

POSITIVE SOLUTIONS ARE CRITICAL TO INCIDENTS AT WORK

A new online facility for protecting the psychological health and safety of those workers likely to be exposed to critical incidents at work has been rolled out by the State Claims Agency in association with the Health and Safety Authority and CISM Network Ireland. Report by Grace Heneghan.

WorkPositiveCI is the first psychosocial risk management framework to be introduced in Europe, which is specific to critical incidents and incorporates a free, easy-to-use, innovative, and most importantly a confidential online process.

It provides feedback on workplace stressors, employee psychological wellbeing and critical incident exposure in the workplace. It also provides structured guidance, which enables organisations to develop an action plan to mitigate against these stressors.

Since 2002, the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) has provided a comprehensive framework for the assessment of psychosocial risk, based on a set of management standards, which looks at the six primary sources of stress at work.

This initiative is an update to the existing Work Positive workplace stress tool with additional guidance on psychological wellbeing and critical incident exposure in the workplace.

The launch of www.workpositive.ie by the State Claims Agency (SCA), the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), CISM Network Ireland and supported by Employee Wellbeing Ltd took place recently at the Rotunda Hospital's



Pictured at the launch of the WorkPositiveCI tool at the Rotunda Hospital were (l-r): Ciaran Breen, Director of the State Claims Agency; Pat Breen, Minister for Employment and Small Business, Paschal Donohoe, Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform; Martin O Halloran, CEO of the Health and Safety Authority; and Brendan McNicholas, Chair of CISM Network Ireland.

iconic Pillar Room.

The SCA includes a statutory brief to advise and assist Delegated State Authorities (DSAs) in relation to measures to prevent or reduce risks which, if not addressed, may give rise to personal injury and property damage claims.

The State Claims Agency (SCA), the claims and risk management wing of the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA), has a particular statutory mandate to manage claims and risks on behalf of the 139 delegated state agencies, which encompass and make up the civil and public

service sector.

With this in mind, the SCA worked collaboratively with the HSA and CISM Network Ireland to produce WorkPositiveCI. Speaking at the launch, Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform, Paschal Donohoe said: “As well as being the right thing to do, reducing workplace stress and improving psychological health will help with recruitment and retention of staff.



Paschal Donohoe, Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform, said that reducing workplace stress and improving psychological health will help with recruitment and retention of staff.

“This tool will harnesses technology to reduce risks for workers and I hope the framework will encourage best practice to promote health and improve wellbeing in the workplace.”

WORK-RELATED STRESS

The Minister for Employment and Small Business, said that this online tool will help employers and employees deal with potential stressors arising from ongoing systemic issues and critical incidents at work.

“Work-related illness is rising and has now overtaken accidents as the largest contributor to working days lost throughout the country,” noted Minister Pat Breen at the launch. A number of reports issued by the HSA from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) identified trends and patterns for recorded workplace accidents and injuries, including incidents for MSDs, stress, anxiety and depression. This was, he said, undertaken during the period of rapid economic and labour change between 2003 and 2013.

“The best way to manage and understand stress is to expose it, through duty of care and proper risk assessment. So, this workplace office safety tool has been upgraded to now include critical incidents, which is particularly relevant to the emergency and rescue services.

“This tool can be used by all kinds of organisations and agencies, from large public sector bodies to SMEs in addition to microbusinesses. It’s a best practice tool for psychosocial risks and is very easy to use, available online and is free of charge.”

POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

Martin O’Halloran, HSA Chief Executive, said: “This issue of work-related stress concerns the Authority. Therefore, we have included the promotion of positive mental health in the

workplace as one of our current strategic goals. It is certainly a topic that we believe deserves more focus and this new online tool will assist both employers and employees in identifying and managing the risks of work-related stress.”

With first responders and those at the frontline of the public service frequently exposed to very traumatic and stressful events, O’Halloran urged employers to recognise and address the complexities of stress in the workplace.

“In 2013 an estimated 55,000 workers in Ireland suffered from work-related illness with over 750,000 days lost at work as a result. These figures are sadly increasing as Minister Donohoe pointed out, but there are now opportunities to fix this with the WorkpositiveCI tool. Employers can now identify the stressors and actively put appropriate measures in place,” he said.

