

# **Stress – has it had a bad reputation?**

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Next time you're stressed have a think about what it's trying to tell you and the opportunities it might provide.

This chapter is purposefully taking a contentious approach to work-related stress to create some food for thought and perhaps challenge views about what 'stress' is. For some, this may seem like an argument in semantics. However, I will outline why stress is good, necessary, and central to mentally healthy work. This chapter will discuss:

- Why stress can be good – and shouldn't always be avoided
- How understanding workers needs can mitigate harmful stress
- How psychosocial safety is central to good stress management

## **Stress can be good**

Stress<sup>1</sup> is a normal part of life. Arguably, much of life's meaning and contribution is borne from periods of stress and distress. It is present at births, weddings, and funerals. Stress is in all aspects of life, and we need these challenges and pressure to learn and grow.

In a work environment, it can be beneficial for workers to feel challenged and mentally stretched in their work at times. A little bit of positive stress can help keep the mind active and stop people from becoming bored (which can feel more stressful than being over-stretched).

Experiencing stress does not automatically mean that we experience harm. However, it would be remiss to not acknowledge the dire consequences for workers from harmful, chronic stress. These experiences can result in significant, life-changing impacts on workers' health and wellbeing. Early intervention is infrequently used, systemic practices that contribute to harmful stress are often left unaddressed, and the conversation turns to burnout – which is waiting much too late to intervene.

For work settings the focus should not be on avoiding stress completely, because this is an impossible task, but how stress is managed. The language we use and how we kōrero about stress is also important. For example, 'challenge' elicits a noble goal, a sense of achievement, a task of complexity or contest; whereas 'stress' elicits a sense of being overwhelmed or experiencing anxiety and tension.

<sup>1</sup> Stress is defined in many ways but usually in negative terms. For the purpose of this chapter stress is understood as the physical, mental and emotional responses to unfamiliar, challenging or complex work. It can be associated with thoughts and feelings of "not being able to keep up with, or have the right tools to cope with, the work demands placed on them (workers)"

**So why is stress good?**

Stress can enhance motivation – we are all likely to remember a time when a pending deadline helped us focus and even think more clearly. The body's natural fight or flight system mobilises our resources and can sharpen our minds to focus on the task at hand and can offer us the boost to push through procrastination, doubt, or pontification.

Stress may feel overwhelming, but it forces people to solve problems. This can ultimately build our skills and confidence to tackle other tasks or issues in the future. Going through the process of stress, or facing a fear, can ultimately increase confidence and therefore resiliency to tackle similar tasks in a more relaxed state. When we are more relaxed, we are more creative problem-solvers. We also feel less threatened and more in control and therefore less likely to resort to mental short-cuts or biases that may lead to poor decision-making.

Times of stress can bond people and help build relationships, providing another protective factor – social connection – which is good for our wellbeing and productivity. Further, embracing stress is aligned with a growth mindset that sees the value in learning, hard work, and a tendency to be more collaborative. Healthy work, characterised by healthy levels of stress, keep people in that growth mindset in which information sharing, innovating, giving, and receiving feedback is the norm – all of which mitigate some of the causes of stress. When there is healthy stress, work is seen as a challenge rather than a drain on personal and organisational resources.

However, too frequently people are left to flail around with no support. For many the barriers to talking about workload and pressure are too fraught with downsides and can bring up feelings of being overwhelmed and a fear of failure. Among these barriers is the perceptions from others of not coping, being seen as weak or incompetent, and the potential of being cut off from future opportunities.

