Stress in the Workplace

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May 2003

STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Final Report

by

The Department of Public Health

Western Health Board

A Survey commissioned by the

Local Partnership Committee

Roscommon Community Services

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May, 2003

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Stress, which results from something in the working environment is called workplace stress and can have many origins. Because stress is so widespread, it has a very high cost for individuals, companies, organisations and society in general. For the company or organisation, the costs of stress can take many forms. These include low performance, absenteeism, higher medical costs and staff turnover, with the associated cost of recruiting and training new workers. Stress in the workplace is a growing concern, both for employers and employees. To be able to effectively address this issue, employers need information on the sources of stress within the workplace. It is in this context that the Department of Public Health has been commissioned to conduct this research, with the aim of determining the causes and the extent of stress levels of employees within Community Services, Co. Roscommon.

Methodology

Three focus groups were held with employees of Community Services, Roscommon, following which a questionnaire was devised based upon the outcome of the focus groups. This specific questionnaire, along with a standardised questionnaire from the 'Work Positive' programme was sent to staff of Community Services in Roscommon. The respondents were asked to return the two questionnaires before a specified date.

Results

The results from both the focus groups and the questionnaires highlighted sources of stress in the workplace; the impact stress had on their health; and the barriers to reducing stress levels.

¨ In all strands of this study, poor communication was highlighted as a major cause of stress. Particular issues raised included feedback received from management about work, the lack of regular team meetings, and the need for an internal intercom system.

- Another commonly raised issue was that of lack/absence of relief cover for staff who are sick or those on holidays.

- There was a consensus in relation to job satisfaction and career prospects that an employee doesn't get the same satisfaction when under a lot of pressure or when very stressed out. Significantly more people who reported being stressed everyday were dissatisfied with their jobs, a direct relationship which many international studies have demonstrated.

- Almost half of respondents stated that workplace stress affected their lives outside of work. Stress affected home lives in a number of ways including, having to bring work home to finish it, finding it difficult to unwind after a stressful day and being short-tempered as a result.

- Peer support was identified as a key coping mechanism. Most respondents reported that they *'talk to colleagues within work'* to help them deal with stress.

- Initiatives dealing with enhancing communications, and getting *'recognition for work done'* received the most positive responses from respondents as a way of helping to alleviate work-related stress. It was also suggested that management attend courses in dealing with stress amongst their staff.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made from the present study to help alleviate stress amongst Community Care Staff, Roscommon, which should be given consideration when developing future policies and initiatives.

1. Communication channels between management and 'front line' staff need to be opened/increased. In particular :

   - Systems should be developed to increase the feedback staff receive from management about their work

   - The feasibility of providing an intercom system should be assessed.

¨ Management should regularly meet their staff and review the number of meetings they attend, to agree an appropriate number of meetings in terms of their current workload.

¨ Career progression within Community services Roscommon and the Western Health Board should be discussed with each staff member by management in an annual review

¨ All departments should have regular team meetings.

2. Mechanisms to help staff deal with stress in the workplace should be introduced. These should include the following:

¨ Promotion of regular exercise in the workplace

¨ Consideration to recruiting a staff welfare officer for Roscommon

¨ The re-introduction of stress management courses for staff

¨ The development of induction courses for new staff that include a stress management component

3. All management should receive training in dealing with stress in their staff.

4. The *'Risk Reduction Table'* (appendix 3) should reviewed be to address issues associated with stress and possible solutions to these problems.

5. Staffing levels should be reviewed to identify and develop a mechanism to deal with understaffing. In particular, the need to reduce the proportion of temporary staff and the provision of sick leave/holiday cover should be addressed.

6. Efforts should be made to enhance the working environment, particularly in terms of minimising overcrowding.

7. The recommendations of the review of security in the workplace (Kelly, 2002) should be implemented.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1   Research Background

Any environment can cause stress and some level of stress is part of everyday life, both within the workplace, in families and in social organisations. However, if stress is intense, continuous or repeated, if a person is unable to cope, or if support is lacking, stress then becomes a negative phenomenon, which can lead to physical illness and psychological disorders (1).

Workplace stress is the harmful physical and emotional responses which can happen when there is a conflict between job demands on the employee and the amount of control an employee has over meeting these demands. In general, the combination of high demands in a job and a low amount of control over the situation can lead to stress. Stress in the workplace can have many origins or come from one single event. It can impact on both employees and employers alike. As stated by the Canadian Mental Health Association (2) :

> *"Fear of job redundancy, layoffs due to uncertain economy, increased demands for overtime due to staff cutbacks act as negative stressors. Employees who start to feel 'the pressure to perform' can get caught in a downward spiral of increasing effort to meet rising expectations with no increase in job satisfaction. The relentless requirement to work at optimum performance takes its toll in job dissatisfaction, employee turnover, reduced efficiency, illness and even death. Absenteeism, illness, alcoholism, 'petty internal politics', bad or snap decisions, indifference and apathy, lack of motivation or creativity are all by-products of an over-stressed workplace".*

Stress can have a negative impact on overall health, in that over short periods it may lead to a variety of disorders and illnesses ranging from chronic fatigue to depression. In the longer term, stress can contribute to high blood pressure and consequently to the possible

development of heart and cerebrovascular disease, as well as to peptic ulcers amongst other conditions (3) It may also alter immune functions, which may in turn facilitate the development of cancer. Taken together, these disorders are responsible for the majority of disease, death, disability and medical care use in most industrialised countries.

Stress in the workplace is a growing concern. Because stress is so widespread, it has a high cost for individuals, companies and organisations, and for society. For the individual, in addition to the devastating impact of serious health impairments, loss of capacity to cope with working and social situations can lead to less success at work, including loss of career opportunities and even employment. It can give rise to greater strain in family relationships and with friends. For the company or organisation, the costs of stress take many forms. These include absenteeism, higher medical costs, and staff turnover, with the associated cost of recruiting and training new workers. It has also been shown in recent years that stress takes a heavy toll in terms of reduced productivity and efficiency.

The European Union estimates that work-related stress affects at least 40 million workers in its 15 Member States and that it costs the EU at least €20 billion annually (4). The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in the UK estimated that 6.5 million working days were lost in Britain in 1995 due to stress, depression and anxiety or a physical condition ascribed to work related stress. The cost of work related stress to employers was around £370 million, and to society as a whole £3.75 billion (1995/96 prices).

As part of the Quarterly National Household Survey in Ireland (5), respondents were asked whether they had suffered from any illness or disabilities, or other physical or psychic health problems, apart from accidental injuries, that were caused or made worse by work. Following this they were asked if they needed to take time off work and if so how much, as well as describing the category of their complaint. For the year 1999, 15,600 respondents reported taking time off work as a result of stress, the second most common complaint after bone, joint and muscle complaints (34,800) as compared to 3,500 for heart complaints.

Major causes of work related stress include poor communication, lack of training, high workload, organisational change, lack of control over work demands, lack of support and interpersonal conflict. As already stated, workplace stress is a growing concern, for both employers and employees. To be able to effectively address this issue, employers need information on the particular sources of stress to enable strategies to be devised so that they maybe overcome. It is within this context that the Department of Public Health has been commissioned to conduct this research, with the aim of determining the causes and the extent of stress levels of employees within Community Services, Co. Roscommon.

1.2   Rationale

Organisations who manage the risks associated with workplace stress can enjoy the benefits of reduced sickness absence, better performance, less frequent and less severe accidents, better relationships with colleagues and clients, and lower staff turnover, thus improving the performance of the organisation. However, besides the financial gains of managing stress within an organisation, there is a legal duty on the organisation to protect the health of its workers. The EU Framework Directive on Health and Safety (6) states that the employer has 'a duty to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect relating to work, following general principles of prevention'. Solely providing counselling for employees is insufficient; the employee law requires that steps be taken to identify and avoid or reduce the risks to health in the first instance. In 1996 in the UK, and in 1999 in Ireland, two employees won cases against their employers due to the employers negligence in protecting the health of the employees in work stress-related matters (7). Additionally, employers have a moral duty to their employees. The costs to those suffering from stress cannot be calculated realistically. Not only does stress affect the physical and mental health of the individual but it has an impact on family and social relationships, personal and family circumstances.

1.3   Aims and Objectives

The aim of the research is to determine causes and extent of stress levels of employees of Community Services, Roscommon. This is to facilitate the development of measures aimed to reduce and manage stress levels.

More specifically, the objectives of the research are:

1.   Sources of stress in the workplace

2.   Impact of stress on health

3.   Barriers to reducing stress levels

CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

Three different methodologies were used for this study, namely

1. Focus Groups

2. Questionnaire Specific to Community Services Roscommon

3. Work Positive Questionnaire.

2.2 Focus Groups

A qualitative methodology was considered appropriate to develop a questionnaire specific to Community Care in Roscommon, due to the nature of the information required, the focus groups facilitated the design of this questionnaire. The information yielded by the focus groups would not only be of value to policy makers and service planners but would also highlight important areas, which require quantitative measurement. The focus groups provided an in-depth insight into stress related issues which employees experience.

2.3 Questionnaire specific to Community Services Roscommon

A questionnaire specific to Community Care Roscommon was developed using the results of the focus groups to design the questions. The aim of developing a specific questionnaire was that it would be useful in terms of making practical and useful changes to working practices and conditions within Roscommon. Additionally it was hoped that this questionnaire would highlight issues that may be overlooked when employing a standardised questionnaire. This questionnaire was developed following the focus groups with consultation between the research team and the Partnership Committee. A copy of the questionnaire is given in Appendix 2.

2.4   Work Positive Questionnaire

In addition to the specific questionnaire a standardised questionnaire was administered to employees of Community Services in Roscommon. After examining available options it was decided to use the "Work Positive" questionnaire, a standardised pack developed jointly by the Health and Safety Authority, Ireland and the Health Education Board for Scotland (Work Positive 2002). It is designed to help organisations address stress at work by assisting them to take the necessary action to identify and reduce the potential causes of stress within the organisation. There are five steps to the Work Positive programme:

1.   Raising awareness, gaining and demonstrating commitment

2.   Benchmarking: assessing the current situation

3.   Identifying the causes and assessing the risks.

4.   Avoiding and reducing any risks identified

5.   Reviewing the situation.

The step which will be reported upon in this report is step three, which involves a risk assessment questionnaire, this aims to identify any sources of pressure within Community Services, Roscommon.

