

Lecture 11 – Psychosocial Hazards and Workplace Stress – An Introduction

Student Notes

Lecturer: George Steve Darmanin MSc. OHSEM CMIOSH

Introduction

Until relatively recently, psychological disorders were not considered part of the traditional occupational health or hygiene framework. The assessment and control of chemical, biological, physical, and ergonomic risks have long been understood as integral to a robust risk assessment framework in organisations. However, recent years have witnessed a growing recognition of the significant impact psychological disorders have on both individuals and workplaces. Furthermore, the principles of assessment, management, and control for psychological risks are fundamentally the same as those for any other health risks. As such, occupational hygiene offers a valuable means to anticipate, recognise, evaluate, and control psychological conditions—particularly stress—in the workplace.

The European Framework Agreement on Stress highlights this growing recognition. While it does not provide a formal definition, it describes stress as:

"a state, which is accompanied by physical, psychological or social complaints or dysfunctions and which results from individuals feeling unable to bridge a gap with the requirements or expectations placed on them."

The agreement emphasises the need to identify risk factors contributing to work-related stress and to take appropriate actions to prevent, eliminate, or reduce it. This proactive approach reflects the importance of addressing the structural and systemic nature of stress in occupational settings.

Psychological disorders, including stress, are among the most significant health risks currently being discussed. Of the range of conditions that can occur, **stress** stands out as the most significant occupational disorder impacting industrialised nations in the twenty-first century. The UK's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as:

"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them."

(HSE, 2005c)

While pressure is often regarded as a normal reaction to reasonable demands and can even have positive effects if managed properly, stress typically arises from intense, continuous, or prolonged exposure to excessive pressures. This prolonged exposure can

have detrimental effects on health, including physical and mental disorders (HSE, 2007d). Managing stress effectively involves balancing the demands and pressures placed on individuals with their ability to cope.

This challenge has significant implications for personal and business life. It is now a primary focus for many western economies and, in Britain, forms a key component of policies and targets aimed at reducing work-related illness over the coming decade. Similarly, in Malta, recent legislation reflects this growing priority. Under **Cap 646 Article 12**, employers are now legally obligated to:

“Ensure the physical and psychological wellbeing of their workers at all times and of all persons who may be affected by the work being carried out for such employer at their workplace.”

This inclusion of psychological wellbeing in Maltese legislation represents a significant shift, highlighting the importance of addressing mental health in the workplace alongside traditional physical risks.

Despite some scepticism regarding the scale of the work-related stress "problem," most statistics provide compelling evidence of the significance and impact of occupational ill-health and diseases caused by psychosocial hazards. Stress has become a major area of focus for policymakers and regulators due to the sheer scale of its impact, including:

- **Health consequences:** Chronic stress contributes to physical ailments such as cardiovascular disease and mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.
- **Economic costs:** The burden on healthcare systems, absenteeism, reduced productivity, and the cost of lost taxation from absentee workers are considerable.
- **Workplace performance:** Stress negatively impacts employee engagement, turnover rates, and overall organisational effectiveness.

The European Framework Agreement and the updates to Maltese legislation both reinforce the need for systematic approaches to managing stress. These frameworks call for identifying and addressing psychosocial risks at their root, integrating mental health considerations into broader occupational safety strategies, and promoting a culture of health and well-being.

As organisations adapt to these evolving expectations, the importance of proactive, participatory, and structured approaches cannot be overstated. By addressing psychosocial risks comprehensively, workplaces can ensure safer, healthier, and more resilient environments for employees.

Health Effects

The number and type of psychological or emotional symptoms exhibited by individuals can vary significantly from person to person. Recognised stress-related symptoms include, but are not limited to, aggression, anxiety, difficulties with concentration, fatigue, insomnia, and recklessness. However, it is important to note that not all these symptoms are necessarily caused or exacerbated by the workplace. Diagnosing stress-related conditions is inherently challenging, as individual responses to stress can be highly variable. Nevertheless, it is evident that individuals can and do experience a wide range of symptoms which, if left unchecked, may lead to serious issues.

It is precisely due to these impacts—and the fact that they are not always clearly understood, particularly by employers—that the government’s occupational health strategy prioritises the promotion of the positive benefits of effective stress management. A key focus is on preventing occupational stress from arising in the first place.

Benefits of Effective Stress Management

Some of the widely recognised benefits of implementing effective stress management strategies include:

- Greater employee commitment to their work;
- Improved staff performance and productivity;
- Reduced staff turnover;
- Lower rates of staff intending to leave their roles;
- Enhanced recruitment and retention of employees;
- Higher levels of customer satisfaction; and
- An improved reputation and image of the organisation.