**Figure 1***Growth mindset v. Fixed mindset*

## Understanding workers' needs can mitigate harmful stress

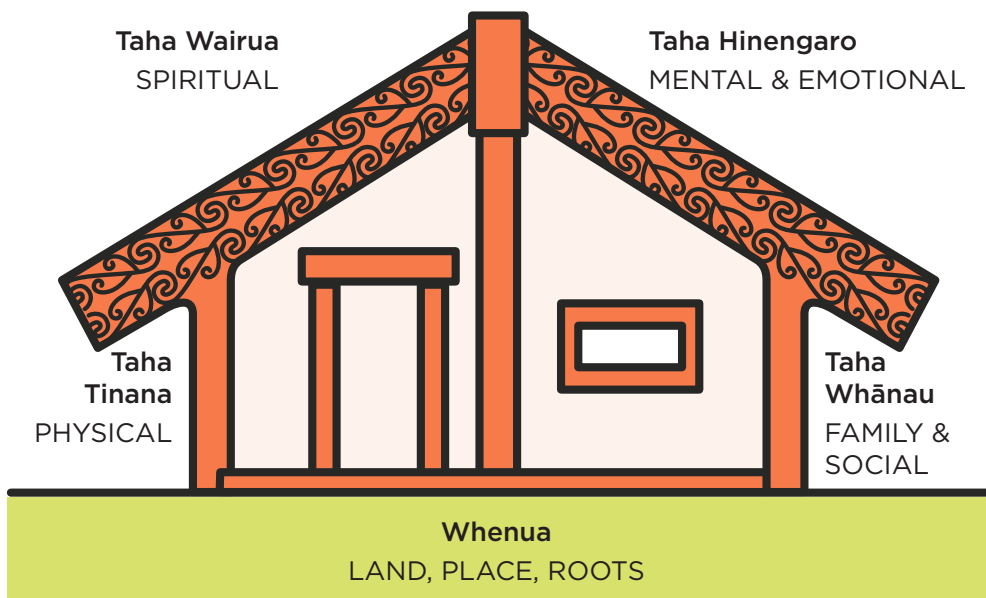
Businesses and organisations need to understand all aspects of their operations, including their people. This may seem an obvious statement, but too frequently the unique needs of workers are not considered as part of this picture. So, the question needs to be asked – who are your workforce?

There is a tendency to take a normative view of workers, and although a health and safety system needs to work for the majority of people, it is not robust unless it considers its most at risk. People do not come to work with the same needs or amounts of stress. It is not a level playing field. Knowing your workers can help prevent or mitigate risks associated with factors like low literacy levels, pressures from family responsibilities, or the impact of living in underserved communities.

Although a business or organisation has little control over non-work-related stress, there is a duty to manage risks to health and safety in the workplace and promote the highest protection of health. For example, if a worker is stressed due to family problems, they may be distracted at work and this may lead to concentration issues, presenteeism, or interpersonal issues. The stressed worker could introduce health and safety risks to themselves and their colleagues, and these risks must be managed.

When stress becomes harmful it impacts multiple domains of life. Our ability to cope with stress relies on an interaction across multiple areas which are illustrated by Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1984 – see Figure 2). Looking at health holistically is helpful for thinking about how people experience their wellbeing – their physical wellbeing *Te Taha Tinana*, emotional wellbeing *Te Taha Hinengaro*, social wellbeing *Te Taha Whānau*, and spirituality *Te Taha Wairua*. It is important to acknowledge the dynamic of these interacting variables as few aspects of wellbeing are confined to one area. This helps us with defining the issues and finding the right solutions to resolve them.

**Figure 2**  
*Te Whare Tapa Whā*



Sometimes, over the short-term we can draw on resources in other areas to pull through, equally when we are struggling with whānau issues or an illness, our ability to go that extra mile gets a lot harder. We know that interesting, highly rewarding work, with supportive relationships, and good rest can contribute to wellbeing. Whereas when work demands are excessive or there is incivility and conflict, these resources become depleted. In these cases, people are able to cope less or more depending on their access to other protective factors.

Stress contributes to many long-term illnesses and diseases, also known as non-communicable diseases (NCDs), these are illnesses like, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, and a range of respiratory diseases, which begin often with stress-related conditions like hypertension, high cholesterol, obesity, and insulin resistance (Narayan, Ali, & Koplan, 2010). NCDs are the leading causes of premature deaths and preventable ethnic and socioeconomic health inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand (Eng et al., 2011).