2.5   Questionnaire Dissemination

Both questionnaires were compiled and posted to 293 employees of Community Services in Roscommon. Freepost envelopes were provided and participants were asked to return the questionnaires in these envelopes to the Department of Public Health, Merlin Park Hospital, Galway before a specified date.

CHAPTER 3 QUESTIONNAIRE SPECIFIC TO COMMUNITY SERVICES
ROSCOMMON

3.1   Demographics

A Total of 293 self administered questionnaires were sent out, of which 137 were returned giving a 47% response rate. The majority of respondents were female (90%); this corresponds to the overall male/female ratio of employees within Community Services, Roscommon.   Sixty one percent of respondents were less than 45 years of age, figure 3.1 details the age distribution of respondents.

Figure 3.1:   Age distribution of respondents
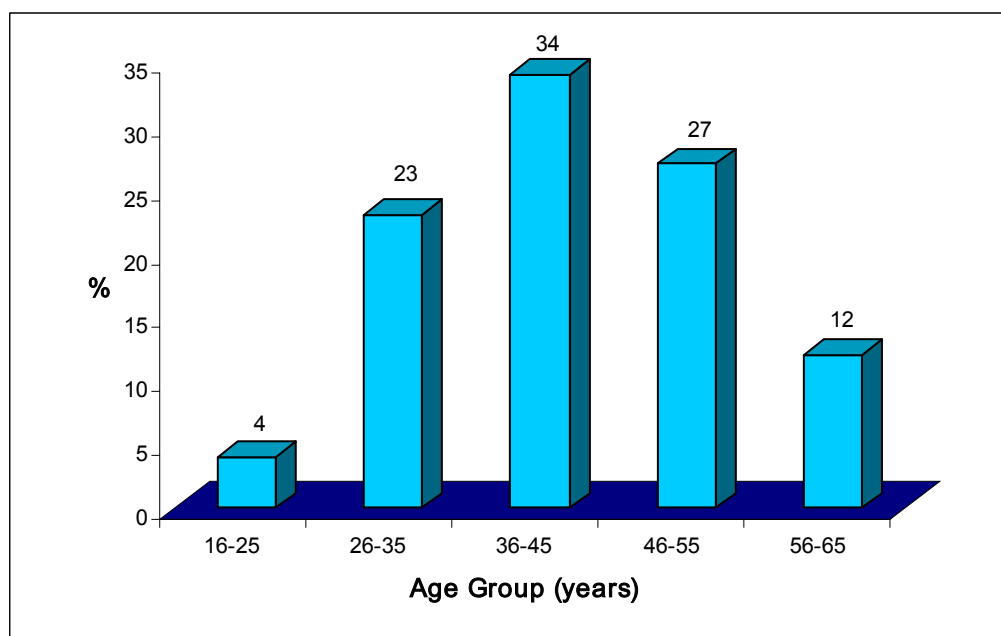
Of the questionnaires returned, the highest proportion was from the Home Help occupation category, however, this is also the category with the highest employee numbers. Table 3.1 details the overall return rate broken down across the various work categories.

Table 3.1   Returned Questionnaire, broken down by occupation

Occupational Category	%	N
Community Welfare Officer	1.5	2
Public Health Nurse	11	15
Dental Surgery Assistant	2.2	3
Dental Surgeon	0.7	1
Speech & Language Therapist	2.2	3
Social Worker	2.9	4
Childcare Worker	1.5	2
Home Help	37.5	51
Home Management Advisor	1.5	2
Environmental Health Officer	1.5	2
Psychologist	2.2	3
Area Medical Officer	0.7	1
Clerical Staff	19.1	26
Management	11.8	16
Other	3.7	5

A higher proportion of respondents worked mainly in South Roscommon- 54% in comparison to 46% working in North Roscommon.

3.2   Current Job Arrangements

Respondents were in their current jobs for an average of 5.5 years, with the minimum being 1 year and the maximum being 38 years. The majority of respondents (52%) are permanent members of staff as can be seen in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2:   Current Job Arrangements for Respondents

Job Arrangement	%	N
Fulltime permanent	52	71
Temporary	25	34
Flexible working	12	16
Other arrangement	11	15

The mean number of hours worked by respondents was 27 hours, with a minimum of 3 hours and a maximum of 50 hours worked. However, excluding the Home Help employees, of which there are a high proportion who work on a part-time basis, the average working week is 36 hours. Table 3.3 details the average number of hours worked in each of the occupational categories.

Table 3.3:   Average number of hours worked in each occupational category

Occupational Category	Average Number of Hours Worked
Community Welfare Officer	36.5
Public Health Nurse	41.2
Dental Surgery Assistant	33.7
Dental Surgeon	38.0
Speech & Language Therapist	35.3
Social Worker	31.8
Childcare Worker	45.0
Home Help	11.2
Home Management Advisor	33.0
Environmental Health Officer	33.0
Psychologist	34.7
Area Medical Officer	38.0
Clerical Staff	32.9
Management	38.4
Other	37.0

Fifty seven percent of respondents reported working extra hours in a typical week, the majority of whom, work extra hours 'to get the job done', as can be seen in figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3:   **Reasons Respondents Work Extra Hours**
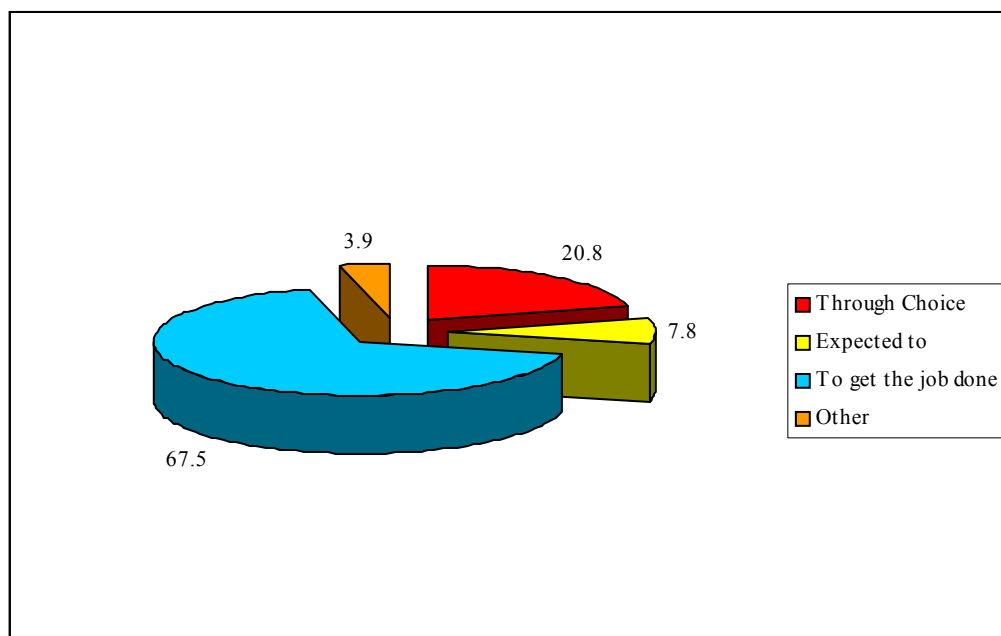
Of those who work extra hours, only 52% reported that they were compensated for it. Significantly more respondents who work extra hours in a typical week reported to being stressed on a frequent basis (c^2=20.146; P<0.01). Additionally, significantly more respondents who work extra hours were dissatisfied with their working hours (c^2=8.19; P<0.05).

The majority of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with their current working hours (65%) and their current job (71%). As can be seen from figure 3.4, satisfaction levels with current job and current working hours is quite similar.

Figure 3.4:   Respondents satisfaction with their current job and current working hours
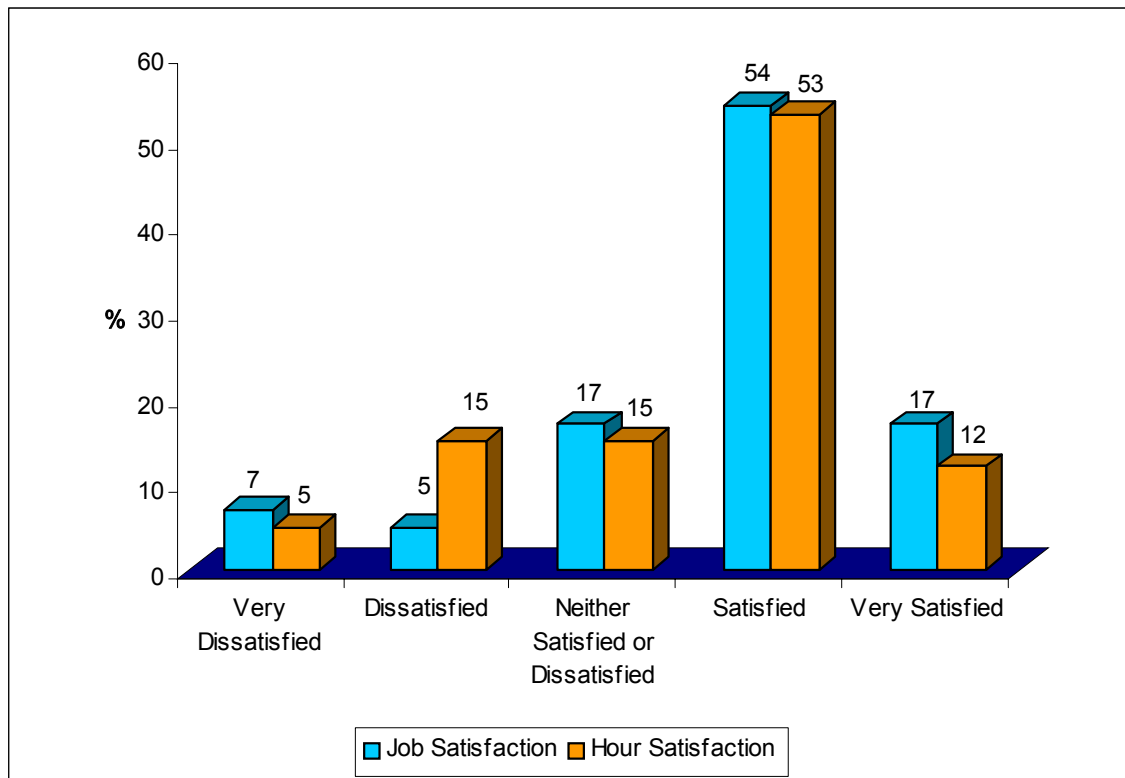
Respondents were given the opportunity to state which aspects of their work they liked and which aspects they disliked. The positive aspects of their work could be broadly categorised into eleven categories (Table 3.5). Team work and peer support were the most popular 'positive aspects of work'.

