. bullying, harassment, aging of the labour force

**Possible action:** Discussion of the issues during the Safety Committee meetings or any other meeting management and employees

**Job responsibility or role**

Not clearly defined or conflicting roles and responsibilities, responsibility for other people

**Possible action:** clearly defined role and responsibility

**Career development**

Professional stagnation, uncertainty, and promotion to a position that is not compatible with the competence of employee, low social value type of work.

**Possible action:** Training for gaining new competencies, job enrichment, job enlargement, change of work title

**Span of control**

Not involved in the decision making process, lack of control over the work carried out.

**Possible action:** Demand involvement in the decision making process for organising work

**Interpersonal relationships in the work place**

Social or physical isolation, bad or inexistent relationships with management, interpersonal clashes, lack of social support

**Possible action:** Monthly meeting with colleagues for discussing common issues other than work related matters. Participate in social events, getting to know new relationships (friends, social discussions)

**M08.03.02****Interaction of family – professional life**

Conflicting requirements of professional and family life, lack of support from the family environment, problems arising from the employment of both partners or the existence of one parent family.

**Possible action:** Time management, distribution of roles and responsibilities

### **M8-EN.3.6 Stress Handling Strategies**

The efficiency of the stress handling strategies will depend on the nature of the stressful conditions, the perception and potential of each individual employee as well as the work environment.

*The individual efforts to manage stress are in general terms inadequate when compared to the team or organisational interventions.* It must be noted that individuals can only have little or no effect on stress related issues.

Some good practices that could be followed when faced with stressful situations are:

#### **Prevention**

- Control stress,
- Redesign of the work programme,
- Improved training,
- Job enrichment,
- Improve the level of employee involvement in decisions at their level,
- Develop review and coaching systems,
- Career development,
- Team work/ social support

#### **Basic Principles**

- Researchers/ Consultants (suggest, do not impose),
- The experts are the employees themselves,
- The whole process must involve the approval and participation of the employees,
- Support from top management.

#### **Prevention- not just therapy**

- Training by itself is inadequate, it must be combined with time management and confidence building programmes,
- Individual interventions by are not by themselves adequate,
- The reduction of risk is only possible through the improvement of the design and management of work,
- Organisational interventions are more effective.

### **M8-EN.3.7 Is there a stress related problem in my work place?**

**The answers that you are going to give in the following questions will help you to identify if there is a stress related problem at your workplace.**

#### **Environment**

- Do you have the idea that in order to get promoted or keep your job you are obliged to work beyond the working hours?
- The feeling of stress is considered a weakness or is taken seriously?
- Is the value of your job or your suggestions appreciated?
- Do you have the feeling that you have to do even more in less available time?

#### **Requirements**

- Are you assigned excess work load that must be carried out in very short time?
- Do you think that your work is extremely difficult?
- Do you have job satisfaction?
- Do you feel bored while at work?
- Are you irritated by excessive noise in your workplace? Is the temperature adequate? Is there anything wrong with the ventilation and lighting?
- Are you worried by the risk of possible violent action by the customers or people in the area?

#### **Control**

- Can you affect the way your work is carried out?
- Do you participate in the decision making process?

#### **Interpersonal relationships**

- Do you have a good relationship with your manager?
- If you are a manager, what are your relationships with your colleagues or your staff?
- Are you harassed in your work place, for example have you been the victim of insults or aggressive behaviour or any of your managers abuse their power?
- Have you been mistreated due to the colour of your skin, your gender, national descent or disability etc?

#### **Changes**

- Are you provided with information that relate to changes in your workplace?
- Do you participate in the formation of changes in your workplace?

- Have you been provided support during the changes?
- Do you have the impression that the changes are too much or inadequate?

### **Role**

- Do you have a clear picture about the nature of your work and your responsibilities?
- Are you obliged to carry out duties that are not part of your work?
- Have there been cases of conflicting roles?

### **Support**

- Do you have the support of you manager and colleagues?
- Is good work appreciated?
- Have you been given constructive comments or you feel that you are continually criticised?

### **Training**

- Do you have the necessary competencies to carry out your work?
- Are you encouraged to improve your competencies?