EMOTIONAL FIRST AID

Calling on all employers to use WorkPositiveCI to develop a policy to manage critical incident stress, Brendan McNicholas, chair of CISM Network Ireland, described Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) as “a robust system of psychosocial or emotional first aid, based on prevention, peer support and professional oversight”.

The membership of CISM Network Ireland includes public bodies such as the Defence Forces, Ambulance and Fire Services, the Irish Coast Guard, Prison Service, HSE, Oberstown Campus, and the State Claims Agency, while voluntary organisations include the Irish Red Cross, the Order of Malta and the Civil Defence.

McNicholas said that CISM Network Ireland has devised a critical incident stress management course in association with the Institute of Technology in Carlow, which will enable “senior managers to understand the legal imperatives around employee wellbeing resilience, the importance of psychosocial

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

risk assessment and strategic planning to cope with critical incidents.”

Meanwhile, practitioners also learn how to impart coping skills, undertake interventions and recognise when further help is required. They will also learn how to co-ordinate organisational CISM resources, he noted.

“Since this course was first rolled out a few months ago the uptake has exceeded our expectations, and evaluations have been most positive. The fact that CISM has become so well-known is particularly satisfying, and signifies that more and more organisations are now considering the psychosocial wellbeing of their employees.”



Anthony Lawlor, chairman of the Irish Red Cross, outlined the importance of critical incident stress management systems in a voluntary agency.

REDUCING ABSENTEEISM

In addition to educational courses, CISM Network Ireland has produced booklets and leaflets, and has developed an e-learning package with the help of the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council and Dillon Productions.

“CISM Network Ireland strongly advocates the use of WorkPositiveCI and we will help managers and practitioners to recognise and deal with psychosocial risks within their organisations.”

Brendan McNicholas, who works within Dublin Fire Brigade’s fire and ambulance service, pointed to obvious psychosocial risks within the fire service “Our CISM system has been in place for almost 20 years now and is an integral part of Dublin Fire Brigade. From the time a firefighter or paramedic joins the organisation, these men and women and their families learn about CISM in terms of prevention, peer support and tertiary help.”

In addition to the frontline emergency services who benefit from CISM, he said that the less obvious beneficiaries include agricultural inspectors, revenue and social welfare protection staff and those who deal directly with customers and members of the public, “in areas where stress can be accumulated”.

FOUNDER OF CISM

By video link from the USA, where he is Clinical Professor of Emergency Health Services at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, the founder of CISM said the WorkPositive initiative will be “a model for the worldwide community”.

Prof Jeff Mitchell, who has worked with the UN standing committee on stress and the UN departments of safety and security, now teaches a Disaster Psychology course at the Florida Institute of Technology and also at Johns Hopkins

University. His own background is in the fire rescue service, from where he first started out as a firefighter and paramedic.

“A peer support programme should be in place for each and every company and organisation. People who speak with fellow workers (who are trained to carefully listen) often do better than visiting a mental health professional. However, they also need to be guided by mental health professionals who understand the programme.

“The State Claims Agency and the CISM Network Ireland have done tremendous work putting together this WorkPositive initiative. It’s a very logistical approach – people can identify the problems and the actual events; they look at risk analysis and how to develop a strategic and conventional programme along with follow-up if that’s necessary,” he said.

MANAGING STATE CLAIMS

Providing the background on the SCA’s involvement in this initiative, Pat Kirwan, SCA Deputy Director, said that in 2012 the Agency looked at the management of personal injury claims in the workplace.

“Today we have over 666 incidents recorded involving stress, anxiety, trauma and PTSD reported through the National Incident Management System, which is used by the 139 state authorities. We have also settled by 84 claims over a five-year period and we now have 222 active claims in relation to stress and stress-related issues.”

Critical incident stress is becoming a more recognised problem in Ireland, noted Kirwan, and he estimated that between €30m and €50m are the resultant costs of these type of incidents and claims, in addition to indirect costs to those state authorities.

“Critical incidents are often foreseeable in a general sense,

so employers are supposed to put supports and protocols in place for employees. This has been demonstrated by the Defence Forces who have very robust systems in place. But if you don't put these procedures in place then it's very difficult for the SCA to defend you should an employee receive an injury at work due to a critical incident," he advised.

The SCA made a number of key recommendations following its review in 2012; "the main one was to adopt CISM and to introduce a more formal process to identify those most at risk, such as members of the Garda Síochána, the Prison Service and the Health Service Executive (HSE), in addition to those working in both the public and private sectors exposed to critical incidents".