Table 3.5:   Positive aspects of work according to respondents

	%	N
Good team spirit, team work and peer support	17	19
Helping people	15	17
Working conditions	15	17
Working hours	14	16
Variety of work	12	13
Personal satisfaction	12	13
Working on own initiative/responsibility	10	11
Fair management and respect from management	11	12
Challenging aspect of the work	9	10
Dealing with the public	6	7
Continuing education and the educational opportunities available within the Board	4	4

*Multiple responses therefore percentages may not add to 100%

In relation to the aspects of work which respondents disliked, the responses were very varied. Seventy eight percent of respondents gave details of the negative aspects of their jobs. Poor communication, lack of resources, lack of management support and 'not enough hours to get job done' were the top four 'negative aspects of work'. Table 3.6 shows the common themes/aspects of the job which respondents didn't like.

Table 3.6:   Negative aspects of work according to respondents

	%	N
Poor communication	15.8	17
Lack of resources	14.9	16
Lack of management support	14.0	15
Not enough hours to get job done/pressure to get things done	14.0	15
Lack of holiday/sick leave cover	9.3	10
Lack of staff	9.3	10
Lack of clerical support	9.3	10
Lack of job clarity	6.5	7
Increased workload	6.5	7
Long hours	5.6	6
Accommodation	5.6	6
Underpaid	4.7	5
Unnecessary paperwork	3.7	4
Lack of career structure	2.8	3
Isolation	2.8	3
Cut backs	3	3
Too many meetings	2	2
Red tape & bureaucracy	2	2
Too many clients	1	1
Poor performance by team members	1	1

*Multiple responses therefore percentages may not add to 100%

3.4   Stress

Thirty five percent of respondents experience stress as a result of work at least once a week, however, 24% reported that they have never experienced stress due to work, as can be seen in table 3.7.

Table 3.7: Frequency with which respondents experience stress as a result of work

Frequency	%	N
Everyday	11.0	15
2-3 times per week	11.7	16
Once a week	12.4	17
Once a fortnight	4.4	6
Once a month	8.0	11
Once in three months	5.8	8
Once in six months	2.2	3
Once a year	0.7	1
Once in two years	2.9	4
Less often	8.8	12
Never	24.1	33
Don't know	8.0	11

Significantly more people who reported being stressed everyday were dissatisfied with their job ($c^2 = 33.6$; $P<0.05$), as can be seen in figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5:   Job satisfaction and frequency of stress
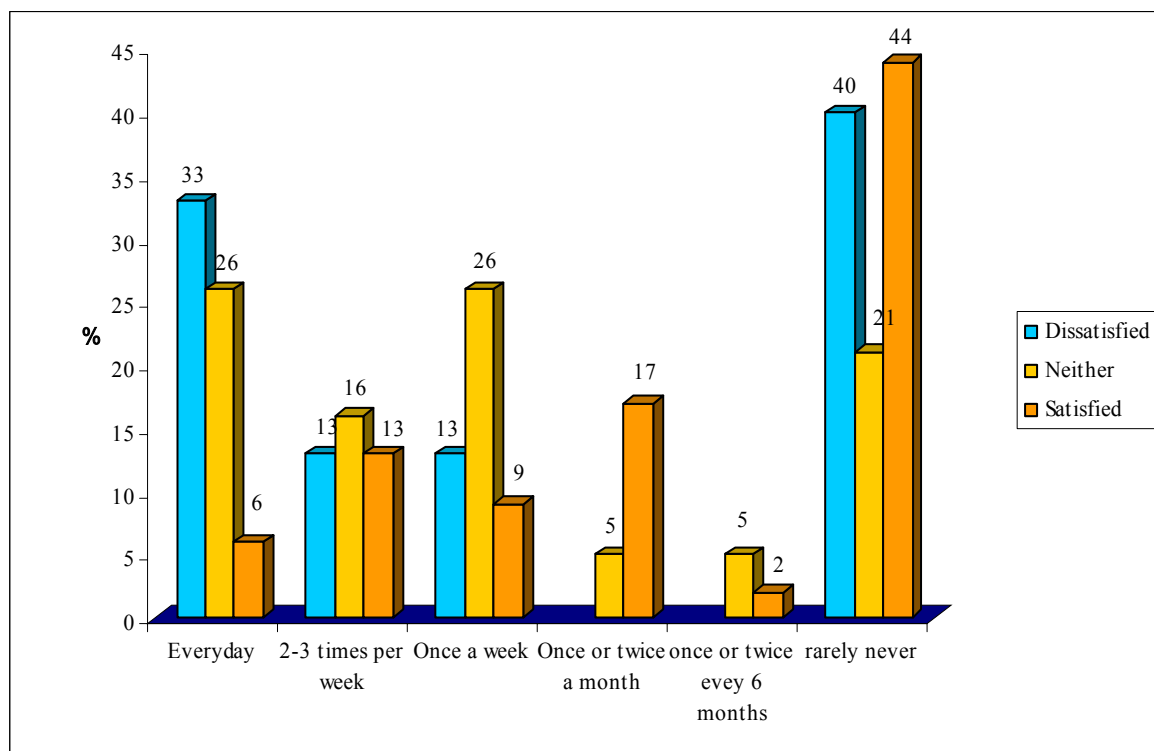
The average number of sick days taken by respondents was 3.3 days of which the average number of sick days due to stress was just over half a day (0.6 days, with a maximum of 30 days by one respondent). Taking this in the context of the entire workforce of Community Care, Roscommon, it is estimated that sick leave due to stress in Community Care Roscommon costs the Board on average €11,559 annually (based upon the average respondent salary).

Respondents were asked to answer from a pre-determined list which aspects of their work particularly cause them to be stressed. As can be seen from table 3.8 increased workload was the area which the highest number of respondents (72%) reported causing them stress. Other areas which were particularly stressful for respondents were *'Lack of clerical support'* (69%), *'Lack of cover for holidays and sick leave'* (68%), *'lack of resources'* (68%) and *'general lack of communication'* (63%).

Table 3.8: Sources of stress for respondents

Aspect of Work which causes stress	%	N
Increased workload	72	52
Lack of clerical support	69	29
Increasing demands/expectations by the public	69	46
Lack of resources	68	49
Lack of cover for holidays and sick leave	68	52
General lack of communication	63	39
**Other	63	19
Lack of understanding by managers about what happens on the ground	60	43
Lack of communication between managers and front-line staff	56	33
Increasing demands by management	54	33
Lack of support from management	52	31
Staff turnover	52	31
Lack of appreciation by management	50	31
Lack of respect by managers	49	29
Isolation of Roscommon from Galway	49	27
Lack of clarity in job description	46	26
Hours worked	46	27
Dealing with the public	44	24
Too many meetings to attend	43	24
High expectations of line managers	38	20
Lack of contact with line managers	36	19
Lack of staff	32	44
Fear of expressing views to management	30	17
Increased administration	31	43
Job insecurity	31	17
Lack of security when working in the community	29	16
Overcrowding of offices	28	15
Office environment	24	13

**see table 3.9

Of those who stated that an 'other' aspect of work caused them stress other than the pre-determined list (N=19), 16 respondents gave further details of what this 'other' aspect was. Table 3.9 details these responses.

Table 3.9: Other' sources of work related stress for respondents

'Other' sources
Matters are always urgent for management when it suits them and they need you to do work for them but you are .5 for another department..
Fear of litigation.
Incorrect and inaccurate information passed from middle management to line manager
Health and Safety
No local management i.e. shared line management with Galway
A high level of sick leave from front line staff
Lack of respect from front line staff, I believe they have become very militant to management
No appreciation for working long hours
Lack of ongoing education
Galway is put forward as the template to be followed although needs are dissimilar to Roscommon
Difficulty in recruiting staff. Poor multidisciplinary teams due to unfilled posts
I would like to have a permanent post
Personal pressure
Lack of respect by fellow clerical officers
No local manager i.e. shared with Galway
Lack of communication by other sectors, Health Nurses etc.
Lack of budget / finance information

Twenty eight (N=37) of respondents were of the opinion that their job/career has been affected by stress. Figure 3.6 details some of the ways stress affected the jobs/career paths of these respondents.

Figure 3.6: How stress affected jobs/career paths of respondents
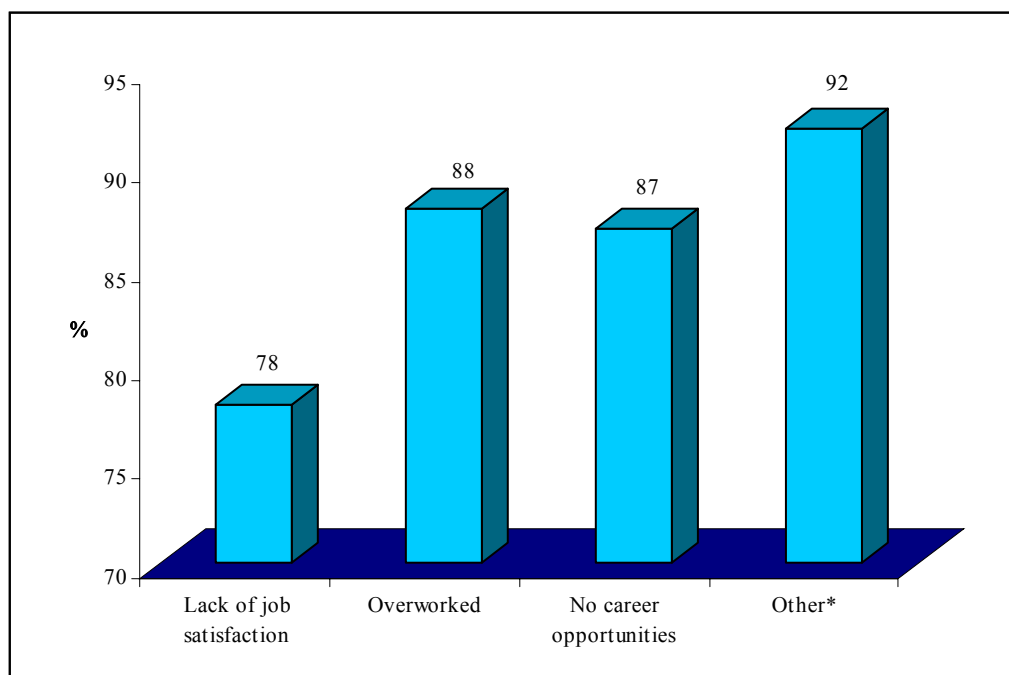
NOTE: Answers were not mutually exclusive hence percentages may not add up to 100%

*Although 92% of respondents stated that stress affected their career paths in ways other than those listed, only 9 individuals gave further details. Table 3.10 shows the responses of employees who gave further details of how stress has affected their jobs/career paths.