There is evidence that Māori experience work-related stress differently than non-Māori, potentially exacerbated by cultural exclusion and institutional racism. Exposure to stress in an occupation is different for ethnic groups, with Māori women more likely to report their job was very or extremely stressful than non-Māori women in the same occupation (Eng et al., 2011). Further, the type of work undertaken by Māori workers may add additional stress with high body strain tasks and low autonomy.

Both Māori and Pasifika are disproportionately impacted by precarious and non-standard work, and represented in low wage jobs where there is a correlation between poor job conditions, social inequality and health outcomes, including high levels of stress (Meehan & Watson, 2021). For example, 10.6% of Māori and 14.3% of Pacific employees are temporary workers, compared with 8.5% of European workers (Statistics New Zealand, 2019).

There are various gender-related factors that may impact on a person's vulnerability to work-related stress. Women are more likely to be exposed to bullying, violence, and sexual harassment in the workplace (World Health Organization, 2010). Women tend to have jobs with a lower degree of decision latitude. In addition, women do more unpaid labour in the home, which often cannot be delegated or postponed. Family violence continues to disproportionately impact on women (World Health Organization, 2010).

Although it is important to think about unique needs of your workers, it is also important to note that increasing an individual's stress management skills by itself is not enough. Treating the effects of stress without looking at the wider causes will only allow the stress to continue. Instead, look at organisational factors that may be contributing to stress, like decision-making and job control, and look to manage them in a systemic way.



## Psychosocial safety is central to good stress management

Psychosocial is the interrelationship between a person's thoughts, emotions and behaviours and their social environment. From this perspective, the experience of stress results from the interaction of the worker, their tasks, the people they work with, and the environment in which it is all done.

Psychosocial hazards are the “aspects of the design and management of work, and its social and organisational contexts that may have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm” (Cox, Griffiths, & Rial-Gonzalez, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Psychosocial hazards are experienced differently for each person. And as stress is influenced by multiple factors and everyone has different thresholds, it is important to consider both individual and systemic factors. A hazard may be a risk to some, but not for others. The initial step of systematic hazard identification is very important when looking at psychosocial factors that contribute to stress.

Hazards can also be experienced in combination with one another, influencing and influenced by other hazards. Certain behaviours or interpersonal issues may arise from other risks that are not being managed. For example, one worker may flourish under complete autonomy while another worker may struggle with the lack of prescribed direction. For one, lack of *role clarity* is a risk, to the other only a potential hazard. If hazard identification is not thoroughly considered then solutions and controls may be based on the wrong assumption of what's contributing to the problem.

For people's stress to be managed and wellbeing to be prioritised, trust needs to be fostered. People will never be completely honest about their levels of stress and wellbeing if they feel they will be penalised for it. This is borne out in research that shows that people do not share their mental health status with their employer, and many do not seek support (Peterson, 2007). Poor psychosocial safety and lack of conversation is a good recipe for stress and burnout.

<sup>2</sup> This definition acknowledges *te taha hinengaro* and *te taha tinana* but is limited by its exclusion of all of wellbeing (*whānau* and *wairua*).



Opening up the conversation and normalising talking about harmful stress can make workers feel comfortable raising issues, and alleviate the fear of being criticised, disciplined, or embarrassed. Make it clear to workers that their health and safety are important to you, and to the organisation. Communicate that it is safe and necessary for them to report harmful stress to you as soon as they feel that they are not coping, that they will not be punished for doing so, and that the information will be kept in confidence. Model this behaviour by talking openly about harmful stress, and emphasise that workers can report stress to anyone within the organisation such as their manager, an HSR, a trusted colleague, or someone else.

