What organisational/employer level interventions are effective for preventing and treating occupational stress?

A Rapid Review for the Institute for Safety, Compensation & Recovery Research (ISCRR)

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Title
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Job stress is a prevalent and growing concern in Australia and internationally. The international job stress intervention evaluation research literature has been the subject of a number of recent systematic reviews. The most comprehensive of these reviews (summarising 90 intervention studies), and the most germane to the question addressed in this Rapid Review, focused on interventions at the organisational level in which organisations set out to address job stress proactively. This review concluded that individual-focused, low-systems approaches (e.g., coping and time management skill development) are effective at the individual level, favourably affecting individual-level outcomes such as health and health behaviours. Individual level interventions, however, tend not to have favourable impacts at the organizational level (e.g., reducing exposures, sickness absence). Organizationally focused high- and moderate-rated approaches (addressing working conditions), however, are beneficial at both individual and organizational levels. Subsequently published Cochrane reviews reached similar conclusions. Taken together, these findings provide strong supporting evidence for growing efforts nationally and internationally to address the upstream determinants of job stress (job stressors, or psychosocial working conditions) as well as its downstream health and other consequences.

Best practice workplace stress intervention

Job stress can be prevented and controlled effectively using a systems or comprehensive approach that integrates *primary, secondary, and tertiary intervention*. In brief, *primary preventive interventions are proactive*, aiming to prevent the occurrence of illness among healthy individuals. These target sources of stress in the workplace, or stressors, through changes in the work environment or the organization. Examples include changes in work pacing and job redesign, and the formation of joint labour/management health & safety committees. *Secondary interventions are ameliorative*, aiming to modify an individual's response to stressors, targeting the individual. Examples of secondary prevention interventions include stress management classes to help employees to either modify or control their appraisal of stressful situations, such as the development of muscle relaxation or meditation skills. Finally, *tertiary interventions are reactive*, aiming to minimize the effects of stress-related problems once they have occurred, through 'treatment' or management of symptoms or disease. These include efforts to help employees to cope more effectively with reactions to stressful conditions, counselling (such as in the form of employee assistance programs), and return-to-work and other rehabilitation programs.

The development and implementation of job stress interventions must include the meaningful participation of groups targeted by intervention. Participation is a particularly important principle in job stress intervention because it is integral to the prevention and control of job stress itself. Participation is a concrete enactment of job control, demonstrates organisational fairness and justice, and builds mutual support among workers and between workers and supervisors (recall these constructs from the section above on job stress and its health impacts). These and other aspects of participation constitute primary preventive interventions in the job stress process.

Participation also serves to optimise the fit of the intervention to the context at hand, and provides a means for integrating the participants context expertise with the content expertise of the OHS or other professionals involved in the intervention. This is crucial because organisations usually require unique solutions to job stress problems, even if the process of intervention may be based on generic principles and frameworks. More traditional and complementary means of tailoring an intervention to context include needs assessment or risk assessment.

Specific examples of intervention activities corresponding to primary, secondary, and tertiary intervention are provided in the body of the report. Well-developed sets of indicators applicable at the organisational level, available from international sources, are also described.

The consolidation of the evidence base around best practice for job stress and other workplace interventions has been the subject of considerable attention internationally. A recent large collaborative European Union project to develop a Psychosocial RIsk MAnagement – Excellence Framework (PRIMA-EF) has been conducted to provide a comprehensive best practice framework for psychosocial risk management in the workplace to the full range of policy and practice stakeholders. PRIMA-EF provides the most comprehensive best practice guidance currently available internationally.

In a series of interviews and focus groups conducted by the PRIMA-EF project, features of a successful workplace intervention projects were identified. The seven key features identified provide a useful organising framework for best practice tools and resources for workplace stress intervention. In the body of the report, resources are detailed for each of these intervention features to assist workplaces in understanding and achieving best practice:

1. Workplace interventions need to be developed with a full understanding of theory and evidence-based practice.

2. A systematic and step-wise approach needs to be utilized with development of clear aims, goals, tasks and intervention-planning

3. A proper risk assessment needs to be carried out with the aim of identifying risk factors and groups of workers with potentially high exposure

4. The interventions need to be tailored to suit a given industrial sector, occupation, workplace size, but also remain flexible and adaptable for implementation in a specific workplace

5. The most effective interventions are those which are accessible and user-friendly in their format, process and content to individuals at all levels of an organization (from lowest status workers to highest level managers)

6. A systematic approach was highlighted as the most effective with components of the intervention aimed at both the individual and the organization

7. Intervention programmes which facilitate competency building and skill development are important as, at the organizational level they build leadership and management skills.

Conclusions

Job stress can be prevented and controlled at the organisational level through the application of a systems or comprehensive approach. Despite the extensive evidence in support of systems approaches to job stress intervention, prevalent practice in Victorian workplaces and internationally remains disproportionately focused on individual-level intervention with inadequate attention to the reduction of job stressors. In addition to being a concern for workers, unions, employers, occupational health and safety, and workers' compensation systems, job stress should be a concern for physical and mental health promotion agencies, government public health authorities, medical practitioners, community advocacy groups, and others. An optimal public health response to job stress would encompass participation by the full range of stakeholders.