Table 3.10   Further details of how stress has affected the jobs/career paths of employees in Community Care, Roscommon.

'Other' means by which stress affected the jobs/career paths of respondents
Irritability with family
Sick leave
Breakdown
Inability to specialise
No confidence in line manager or middle management
Not always being able to do things properly
No security within job, no sick pay, no holiday-pay, no pension for part time workers
Forced decision to terminate in a job that I loved, with the exception of details in relation to the lack of support from General Manager
Bullying and intimidation from colleagues.

Eleven percent of respondents reported that workplace stress has had an adverse affect on relationships with their work colleagues. A large proportion of respondents (43%) stated that workplace stress affects their life outside of work. Figure 3.7 details how stress affects respondents lives outside work.

Figure 3.7:   How workplace stress affects respondents lives outside work
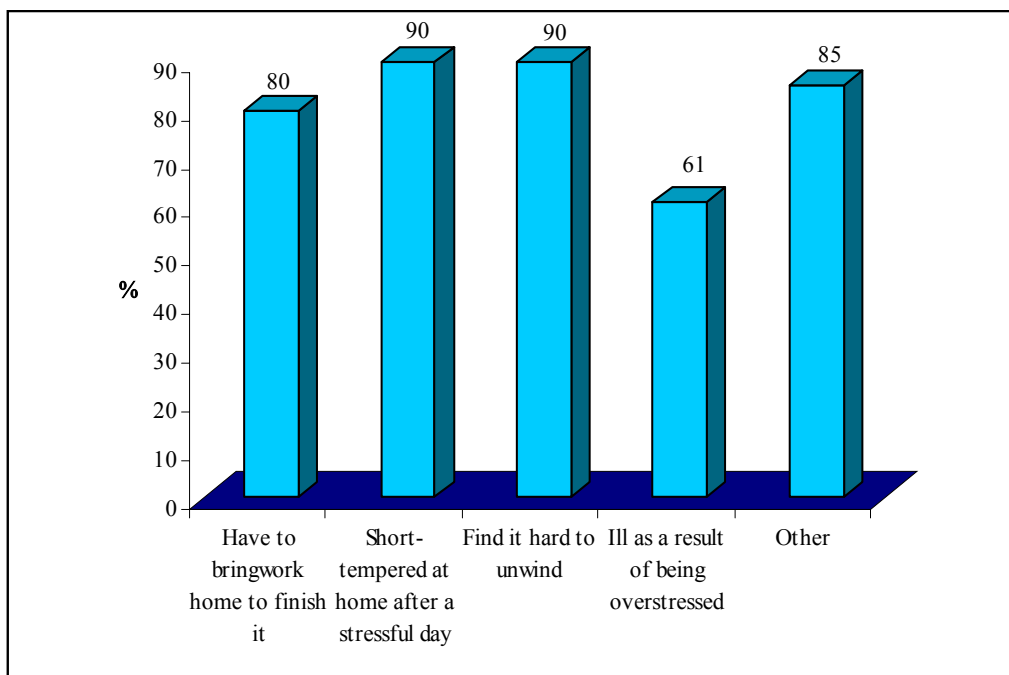
Of those respondents who stated that stress affected their lives outside of work in ways other than those listed, 14 individuals gave further details. Table 3.11 shows the responses of employees who gave further details of how stress has affected their jobs/career paths.

Table 3.11:   'Other' ways in which workplace stress has affected the lives of

respondents outside work

'Other' ways
Staying late to finish work
Tired.
Feeling tired, sometimes not able to carry out work to best of my ability causes me to get the flu etc
Can't sleep or keep waking up with thoughts of works
Interferes with sleep
No time for ongoing education courses, degree etc.
Guilt as a result of working with 2 young children and yet not getting real job satisfaction
Lost interest in area outside work, because the problem at work have taken over my
Affected my personal life outside work
Involved in 2 car accidents returning home from work. One attributing to loss of concentration – late home, the other at same site 5 minutes from home
leisure time has become limited
Insomnia, constantly tired
Tired from work
Have had serious health complications

3.4   Dealing with Stress

The most frequent way to deal with stress was exercise (86%) and to talk to colleagues within work (86%) (Figure 3.8). Table 3.12 details other methods respondents use to deal with stress. As can be seen, a very high proportion of respondents (75%) do not deal with their daily stresses, they *'just get on with things'.*

Figure 3.8:   Methods used by respondents to deal with stress
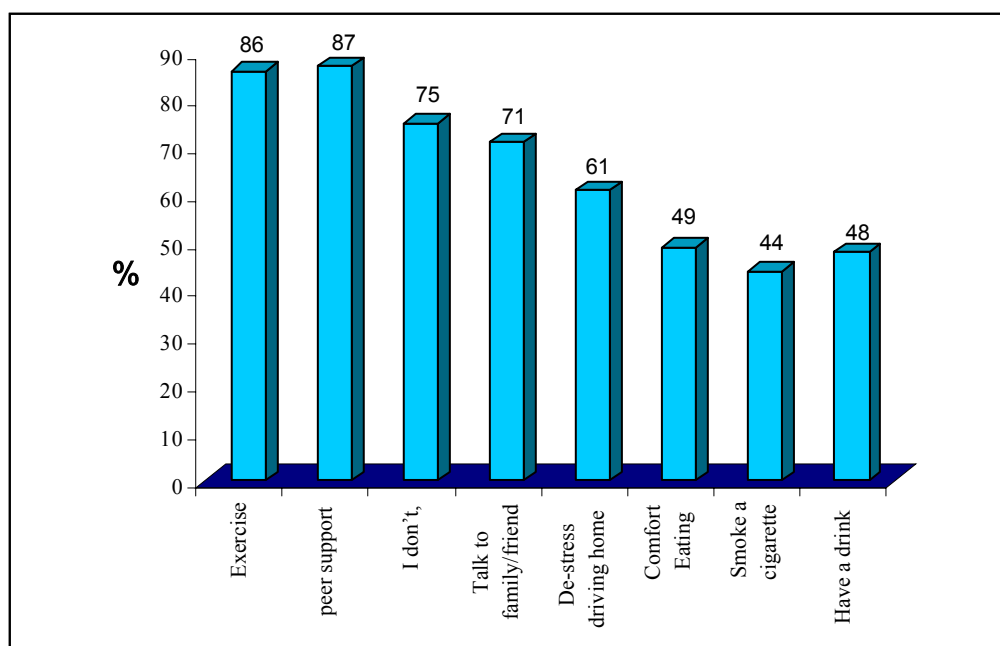
Table 3.12:   Other' means by which respondents de-stress

'Other'
Participated in Stress Management Course – listen to tapes, carry out exercises etc
Builds up until I get very low
Listen to music / enjoy myself / gardening
Yoga, golf, bridge
Go for a long walk
Concentrate on more important things in life
I never realised until now that the potentially life threatening impact of stress. I had previously attributed it to be related only to people prone to heart disease (although I have to
Yoga
Got involved with different clubs
Time out at hobby

3.5   Assessment of facilities to Reduce Stress

Respondents were asked to state how effective various types of initiatives would be at helping to reduce workplace stress levels. All initiatives with the exception of *'more team leaders'* were though to be effective means to help reduce stress by respondents, however,

the initiatives which were identified as being the most effective were *'recognition for work done'* (95%), *'Training and upskilling'* (93%), and *'honesty from management'* (91%). Table 3.13 details how effective respondents thought various initiatives would be.

Table 3.13:   Perceived effectiveness of initiatives to help reduce stress

Initiative	Effective %	Neither Effective or Ineffective %	Ineffective %
Recognition for work done	95.1	2.9	2.0
Training and upskilling	92.8	5.2	2.1
Honesty from management	91.2	7.7	1.1
Induction courses for new staff	88.2	7.5	4.3
Improved physical environment	87.4	11.5	1.1
Increased communication channels between managers and frontline	85.9	10.1	4
Increased physical security in the workplace e.g. out in the Community	84.9	11.6	3.5
Stress management courses available to all staff	84.4	8.3	7.3
Health Promotion initiatives for staff	83.2	14.7	2.1
Increased job security	82.8	15.1	2.2
Supports for staff e.g. employee assistance	81.3	12.5	6.3
Physical rewards for work done	78.7	14.9	6.4
Initiatives to support staff with families	77.8	17.2	5.1
Increased emphasis on team work	76.1	18.5	5.4
Staff welfare officer specific to the region to support staff with any work related problems	73.2	16.5	10.3
Effective management courses for management	73.3	14.4	12.2
Regular team meetings in all sectors	69.9	19.4	10.8
Better access to management	68.2	23.5	8.2
More team leaders	43.7	28.7	27.6

CHAPTER 4 'WORK POSITIVE' QUESTIONNAIRE

4.1 Introduction

A total of 105 employees completed the *'Work Positive'* questionnaire. The questionnaire provides an assessment of the risk of experiencing stress in terms of a number of key areas. Appendix 6 shows the output report for the *'Work Positive'* questionnaire. The risk of experiencing stress in terms of each of the key areas will now be outlined.

