

GIS RISK ADVISORY NOTICE 19: WORK-RELATED STRESS AND CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

Introduction

The global spread of COVID-19 has prompted a rapid shift in the way we live our lives and has impacted employees, who may be experiencing heightened anxiety during these uncertain times. The pandemic has brought into sharper focus the need for Delegated State Authorities (DSAs) to have appropriate workplace stress and critical incident stress supports in place for their employees.

Scope

There is a statutory requirement on DSAs¹ to carry out a risk assessment and implement control measures to help mitigate workplace hazards. The purpose of this Risk Advisory Notice (RAN) is to assist DSAs with the implementation of appropriate risk management controls to help mitigate the risk of work related stress² and critical incident stress³ in the workplace. Proper management of these risks can help reduce the incidence and cost of claims.

What causes stress and critical incident stress in the workplace?

There are six main stressors associated with work related stress: **Demands, Control, Support, Relationships, Role and Change**.

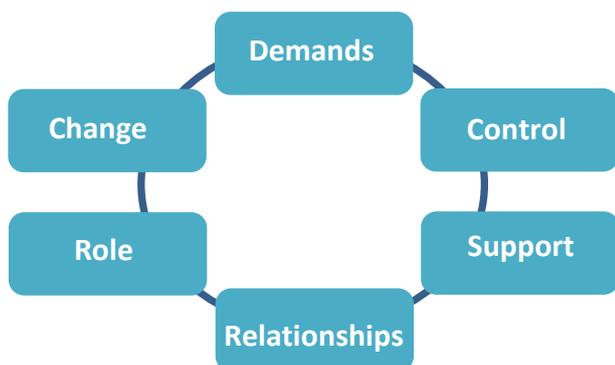


Fig 1: Work related stressors

¹ Delegated State Authority (DSA) - All bodies, where management of personal injury and third-party property damage claims against the body is delegated to the SCA. This includes State agencies, health and social care enterprises, community and comprehensive schools and prisons.

² Work related stress is a mental and physical condition which results from pressure or demands that strain or exceed your capacity or perceived capacity to cope.

³ Critical incident (CI) stress is the stress reaction of a person or a group to a critical incident and is characterised by a wide range of cognitive, physical, emotional and behavioural signs and symptoms which are likely to diminish over time.

These stressors have become amplified in the work environment, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, employees may have had to deal with a sudden change in the way they work. New work patterns, accessing IT remotely and the need to juggle work and family commitments, all have the potential to increase work-related stress.

Exposure to **Critical incidents**⁴ may also arise during COVID-19, particularly for those working in the health and social care sector. For example, healthcare workers may experience psychological distress if a colleague contracts COVID-19 in the work setting and becomes seriously ill and/or passes away. Essential and frontline organisations, such as the Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service, the Irish Coast Guard, the National Ambulance Service, and Túsla, among others, are also particularly exposed to critical incidents and this exposure may be heightened due to the additional challenges of delivering services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is widely accepted that there is a crucial period in the aftermath of a critical incident during which there is a risk of developing clinical levels of traumatic stress. Research indicates that a range of factors can modulate its effects and recovery; for example, prior stress management training, providing confidential advice, and counselling have been shown to have a positive effect.

⁴ A critical incident is an event out of the range of normal experience – one which is sudden and unexpected, involves the perception of a threat to life and can include elements of physical and emotional loss (World Health Organisation 2006).



What can a DSA do to mitigate stress and critical incident stress in the workplace?

The SCA has previously strongly recommended that DSAs use the **Work Positive^{CI}** (WPCI)⁵ risk assessment framework to assess workplace stress, psychological distress, and critical incident stress in the workplace. Based on the outcome of this risk assessment, where required, DSAs should implement a stress and CISM programme.

Appendix 1 contains a sample of practical control measures that DSAs can implement, following a risk assessment, which can help mitigate workplace stressors and critical incident stress that may arise during the COVID-19 pandemic.