By proactively managing stress in the workplace, employers not only support the well-being of their staff but also strengthen their organisation’s performance, culture, and reputation.

Management Standards

In the UK, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has developed a set of **management standards** aimed at promoting high levels of health, well-being, and organisational performance. These standards provide employers with a framework to conduct a **gap analysis**, comparing current performance levels with the conditions outlined in the standards. The identified gap between the current and desired conditions enables employers to create an action plan to manage and improve workplace stress and overall organisational health (HSE, 2007e).

The management standards are structured around six key areas of **work design**. These areas, if not effectively managed, are closely linked to poor health and well-being, low productivity, and higher rates of sickness absence. They are recognised as the six primary sources of stress at work:

1. **Demands:** Refers to workload, work patterns, and the work environment.
2. **Control:** The degree of autonomy individuals have in how they carry out their work.
3. **Support:** The level of encouragement, sponsorship, and resources provided by the organisation, line management, and colleagues.
4. **Relationships:** The importance of fostering positive working relationships to prevent conflict and address unacceptable behaviours.
5. **Role:** Ensuring employees have a clear understanding of their role within the organisation and addressing any potential role conflicts.
6. **Change:** How organisational changes, whether large or small, are managed and communicated to employees.

European Standards and Frameworks

At the European level, the **EU Framework Directive 89/391/EEC** provides the legislative basis for workplace health and safety, including the management of psychosocial risks. While it does not explicitly mention work-related stress, its broad mandate requires employers to ensure the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to work. This includes psychosocial risks, which are increasingly recognised as integral to occupational health.

The **European Framework Agreement on Work-Related Stress**, established by European social partners, further highlights the importance of addressing stress in the workplace. Although it does not provide a precise definition of stress, it describes it as:

"a state, which is accompanied by physical, psychological or social complaints or dysfunctions and which results from individuals feeling unable to bridge a gap with the requirements or expectations placed on them."

This agreement emphasises:

- The need for **collaborative efforts** between employers and employees to identify, prevent, and manage work-related stress.
- A proactive approach to addressing the root causes of stress through improved work design and organisational practices.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) has also developed comprehensive resources to guide organisations in managing psychosocial risks, including:

- **E-guide to Managing Stress and Psychosocial Risks:** This tool provides practical advice, particularly for small enterprises, on recognising and addressing stress and psychosocial risks in the workplace.
- **Guidance on Work-Related Stress:** This document outlines the causes, symptoms, and consequences of stress while offering a flexible action framework for organisations to develop tailored solutions.

Integrating UK and EU Standards

While the UK's HSE Management Standards provide a detailed framework for addressing workplace stress, the EU's legislative and policy initiatives, such as the Framework Directive and the European Framework Agreement on Stress, offer complementary guidance. Together, these frameworks enable organisations to:

- **Assess and identify risks:** Using structured approaches to evaluate stressors within the workplace.
 - **Develop targeted interventions:** Leveraging resources and tools to design sector-specific or enterprise-level solutions.
 - **Encourage collaboration:** Engaging employees in the identification and management of workplace stress.
 - **Enhance compliance:** Aligning organisational practices with both national and European regulatory requirements.
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What is the Difference Between Psychosocial and Psychological Safety?

To explore the distinction between these terms, let's use a relatable story:

The Garden Analogy

Imagine you have six medium-sized raised garden beds in your back garden, where you've planted baby mint, parsley, and cherry tomato plants, along with some green strawberries. For everything to thrive, the soil must be rich—full of vitamins and minerals, neither too sandy nor too clay-filled, with good drainage and a rich, dark brown colour.

For people, the “soil” is the workplace environment. A healthy vegetable patch represents a **psychosocially safe workplace**, where the right “nutrients” like role clarity, recognition, professional development, communication, and work-life balance are present to promote overall well-being.

This macro-level safety is called **psychosocial safety**.

The micro-level component, **psychological safety**, is just one nutrient within the broader “soil” needed to foster growth.

Highlights

1. **Psychosocial Safety:** A high-level concept focusing on the overall environment supporting mental, emotional, and physical health.
2. **Psychological Safety:** A specific element within psychosocial safety, emphasising feeling safe to express thoughts, concerns, or mistakes without fear.
3. **Stress and Safety:** Stress affects both psychosocial and psychological safety and serves as a key indicator of hazards or deficits in the workplace.