4.2 Organisation Change & Job Security

Figure 5.1 depicts the risk level of stress for questions 3-6 (as indicated in the graph legend). As can be seen, there are two areas where there is either a medium or high risk of stress for a significant proportion of employees of Community Care, Roscommon, namely:

➢ how organisational changes are planned and

➢ how organisational changes are communicated

Figure 4.1: **Organisational change and job security**
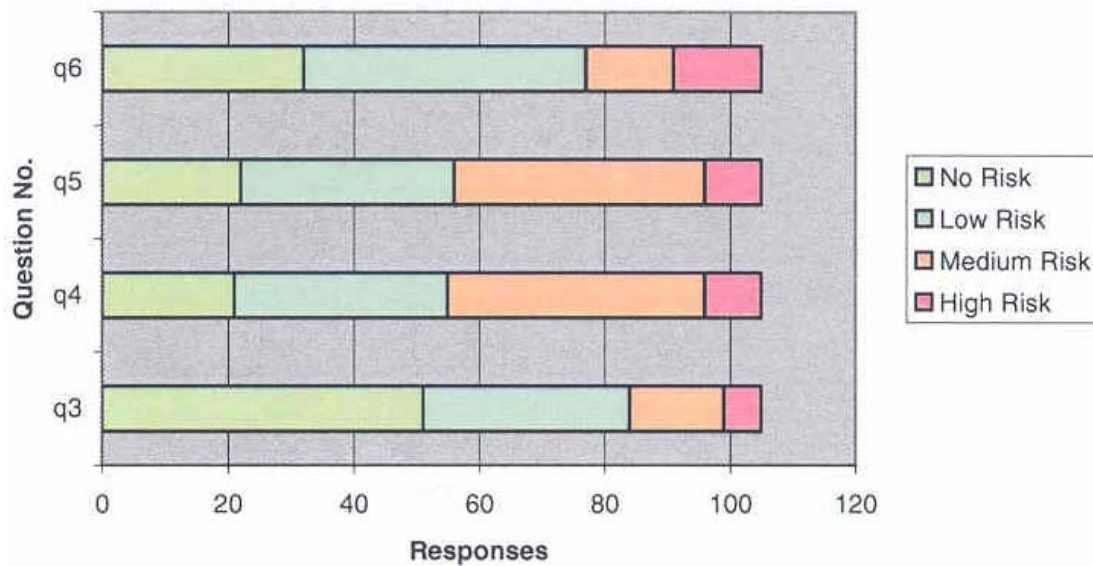
KEY:

Q3   Do you feel that the change of pace in your organisation (whether slow or fast) is a source of pressure for you?

Q4   How are organisational changes planned?

Q5   How are organisational changes communicated?

Q6   Do you feel your job is secure?

4.3   Organisation Structure & Management Style

Figure 5.2 depicts the areas, which caused employees to be at either a medium or a high risk of being stressed, namely:

➢ Not being informed of organisational policy and decisions'

➢ Not being consulted about these decisions'

➢ Not being involved in the decisions within your team or function'

Figure 4.2:   Organisational structure and management style
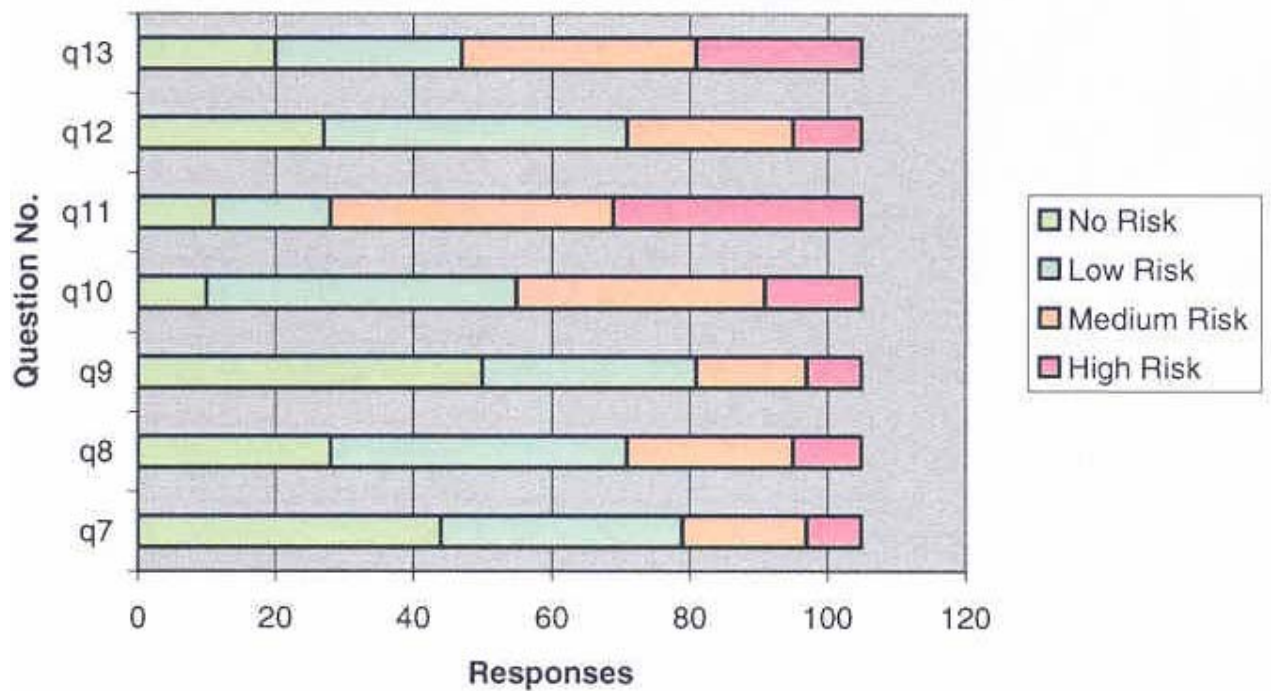
KEY:

Q 7	Are you clear about the lines of reporting in your organisation?
Q8	How supportive do you find senior management (or equivalent)?
Q9	How supportive do you find your line manager (or the person you report directly to)?
Q10	How informed are you of organisational policy and decisions?
Q11	Are you consulted about these decisions?
Q12	How informed are you about decisions within your team or function?
Q13	Are you involved in the decisions within your team or function?

4.4   Human Resource Processes

From figure 4.3 it can be seen that the one area, which is highlighted, as causing a high risk of stress relates to

➢   not receiving ' *formal feedback from your line manager regarding your performance".*

Another high-risk stress causing area is that of training, in that

➢   not enough training is obtained.

Figure 4.3:   Human Resource Process
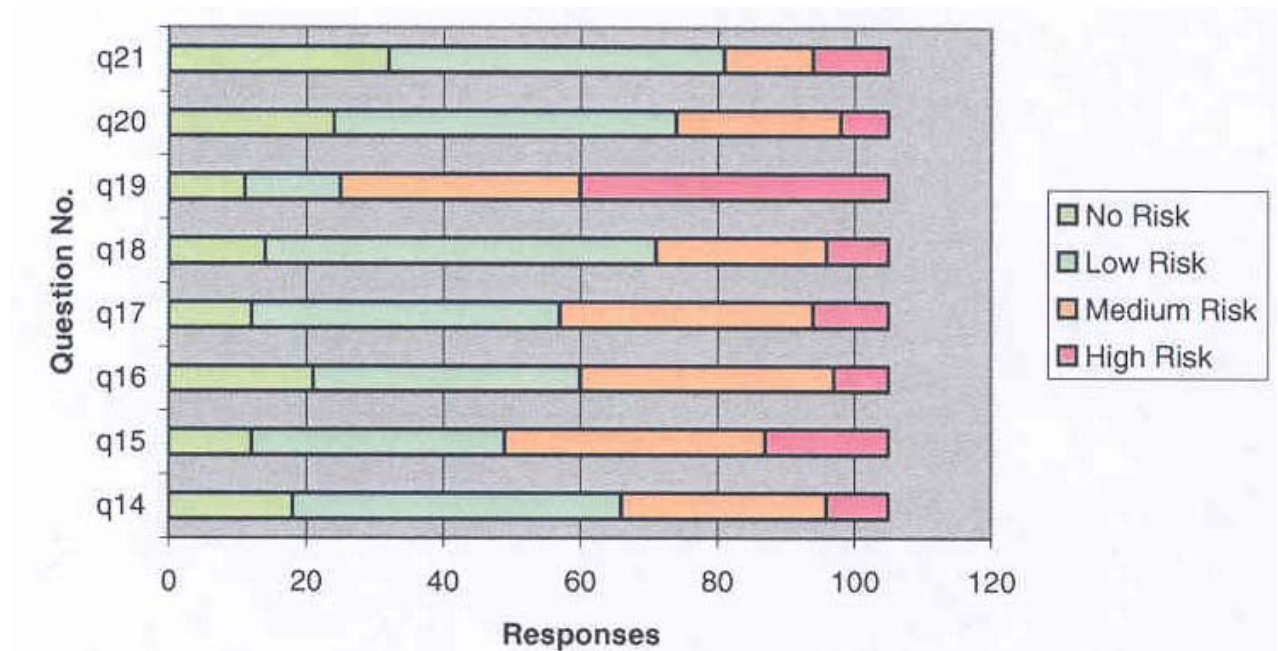
Q14   How rigorous is the recruitment procedure?
Q15   Do you receive the training that you need to do your job?
Q16   Are you provided with the support you need to do your job (resources, equipment)?
Q17   Do you feel you are fairly paid for the work that you do?
Q18   How satisfied are you with your non-monetary benefits (e.g. annual leave, pensions, social events etc.)?
Q19   Do you receive formal feedback from your line manager regarding your performance?
Q20   How flexible is the organisation to allow you to manage any non-work commitments (families, dependants etc.)?
Q21   Do you feel that the organisation is supportive during work crisis (for example, following bereavement, illness, marriage break-up)?