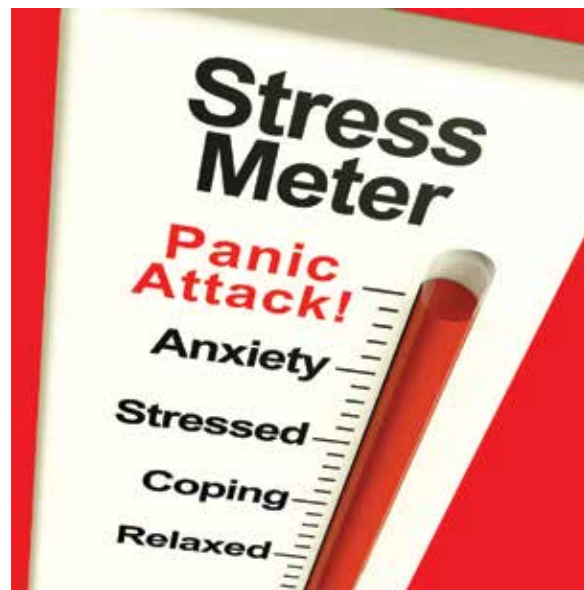
PROMOTING GOOD HEALTH

He said that the new framework will now encourage workplace practices that promote good health. "Many of the organisations under the remit of the SCA provide emergency, rescue, security, and healthcare services to the citizens of the State. These staff deserve our support and protection with many of them facing the risk of exposure to critical incidents in their daily working lives."

The Workpositive.ie framework is a four-stage process and fundamentally provides feedback on the employees' psychological wellbeing and critical incident exposure and hazards. It took a number of years to develop the framework, then we needed to pilot and validate the processes. Part of it involves an employee questionnaire that will indicate their levels of psychosocial mental health and wellbeing, which needed to be finessed.

There are 15 organisations involved through the CISM Ireland Network; we offered the survey to 12,000 employees and we received 2,500 responses to the questionnaire. Following a validation process we then worked with Ulster University's Dr Robert Kerr to develop the website and make it easily accessible to all members across all sectors, and it's important to note that it's confidential, so the results are only available to you.

It identifies measures such as social risks, provides feedback and online tools available to address the actions identified. A lot of people spoke about the advantages of how this can improve the level of engagement, how it complies with health



and safety legislation and also with the duty of care under common law.

Kirwan paid tribute to the co-operation of the HSA's Dr Sharon McGuinness and Patricia Murray; psychologist and researcher Sharon Gallagher who worked with the SCA for a period of time on the development of the framework; Irish Coast Guard's Gerard O'Flynn who chaired CISM Network Ireland during the development of the CISM tool; Dr Robert Kerr, Ulster University lecturer and MD of Employee Wellbeing Ltd, who was involved in the development of the online tool and the pilot process; and his Ulster University colleague Prof Mark Shevlin who was

involved in the validation process.

PEER SUPPORT NETWORK

The Irish Red Cross (IRC), one of the original members of CISM Network Ireland, currently has 40 full-time staff and 3,000 volunteers based throughout the country. Outlining the importance of critical incident stress management systems in a voluntary agency, IRC chairman Anthony Lawlor, said that one of the critical incident stress support systems they have in place is short stress awareness training on prevention, symptoms and stressors.

"Apart from direct frontline stressors, our volunteers may also experience stress within their personal lives, so this training course identifies how to deal with stress in general. We also provide psychological first aid training, which is a good measure in itself as you may be dealing with people who are psychologically traumatised due to their physical injury.

"There's a real value of having peer support workers in your workplace; the IRC has up to 40 peer supporters within our cohort of volunteers who find the peer support network more valuable than the formal level of support, as they have a common understanding."

He pointed out that the IRC also has a national helpline in place for members, which is operated by a national CISM co-ordinator. "Gerry O'Sullivan, who is ex-military and ex-ambulance service, co-ordinates the peer support networks at a regional and county level for the Irish Red Cross. We also have a clinical psychologist on board – Dr Brian Gahan – who provides clinical advice on our training programmes.

"It is certainly our practice within the Irish Red Cross that incident or accident investigation should be a separate process to peer support. So, any lessons learned are duly applied within the organisation. WorkpositiveCI is a valuable tool and our experience as a voluntary organisation has been positive."