What is Psychosocial Safety?

Psychosocial safety refers to protecting employees' mental, emotional, and physical health by minimising stress and fostering positive relationships. A psychosocially safe workplace reduces risks, supports well-being, and ensures a collaborative environment aligned with common goals.

Threats to Psychosocial Safety

- **High/Low Job Demands:** Overly challenging or monotonous work can lead to stress and disengagement.

- **Low Job Control:** Limited autonomy in decision-making reduces motivation and job satisfaction.
- **Poor Support:** Lack of training, resources, or help from managers undermines confidence and performance.
- **Low Role Clarity:** Ambiguity in duties creates confusion and anxiety.
- **Poor Organisational Change Management:** Unmanaged changes increase uncertainty and resistance.
- **Low Reward and Recognition:** Employees feel undervalued, reducing morale.
- **Poor Organisational Justice:** Perceptions of unfairness or unequal treatment lead to distrust.
- **Poor Workplace Relationships:** Conflicts or toxic interactions harm team dynamics.
- **Remote/Isolated Work:** Physical separation from peers may lead to loneliness and disconnection.
- **Poor Environmental Conditions:** Uncomfortable or unsafe physical settings directly impact well-being.
- **Traumatic Events, Violence, Bullying, and Harassment:** These hazards cause severe stress and erode trust and safety.

Components of a Psychosocially Safe Workplace

1. Positive work environment
2. Effective communication
3. Supportive management
4. Job control and autonomy
5. Role clarity
6. Work-life balance
7. Recognition and reward
8. Professional development opportunities
9. Social support
10. Fairness and justice

What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety refers to the belief that one can share ideas, concerns, and mistakes without fear of humiliation, rejection, or punishment. It enables openness and innovation within teams.

Threats to Psychological Safety

- Low job control
- Poor support
- Low role clarity
- Poor organisational change management
- Low reward and recognition
- Poor organisational justice
- Poor workplace relationships
- Violence, aggression, bullying, and harassment

Hazards Less Directly Linked to Psychological Safety

- High/low job demands
- Remote or isolated work
- Poor environmental conditions
- Traumatic events

The Role of Stress in Safety

Stress is a key factor influencing both psychosocial and psychological safety.

- **Psychosocial Safety:** Stress arises from prolonged exposure to hazards like high demands, poor support, and unfair practices. Chronic stress impairs mental and physical health, reducing productivity and increasing absenteeism.
- **Psychological Safety:** Stress hinders collaboration and trust. Employees experiencing stress may hesitate to voice opinions or admit mistakes, fearing judgement or consequences.

Key Takeaways

1. **Difference Between Psychosocial and Psychological Safety:**

- Psychosocial safety addresses the holistic work environment.
- Psychological safety focuses on feeling secure to share without fear.

2. Stress as a Common Denominator:

- High stress levels indicate threats to both types of safety. Reducing stress enhances well-being, communication, and productivity.

3. Actionable Steps to Improve Safety:

- Foster respect and openness.
- Promote clear communication and role clarity.
- Provide autonomy and support.
- Recognise and reward contributions.
- Ensure fairness and balance in policies and practices.

Report on Psychosocial Risks in the Workplace

Source: Eurofound and EU-OSHA (2014), *Psychosocial risks in Europe: Prevalence and strategies for prevention*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

[Read the full report](#)

This below presents key findings and detailed insights into the prevalence, impacts, and strategies for managing psychosocial risks at work, as outlined in the joint Eurofound and EU-OSHA report.

Key Findings

Prevalence and Impacts

- **25% of workers** report experiencing work-related stress most or all of the time.
- A similar proportion attribute **negative health outcomes** directly to their work.
- **Main psychosocial risks include:**
 - **Task-related factors** such as monotonous or overly complex tasks.

- **Work intensity**, characterised by high demands and sustained pressure.
 - **Violence and harassment**, though less frequent, severely impact well-being, leading to long-term psychological and emotional harm.
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Manifestation of Psychosocial Risks

1. Task-Related Risks:

- Monotonous tasks lead to boredom, disengagement, and frustration.
- Overly complex tasks result in stress due to high cognitive demands.
- Both extremes erode job satisfaction and increase burnout risks.

2. Intensity-Related Risks:

- High work intensity, including tight deadlines and excessive workloads, leads to chronic stress.
- Consequences include cardiovascular issues and mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression.