4.5   Fairness and Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships with both managers and colleagues posed no particular risk of causing stress for the majority of respondents, as can be see in figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4   Fairness and interpersonal relationships
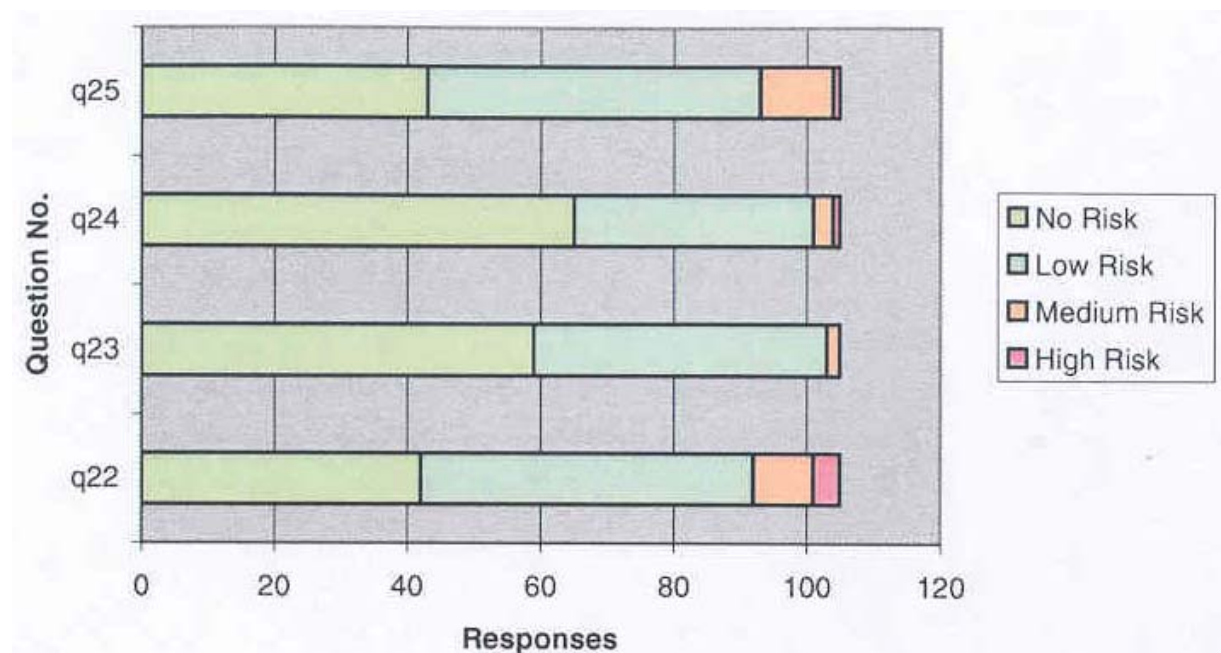
KEY:
Q22   How would you describe your working relationship with your immediate manager (or equivalent)?
Q23   Generally, how would you describe your working relationship with colleagues?
Q24   Is there any ongoing interpersonal conflict that results in you feeling unhappy?
Q25   Generally, do you feel that you are treated fairly?

4.6   Work Processes

*'Work Processes' (*e.g. working hours, work load etc.), scored relatively low on the risk of being 'stress-causing' for the majority of respondents. In relation to the work processes which posed a 'medium risk' of causing stress, are:

➢ Working with external clients/public/children and not being able to take a break from work when required as can be seen in figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5   Work Processes
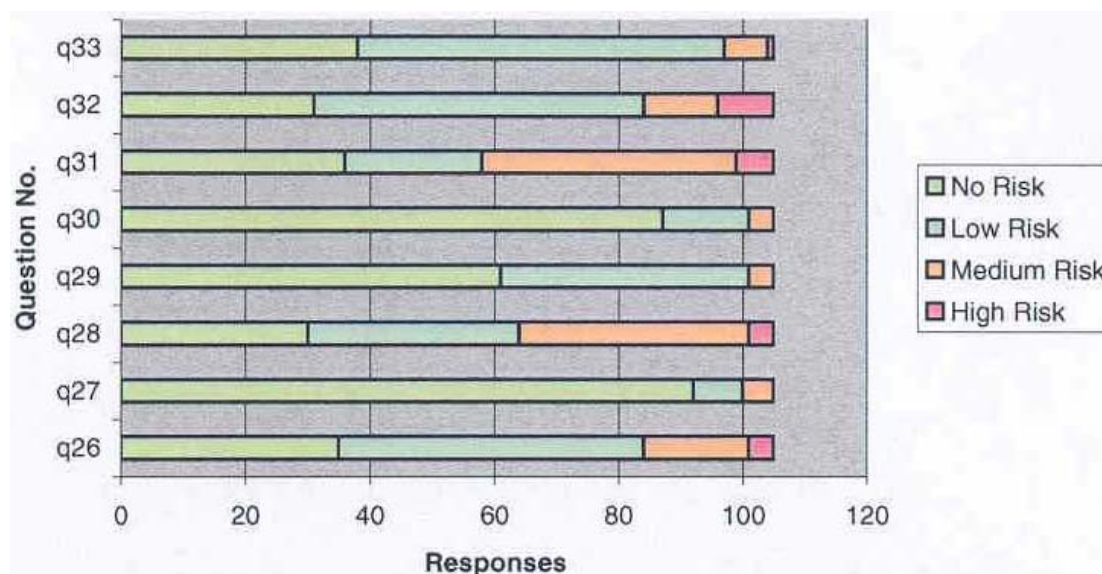
Q26   If you work alone, are you concerned about working alone?
Q27   If you work shifts and/or unsociable hours, are you satisfied with the shift patterns/arrangements?
Q28   If you work with external clients/public/children as part of your job, is this a source of pressure?
Q29   Are you expected to work long hours?
Q30   Do you regularly work more than 48 hours per week?
Q31   Are you able to take a break from your work when required?
Q32   Do you feel you have too much work to do?
Q33   Are you able to do what is expected of you?

4.7   Work Characteristics

In relation to *job characteristics,* the area which posed the highest stress-causing risk was:

➢ Not being provided with positive feedback when doing something well.

This relates back to section 4.3 (Q19), i.e not getting formal feedback from line manager regarding one's performance.

Figure 4.6   Job characteristics
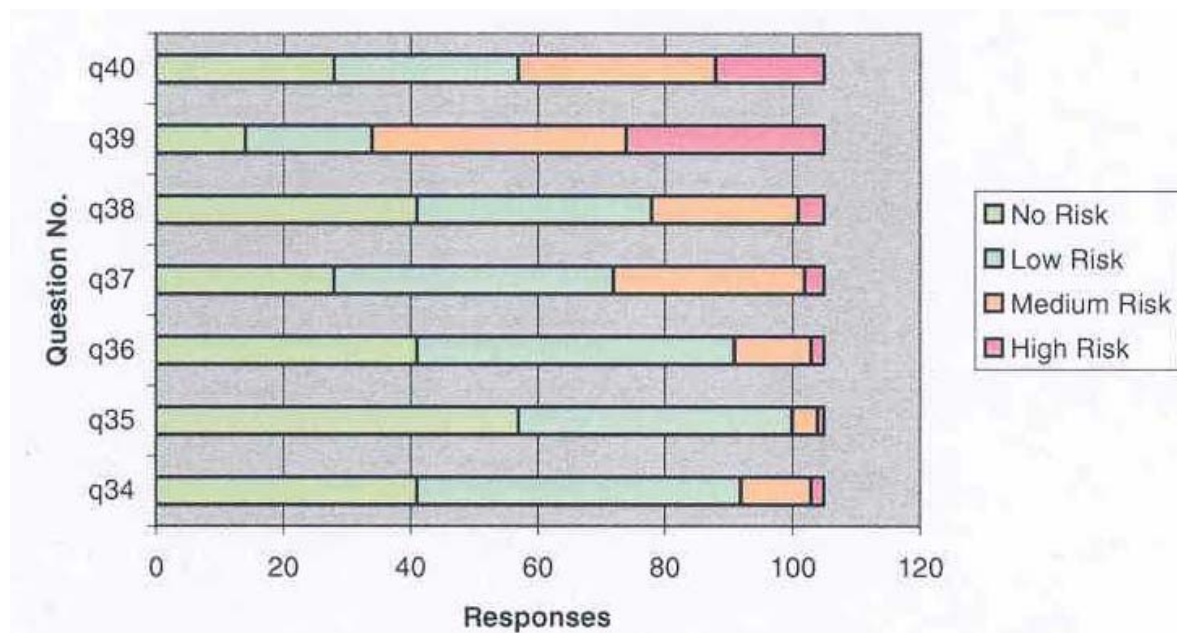
KEY:
Q34   How clear are you about roles and responsibilities?
Q35   Do you find your work mundane or boring?
Q36   How clear are you about how you contribute to the product or service provided?
Q37   Do you feel that your contribution is valued?
Q38   Are you able to use your own method of working as much as you would like?
Q39   Are you provided with positive feedback when you do something well?
Q40   If you make a mistake, or did not achieve your objectives, would these be pointed out immediately to allow corrective action?

4.8   Work Environment

The area, which caused most stress in relation to working environment, was:

➢ adequate equipment (or rather lack of) to do the job properly, as can be seen in figure 4.7

Figure 4.7   Work Environment
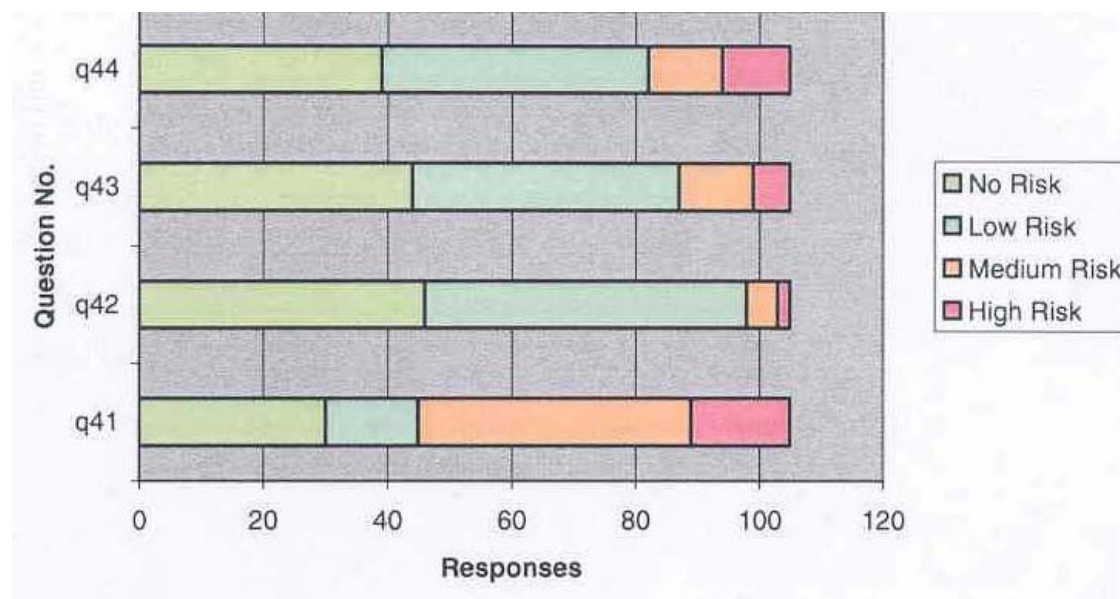
Q41   How adequate is the equipment you need to do your job?