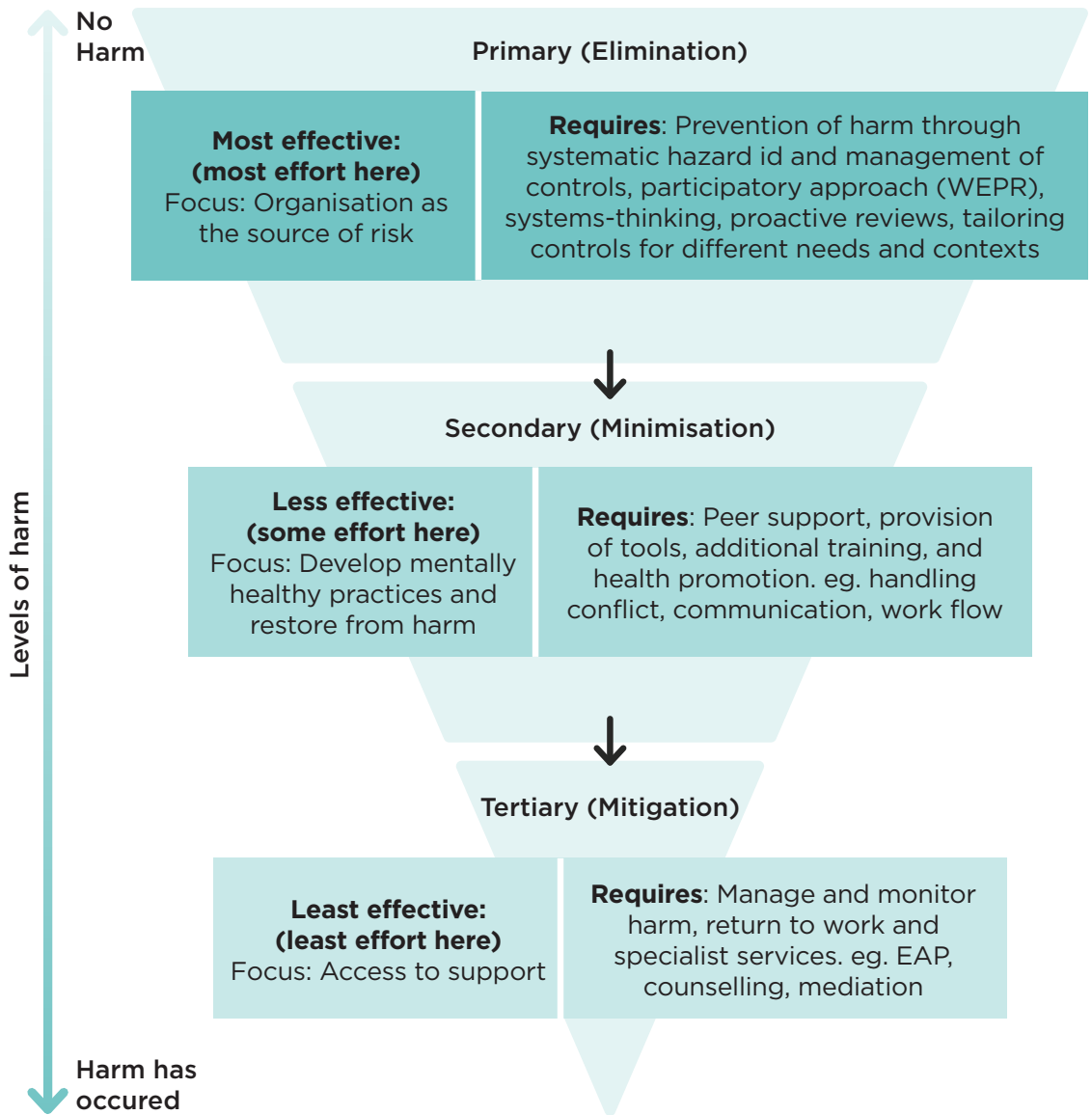
### **Levels of intervention to managing stress**

Alongside good psychosocial safety and effective hazard identification, there needs to be greater understanding of working at different levels of interventions. Many businesses and organisations almost exclusively look at individualised approaches (tertiary) without any analysis of needs. Instead, businesses need to work at multiple levels of intervention, particularly the primary level that sees the organisation (its people, practices and environment) as the source of risk (see Figure 3).