3. Violence and Harassment:

- Violence can be physical or verbal.
 - Harassment involves repeated unwelcome behaviours, undermining psychological safety and productivity.
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Trends in Psychosocial Risks

Positive Trends

- Decrease in long working hours, improving work–life balance.
- Enhanced social support, fostering stronger workplace relationships.

Emerging Concerns

- **Job insecurity**: Economic instability and globalisation heighten concerns about job stability.
- **Increased work pressure**: Productivity demands and tighter deadlines elevate stress levels.
- **Growing incidence of violence and harassment** in specific countries.

- **Economic crises** exacerbate psychosocial risks through downsizing and cost-cutting measures.
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Sectoral and Gender-Specific Variations

Sectoral Differences

- **Healthcare and Finance:** High work intensity and stress due to demanding workloads.
- **Manual Labour:** Risks of monotony and physical exhaustion.
- **Retail and Hospitality:** Increased harassment and violence from public interactions.

Gender Dynamics

- **Men:** More likely to work long hours, with risks of physical exhaustion and reduced work-life balance.
- **Women:**
 - Face systemic barriers in career progression, such as gender bias and the "glass ceiling".
 - Greater caregiving responsibilities compound work-related stress.

Managerial Awareness and Response

Awareness of Psychosocial Risks

- **80% of managers** recognise work-related stress as a concern.
- **1 in 5 managers** identify violence and harassment as major workplace risks.
- **Top managerial concerns:**
 - Time pressure driven by high workloads and deadlines.
 - Difficult interactions with customers, patients, or pupils.

The Implementation Gap

- Despite awareness, fewer than **30% of organisations** have risk management procedures.

Barriers to Effective Action

- **Resource constraints:** Limited finances and staff capacity hinder comprehensive interventions.

- **Lack of expertise:** Managers often lack the knowledge to address psychosocial risks effectively.
 - **Competing priorities:** Operational demands take precedence over risk management.
 - **Cultural resistance:** Stigma surrounding mental health discourages open discussion.
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Strategies for Prevention

Structured Approach: A Continuous Process

- Regular **risk assessments** to identify psychosocial risks.
- Organisational changes, such as workload redistribution and clearer role definitions.
- Active **employee involvement** in designing and reviewing measures.

Tailored Interventions

- Address **sector-specific challenges**, such as harassment in retail or stress in healthcare.
- Scale initiatives based on organisational size and readiness, starting with foundational measures and evolving towards comprehensive programmes.

Participatory Approaches

- **Co-creation of policies:** Collaboration fosters ownership and relevance.
- **Feedback mechanisms** ensure interventions address real concerns.

Examples Across Europe

- **Sweden:** Stress prevention through leadership training and workload adjustments.
 - **Germany:** Mental health support, including counselling and mindfulness programmes.
 - **Netherlands:** Flexible work arrangements to support work–life balance.
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Policy-Level Contributions

Role of Legislation

- EU directives, such as the Framework Directive on Occupational Safety and Health (89/391/EEC), mandate psychosocial risk assessments.
- Labour inspectorates enforce compliance through inspections and penalties.
- Policymakers provide tools like guidelines and risk assessment templates.

Social Dialogue

- **Joint agreements** between employers and employees include stress management and anti-harassment measures.
- Collaborative solutions ensure strategies are relevant and effective.
- Builds trust and encourages shared responsibility for well-being.

Variations Across Europe

- **Strong Performers:** Sweden and Denmark, with robust social dialogue and worker participation.
- **Emerging Frameworks:** Newer Member States face challenges such as resource constraints.

EU Initiatives

- Campaigns like “**Healthy Workplaces Manage Stress**” raise awareness.
- EU funding supports research and pilot programmes for innovative strategies.

Conclusion

Addressing psychosocial risks requires a structured, participatory approach that evolves with workplace needs. Combining legislative support, sector-specific interventions, and a culture of inclusivity ensures organisations can foster safer, healthier, and more productive work environments.

Other Important Resources:

EU Social Dialogue: Framework Agreement on Work-Related Stress

<https://resourcecentre.etuc.org/agreement/framework-agreement-work-related-stress>

EU-OSHA publications:

https://osha.europa.eu/en/search/site?search_api_fulltext=stress

https://osha.europa.eu/en/search/site?search_api_fulltext=psychosocial

https://osha.europa.eu/en/search/site?search_api_fulltext=psychological%3B

HSE (UK): Stress and mental health at work

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/>

Comcare (Australia): Psychosocial hazards

<https://www.comcare.gov.au/safe-healthy-work/prevent-harm/psychosocial-hazards/about-psych-hazards>