Q42   How comfortable is your working environment?

Q43   How well designed and laid out is your work area?

Q44   How adequate are the welfare facilities (toilets, rest rooms etc.)?

4.9   Indicators

In relation to other stress indicators, the main risk factors for a high proportion of respondents included:

➢ Coming to work when not well enough to work

➢ Additionally a large proportion of respondents felt that pressure at work caused then to perform 'less well' as can be seen in figure 4.8.

Figure 4.8   'Other' Stress Indicators
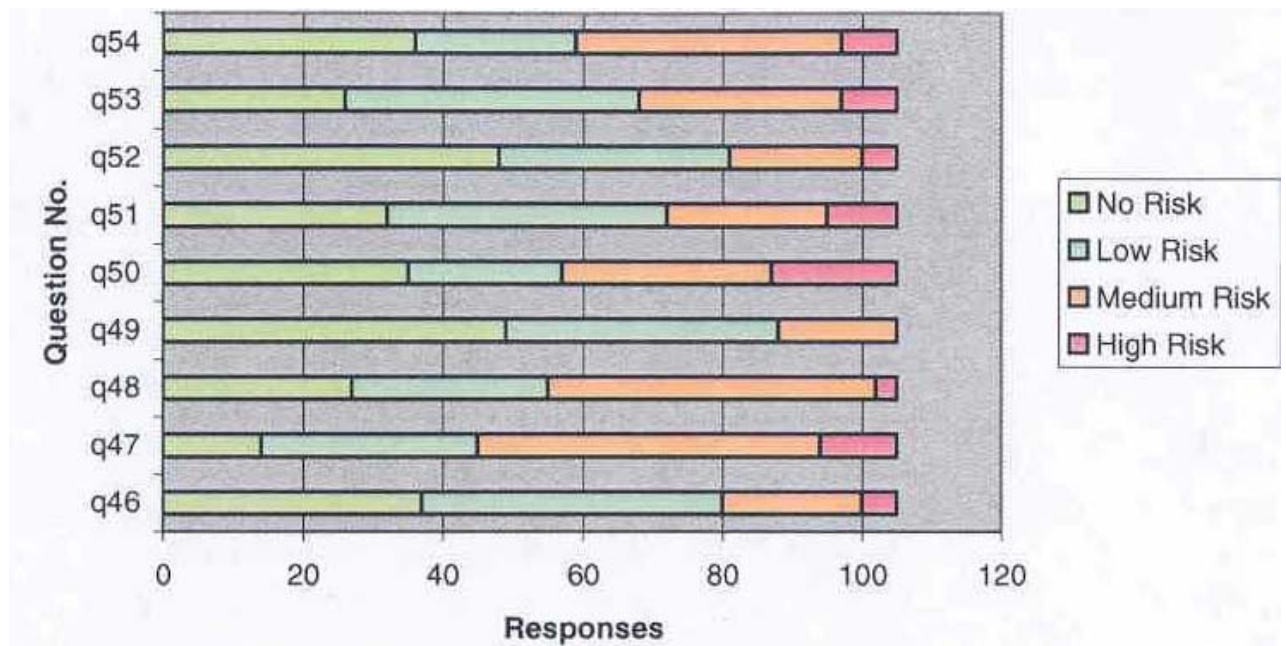
Q46	Are you concerned about your safety of health at work?
Q47	Do you come to work when you are not well enough to work?
Q48	Do you think that pressure at work causes you to perform less well?
Q49	Do you feel that pressure at work has affected your health whilst working in this organisation?
Q50	Generally, do you feel that you could talk to someone if you felt you were under too much pressure at work?
Q51	How supportive is the organisation of people suffering from stress-related illness?
Q52	How would you describe the level of sickness absence?
Q53	How would you describe morale at work?
Q54	How would you describe the rate of turnover of staff?

CHAPTER 5 FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

The following results represent a summary and interpretation of the three focus groups con-ducted within the Community Services, Co. Roscommon. The aim of the focus groups was to provide information, which was used to formulate a questionnaire specific to Community Services Roscommon and also to provide an in-depth insight into staff's experiences of stress in the workplace. A total of 22 individuals participated in the focus groups. A num-ber of issues were raised within the focus groups, some of which were common across all sectors and some of which were specific to certain disciplines. The results of the focus groups will be presented under the main headings of the topic guide. Additional quotes from the focus groups are presented in Appendix 1.

5.2 Sources of Stress

A number of sources of stress were identified, however, there was a general acceptance that stress was part of every day life.

> *"Well I would say on an every day basis that everyone suffer from stress. If you don't its not normal but if it goes beyond a certain level then it becomes a problem".*

Participants identified a number of 'sources of stress'. Each source will be presented indi-vidually below.

5.2.1 Communication

One source of stress raised, which was common to all disciplines represented in the focus

groups, was communication, or rather the lack of it. Respondents felt there was a lack of communication in general, which resulted in a perceived lack of understanding by other colleagues and by management in relation to what was happening on the 'ground'. There was a perception that this lack of communication was the cause of a lack of appreciation for the work done by employees from both colleagues and management alike.

> "*I think that one of the basic things in stress that I have experienced would be a lack of appreciation or lack of understanding by other people of what you do yourself. So, and that basically might be a lack of communication*"

Additionally, there was an issue of not being able to contact and/or communicate with people in the same building especially where there was no intercom system. This lack of 'contactability' due to the absence of an intercom system was frustrating, demanding and time-consuming when trying to locate people within the building.

Another major issue was communication between managers and front line staff. Many participants felt that they could not communicate with their line managers because they were either not approachable or they were not contactable. Many focus group participants vented their frustration due to the fact that often times they only get an answering machine when trying to contact their line manager.

> "*you can try to contact somebody but it's the famous answering machine*"

In relation to managers and communication with staff on the 'ground' there is a perception that the managers do not know what is going on and that they are far removed from the practicalities of the day-to-day running of the services.

5.2.2 Management

Another major source of perceived stress, which emerged from the groups, was management. In general, there was an animosity towards managers. Some participants felt that of-

ten times the manager may not always be the best person to carry out particular tasks, in that there may be other people more capable of conducting the particular task in question. It was felt that if this 'delegation' attitude was taken and the skills of individual employees were recognised and utilised it might free up resources, for example manager's time, thus giving them more time to devote to staff issues.

In relation to stress amongst their employees it was felt that, many managers did not have the relevant skills and training to deal with this issue, and because of this the issue of workplace stress is often ignored.

There was a general fear amongst participants about expresing their views to line managers in case of repercussions at a later date or at the risk of being termed a 'nuisance'. This was a concern of employees from more than one discipline, although it must be stressed that not all participants felt this way. Additionally, a number of participants raised the issue of lack of respect, appreciation and understanding on the part of managers towards their staff. There was a feeling amongst some participants of being taken for granted by management.

5.2.3   Resources

The three main issues in relation to resources were the lack of staff; staff turnover; and increased administration coupled with the lack of clerical support.

Due to the lack of staff, the workload for the current employees is increased which leads to increased stress levels, too much work and not enough time to do it.

> "*It comes back to there is never enough staff*"

Adding to the lack of staff, the temporary contract situation of many of the staff leads to a high staff turnover, which in itself increases stress levels for a number of reasons. This is an issue, which many of the focus group participants felt strongly about. The issue of having to

train a new individual into the position results in someone being given the extra task of the training in addition to their own work, which still has to be done in the same time frame. Additionally, it was recognised that it takes a few weeks before a person settles into the position, in which time other employees have to compensate for them.

> *"But it takes anyone a number of weeks to orientate themselves to a job and in that interim period somebody else has to carry the boat and you're laden over then and then the stress levels rise"*

It was felt that this constant rotation of temporary staff erodes the morale of employees and as a consequence that of the organisation.

There was some discussion into the positioning of permanent staff, some participants felt that certain posts should be permanent for a number of reasons, one of those being confidentiality.

> *"And then there are areas where there should be permanent staff, I mean , there is confidentiality in all areas of the work places in community services but there is some very high confidential things, now I think in those kind of areas you should always have a permanent member of staff not somebody moving in and out. It creates terrible problems."*

Another post, which participants felt should be a permanent one, was that of the receptionist, due to the responsibility they have and the fact they are the 'face' of the Board. It was felt that a permanent receptionist would add a degree on stability to the organisation, in that this person would know *'who was who, and where they were'.*   This was one position where participants felt was a very difficult one to be new to, due to the responsibility of having to contact people and knowing where they are located at short notice.

Some participants felt the receptionist position wasn't permanent because additional duties

were being 'off-loaded' onto the receptionist e.g. paying bills. It was felt that, if a permanent person were in the position they would refuse to do some of the new additional duties. A temporary receptionist has no say due to the position/insecurity of this job.

5.2.4   Job Insecurity

Job insecurity was a major cause of sterss for those on temporary contracts:

> *"An important factor I think is the whole thing of temporary and contract and the insecurity of work can be a stress."*

Participants on temporary contracts felt they had no control over what was 'loaded' onto them, if they refused to do it their contract may not be renewed.

5.2.5   Lack of support

The lack of support in relation to holiday and sick-leave cover was another issue of concern for participants of the focus groups. It was felt that it wasn't worth taking time off because there would be nobody to cover the leave, and as a result the workload on return would be huge, resulting in the added stress of having to play 'catch-up'.

> *"But we get no cover at all. When we are on holidays or out sick, the work is left to pile up until we come back. It is nearly not worth going "*

In addition to lack of support staff, a number of participants voiced their concern in relation to the lack of support from their line managers. Many felt that if they had a problem either a personal one which warranted time off or a work-related one they could not approach their manager.

"There's no sense of belonging, I would consider in the Health Board now. You know, it's every man for himself and God for us all. Everyone is on their own and if you can paddle your canoe fine, if you can't well tough luck".

5.2.6   Increased administration and meetings

Another issue, which arose in relation to sources of stress, was the increased amount of administration coupled with the lack of clerical staff, a problem particularly amongst the public health nurses and other staff working in the community.

"well the amount of time that you can take writing a report and looking for the help and on the telephone. You can imagine how much time that takes, you know, because you literally have to write in to apply, and we write by hand, we don't have clerical assistants at all, for any of our reports".