Primary intervention means preventing (eliminating at source) potential risks as much as reasonably practicable. The focus is both the systematic identification and management of controls, as well as setting up systems and practices that enable worker wellbeing and a healthy place of work. The focus of control measures should be on designing good work, developing a positive culture, using inclusive, participatory approaches, and a proactive approach to eliminating risks at an early stage.

Figure 3

Levels of interventions for psychosocial safety and stress management



**Leadership is essential**

Ensuring leaders at all levels understand and are committed to psychosocial safety and managing harmful stress. Leadership throughout the business, particularly from senior leaders to mobilise organisational resources and the adoption of new practices. Leadership can demonstrate commitment by reinforcing behaviours and ensuring sustainability by including stress and psychosocial risk management in strategic plans as well as existing health and safety systems and processes.

**Establish commitment from all levels of the business before putting processes in place**

‘All levels’ means identifying champions and leaders with different perspectives of the business – these could be frontline managers, HSRs, union delegates, and senior leadership. By confirming this commitment from the start, you can make sure there is sufficient resourcing, clear chains of responsibility, support, and championship for minimising harmful stress within the business.

**Ensure there is worker engagement and participation in place**

You must engage with your workers and enable them to participate in improving health and safety. Particularly because stress is not always something that can be objectively measured. People who carry out the work usually have the best insight into the risks present in their workplace. One way you could engage with workers is by creating a working group that includes workers and their representatives.

**Tailoring controls for different work groups and workers**

Do a needs analysis to understand workers’ challenges, and what types of controls they might find helpful. Considering the range of views, being comfortable with difference and valuing the diversity of response people bring to their work. But take the time to allow people to open up. Focus on both eliminating and minimising risks and increasing protective factors.

**Make sure workers know how to report harmful stress**

- Set up and clearly communicate ways for workers to report harmful stress through a variety of nominated people within the organisation or securely online. Encourage early reporting, and remind workers that there will be no negative consequences for doing so. Make sure that all information provided in harmful stress reports is kept confidential, as some aspects of the report may be sensitive or private.
- Use the data collected from reports of harmful stress to monitor whether your control measures are working effectively. Remember that managing risk is not a one-off event, and you should frequently revise and refine your processes.
- The following questions may be helpful to guide your thinking:
  - Did we assess the risks in the workplace correctly?
  - How well did our questionnaires and interviews work?
  - Have we helped workers understand what they can do themselves to manage harmful stress?
  - Are our communication and training processes adequate?
  - Did we successfully eliminate or minimise the likelihood of harmful stress?
  - Did we choose the right prevention methods – primary, secondary, and tertiary?
  - Which prevention plans have got good results? Which ones do we need to look at again?

## Conclusions

In Aotearoa New Zealand the rates of stress are increasing, much like the rest of world. This could be attributable to the pace and lifestyle of the modern world, or to the complexity of work and the pressures of increased productivity. It may be that work-related stress co-occurs with other stress-related conditions or mental ill-health, which will see depression as the leading cause of disability worldwide.

The future of work might seem a little murky and complex, but the rewards will be greater. We need to harness ‘work as imagined’ and be bold to make these changes a reality. We need to be flexible with our thinking, and embrace a growth mindset to facilitate this change, seeing times of stress as directly contributing to our personal development and to providing a sense of meaning and contribution in our lives. Too many people are being harmed at work because of the stigma of admitting they are stretched, and we continue to work in ways that erode our sense of self, our value and our ability to contribute to a flourishing nation.

There is a resounding acknowledgement that work can be good for our health, in turn contributing to the wellbeing of whānau and community. The condition being that the nature and quality of the work environment should be safe and accommodating, whilst also being cognisant of people’s needs and the diversity of people’s responses to psychosocial hazards. This will likely mean leading the conversation and not expecting workers to necessarily start the conversation. Trust is essential to build and is based on reciprocal obligations and responsibilities. We can embrace stress when we have each other’s backs and are rowing together in the same waka!

He waka eke noa – We are all in this together.

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