References

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- BC First Responders' Mental Health Supporting Mental Health in First Responder Overview of Peer Support Programs

⁵ Work PositiveCI was developed by the SCA, HSA and CISM Network Ireland and comprises a systematic, validated approach to address workplace stress, psychological distress, and critical incident stress in the workplace as set out in the WPCI website (www.workpositive.ie).

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Practical scenarios

Scenario 1 - Relationships

Adam's relationships with his line manager and colleagues have frayed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The increase in social and physical isolation means that Adam isn't getting the same support as he normally would receive from his manager. He also has less opportunity to network and interact with his colleagues.

Control measures – Adam's line manager, Margaret, has arranged to meet Adam by video call once a week to ensure frequent contact is maintained. Margaret will monitor Adam's workload to ensure that he has full clarity on his role and work priorities. She has also encouraged Adam to sign up to the virtual coffee mornings, arranged by the HR department, to help promote social interaction with his colleagues.

Scenario 2 - Critical incident scenario

Helen works in policing and has been enforcing COVID-19 government guidelines during the pandemic. Helen has experienced heightened public resistance and has frequently been physically and verbally threatened when enforcing new government restrictions.

Control measures – Helen informs her manager, Mark, of recent incidents where she has felt threatened when on duty. Mark arranges for Helen to meet with trained Peer Support staff to discuss critical incidents and stress related issues with a view to learning from and providing support to each other. Mark also informs Helen of the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which is available to her should she wish to access it.



Appendix 1

Note this is a non-exhaustive list. Please refer to www.workpositive.ie for further information and support.

Sample stress and CISM control measures	
Demands	Ensure employees are encouraged to take regular breaks and apply healthy work practices such as getting regular exercise, taking annual leave, getting outdoors regularly. Managers should promote set lunch hours and encourage employees not to schedule meetings during the lunch period. Use internal communication channels, such as newsletters/emails/team meetings, to promote positive work-life balance. Encourage people to communicate with each other and meet virtually as they would normally do in the work setting. Advise employees to minimise watching, reading or listening to news about COVID-19 that may cause anxiety or distress.
Control	Provide employees with greater flexibility over their working time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider changing start and finish times to help employees cope with pressures external to the organisation, such as family commitments at home. Give more control to employees by enabling them to plan their own work, make decisions about how that work should be completed and how problems should be tackled.
Relationships	<p>Good communication and discussions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on clarity, can often reduce stressful situations without any other intervention. There should be clear on-going communication with employees about any potential return to office / building and other work environments.</p> <p>Give regular feedback and ensure open communication between management and employees. With people working remotely managers should maintain regular telephone communication and arrange meetings using videoconferencing tools, where available. This gives people an opportunity to address instances in which they may feel isolated, fatigued or stressed.</p>
Role	For employees whose working environment or primary duties have changed, ensure that they are provided clarity on their role and know what is expected of them. Set realistic expectations and provide flexibility as people may not have typical home supports available to them during this time e.g. childcare.
Change	Arising from the change in work environment and the requirement to work remotely during COVID-19, ensure employees have arranged an appropriate work environment, to include sufficient space, lighting, ventilation and access. Work equipment should be considered for employees who are required to work remotely during the pandemic. Employees should also have access to IT support in the event that they require any assistance in accessing systems.
Support	Ensure employees are aware of where and how they can access mental health and psychosocial support services. If there is an Employee Assistance Programme in place remind people that the service is there if they need support. Be sure to include all relevant website links and phone numbers when communicating with employees. Information programmes (e.g. eLearning courses, webinars) could also be developed to help heighten awareness of potential stressors during COVID-19.
Critical Incident Stress Management	Peer support from colleagues provides feelings of security and belonging that can reduce mental and emotional strain. Provide peer support training to employees / volunteers who can support other employees within their workplace. Establish self-help support groups where peers meet regularly to provide mutual support. This can be done virtually through emails, telephone calls, texts, and video chats. Ensure psychosocial support systems are in place to help deal with critical incidents, should they arise in the workplace.

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