

## Combined stressors increase risks exponentially

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"Fixing" the individual worker is only half the battle of dealing with work-related stress injuries, a senior scientific officer and expert in human factors and ergonomics has told a Western Australian conference today.

Speaking at the Australian and New Zealand Society of Occupational Medicine's Annual Scientific Meeting in Fremantle, WorkSafe WA's Kath Jones says employers must proactively address organisational factors.

She says workplace stressors rarely occur in isolation, and the effects of combined stressors can be insidious, increasing the risk of a stress injury exponentially.

According to Jones, only about two per cent of workers' compensation claims are for mental stress, but these types of injuries take three times longer to recover from than physical injuries like musculoskeletal disorders.

This is because the "locus" of control is beyond the injured worker, which can lead them to develop a victim mentality that reduces the odds of a positive return-to-work outcome, she says.

"Injuries might happen to individuals but all evidence points to organisational factors being causal," Jones adds.

"We know that yes, your personality, your sleeping patterns, your ability to cope and history of coping might affect stress claims... but research tells us [there are] certain conditions which cause it."

Jones says a Griffith University study on workers' comp claims found the "big defining factors" behind workers making claims include feeling like they're being criticised at work, believing their co-workers don't care about them, and working in an environment "characterised by conflict".

Meanwhile, a Spanish study of 10,500 workers found organisational policies and culture, and support from colleagues and supervisors, are the biggest protective factors against poor mental outcomes, she says.

"If you take away one message, it's that the leadership skills of your managers is going to be one of the most important things you can work on," she told meeting delegates.

### Case study: reducing customer stress improved workers' wellbeing

Jones says a Western Australian Department of Transport overhaul of its licensing centres provides a good example of how an employer can transform their organisational structure to support workers' wellbeing.

Licensing centre workers were exposed to frequent verbal aggression from customers, including being continuously told they were "useless".

These and other forms of abuse can have a greater impact on workers' wellbeing than threats of violence, she says.

To tackle the problem, the department surveyed employees, looked into factors in licensing centres that made customers annoyed or frustrated, and put together a dedicated team to work out what to do about cases of customer aggression.

As a result, it provided workers with de-escalation training and implemented engineering controls like silent duress alarms, which they can activate if a customer starts to show any aggression, prompting managers to make their presence known to the customer, Jones says.

The department also implemented administrative controls like signage to indicate to customers they are being watched on CCTV, appointed concierges, and separated the various services the centre provided to alleviate customer stress, she says.

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