A discussion arose amongst some participants in relation to the number of meetings people had to attend. Whilst acknowledging that meetings were useful and informative and they were appreciated, it was felt that they were cutting into work time, and work piled up.

"On the ground, at the coalface, the amount of hands-on work that I do now, compared to five years ago, is significantly less, because there are meetings, nothing wrong with meetings and partnership and all that, it's very healthy and certainly from that they've certainly done something for the morale of the staff, however, meanwhile back at the coalface the work still has to be done and we are making X, Y, and Z promises".

5.2.7   Working Environment

Participants of the focus groups, in particular the clerical staff based in offices, felt that the working environment itself can add to and increase the levels of stress amongst the employees. Some participants felt that there were too many people working in the offices, which resulted in a lot of distractions and large volumes of noise, causing an environment where it was hard to concentrate on work. One participant commented on how there were 15 people sharing the office with her.

5.2.8 High Demands

High demands from both the public in general and the line managers were also highlighted in all focus groups as sources of stress. There was an acceptance that public expectation in recent years had increased, however, this increased expectation brought increased demands which in turn increased the pressure to perform and meet deadlines. This pressure with the limited resources of the staff adds to the stress levels.

> *"The general public is looking for more. And resources are less and there is more writing, there's nothing taken away from you, but there's more piled on."*

In relation to high demands from line managers some participants felt that they had no control over their work load and the managers kept 'piling' on the work, irrespective of current work and how a day is planned out.

> *"I think a huge thing is having no control as well over your work load. You get control over the hours you work that's about it. You come in and do your days work as best you can do but people keep loading on you, and loading on you, and you can say 'hello I'm up to my eyes here' but it doesn't matter you know".*

5.2.9 Security

Finally in relation to sources of stress, security was an issue amongst people who worked in the community. Participants felt they did not have the appropriate safety 'tools' for work within the community. Additionally, some participants felt that often times they did not have enough background information on the individuals they were calling to, to be able to assess the situation into which they were going.

> *"I am going into a house and nobody has told me about the person in there and I am walking in blank and it is quite difficult to come to and you are totally isolated, you have to make a quick exit sometimes, that's a big problem in the community and if you haven't your own phone you might not find a*

relation to dogs. A number of participants had been attacked by dogs whilst out in the community.

5.3 Stress and Career Prospects

In relation to stress and career prospects, a number of participants raised the issue that the Health Board are not family-friendly. Having to juggle family and work in such an atmosphere was a major cause of stress for some participants and some felt that it prevents people from climbing the career ladder.

> *"I would definitely say too that they are definitely not family friendly, and that would be a big halt to a lot of people's climb up the ladder or ambition because they are not facilitated, because of the family problems or whatever. I know, and you know that people were having problems family wise, children and different things, well they could sort them out but don't bring them into work, you know that was the attitude".*

There was a consensus amongst clerical staff in particular that once you achieved a grade four position you were at the pinnacle of your career and there was no chance of further progression. In addition to being a source of stress, as documented previously, job insecurity and the contract situation was identified as being a barrier to career progression.

5.3.1 Job satisfaction

There was a consensus that one doesn't get the same satisfaction from work when under a lot of pressure or stress. Additionally, having a line manager who doesn't appreciate the work being done, or one who keeps piling work on top of the employees also effects job satisfaction, adding to the stress experienced by employees.

There was a consensus that to have job satisfaction, the individual and the work they do must be appreciated, which wasn't always the case. Another issue in relation to job satisfaction

and ultimately one's career path is that of being overworked. There was the perception that when an employee has too much work and not enough time to do it, it gives the impression to management that the employee isn't doing his/her job satisfactorily. One participant offered a solution to dealing with work being 'piled' on by line managers:

> *"….their boss was getting all gung-ho about this idea and that idea and she said will you do this, and this person said 'absolutely, I think it's a great idea, I think if we try it this way'. …and her last comment was 'and what do you want me to drop while I'm doing this', and I think that was a brilliant line".*

5.4   Stress, Health and Relationships

A number of issues emerged in relation to stress health and relationships, each of which is reported separately below. There was a general consensus that health and relationships were effected by excess stress within the workplace.

5.4.1   Working at Home

A number of participants felt they had to bring work home with them to keep on top of their workload, with little or no appreciation from their managers. Some participants were expected to take work home, which was a situation they felt strongly about.

> *"I remember a situation I walked into where there was a huge backlog of work and this is what you can do with those, that's the sort of thing you can take home and do at the weekend and I said will I be getting paid overtime, no, no, everybody takes that and does it at the weekend. I said I'm sorry, I decided to speak for myself, I said I was contracted to work 33 hours a week, I do the best that I can do, and I was told that kind of attitude is no good when starting a job. You are expected to take them home and I said I'll happily take them home no problem at all if you'll pay me the time and a half or double time, whatever the rate".*

5.4.2 Relationships

A number of participants reported finding it hard to 'unwind' after a particularly stressful day at work, and find it difficult to cope with normal family duties; this was upsetting for many participants, which in turn, added to the already high stress levels.

> *"That's when you know you've got stress, when you start bringing home your moods and your tiredness and like, I'm not saying I should be fit to climb Mount Everest after a hard days work because I'm getting paid to work and work is what I should be doing but surely there has to be a balance"*

Stress has been identified as affecting relationships with work colleagues also, in particular where one person is overloaded with work and another in the same office has relatively little to do.

5.4.3 Health

The main issue in relation to stress affecting health was the fact that if an employee was out of work due to illness, there would be no cover and the work would just pile up, thus increasing the stress when they returned to work.

> *"Well you'd want to be awful sick before you couldn't go to work because the work would still be there tomorrow"*

Other participants felt that excess stress was a contributor to getting sick in the first place

> *"Absolutely, sickness is down to stress and people working flat out on wards like you know, dealing with families people coming in and dying, the whole lot, what are they, robots? "*

5.5 Dealing with Stress

A number of issues emerged in relation to how people deal with stress, the more prominent one being peer support, however a number of participants had no specific way to deal with stress other than '*to get on with it'.*

Some participants highlighted that it is important to be able to cope with stress, while also accepting that people need a certain amount of stress in their daily lives to be motivated.

5.5.1 Peer Support

Peer support was identified as an important channel to cope with stress, it helped to be around people who understood the situation and were able to offer solutions or just to have someone to listen to you. There was a consensus that in general there was a lot of support for work colleagues. However, while peer support was a means of dealing with stress for most people, it was also identified as being a negative thing if for instance there was a problem with a fellow employee.

5.5.2 Other coping strategies

Focus group participants identified a number of other strategies of coping with stress, these included, exercise and driving home. One participant spoke of *"de-programming in the car on the way home",* while some other participants preferred to go for a walk.

5.6 Initiatives to Deal with Stress

A number of suggestions were made by the focus group participants in relation to the types of initiatives, they felt should be introduced to help alleviate stress within the workplace.

5.6.1 Staff Welfare Officer

One such suggestion was to have a staff welfare officer specific to the Roscommon region. Some employees, though not all, were aware there was such an officer based in Galway

whom they could contact. However, it was felt that there should be an officer specific to the region, one who would be familiar with the local issues and would be able to dedicate time to Roscommon, and not be divided between Galway and Mayo also.

5.6.2 Induction courses for new employees

Induction courses for new employees to the Western Health Board were seen as essential to help alleviate the stress of both the new employee and the people with whom they share the office.

> *"Good orientation to people who are brought in and are shown around. Now I mean we had a situation and it was quite unfair to the particular girl and it was quite unfair to us. She arrived on the desk, we were not informed that someone new was arriving at all, she sat at the desk, I thought she was a visitor to somebody in the room, I passed her by a few times, I went in and out trying to draw things out from the source, not realising she was a member of staff and she was there for the full day and I didn't know she was actually our secretary. I mean that's a terrible situation to be in, from her point of view it must have been worse".*

5.6.3 Team Work

Some participants felt that more team meetings are essential for the flow of information and decisions and new developments within the specific departments. It was felt they were important to get a feel for what everybody was doing, especially where there was a multidisciplinary team involved. Team meetings would increase communication between management and their staff, and give staff more contact with their managers, which could alleviate problems in the beginning. Staff wanted to have more access to their managers, more frequent team meetings would be one way of addressing this problem.

A number of participants felt that managers should be sent on compulsory 'effective management courses' as soon as they are appointed to the position in order to have the correct skills and training for the position in relation to team management.

5.6.4 Stress Management Courses

Several participants expressed their disappointment that the stress management course, which the Board had started, has been stopped. The general consensus was that it is needed on an on-going basis. Participants acknowledged the course was good and very useful when it was running, however not everybody was given the chance to avail of it.

> *"it was meant to continue so everybody could have access to it. I don't know where it is at now. The people trained people who would train others but they didn't it stopped"*

5.6.5 Other Comments

Other comments made, which warrant attention, included the lack of opportunity for 'up-skilling', especially for clinical staff. Additionally, for those staff who are privileged to get to attend these courses, there is no support within the workplace in relation to time off for study or relief staff, thus adding to the already high levels of stress for the individual.

In general, the staff welcomed the project, and they were grateful to be given a chance to voice their opinion and to contribute. Many staff believed it was *'well over due".*

CHAPTER 6 DISCUSSION

6.1   Discussion

The present study aimed to determine the causes of stress amongst employees within Community Services, Co. Roscommon. The study required the collection of both qualitative data in the form of focus groups and quantitative data in the form of self-administered questionnaires.

The positive relationship between stress and absenteeism from work has been demonstrated in numerous studies (8). Almost half of the respondents in the current study experience stress at least once a month, while 35% experience it on a weekly basis. This highlights the need to introduce mechanisms to deal with stress in the workplace. The results of the study indicate the average number of sick days taken due to stress is just over half a day (0.6 days) per person. This absenteeism an annual cost of approximately €11,500 being paid due to stress-related sick leave. This suggests that if stress reduction initiatives are put in place in Community Services Roscommon, cost savings can be made in terms of reduced absenteeism due to stress. This may help offset the cost of setting up such initiatives.

For an organisation to effectively operate, there needs to be a good system of communication at all levels. In all strands of this study, poor communication was highlighted as a major cause of stress. This has also been identified in studies of stress in the workplace. Particular issues raised included feedback received from management about work, the lack of regular team meetings, and the need for an internal intercom system. Whilst it is acknowledged that Community Services Roscommon have been committed to improving their communication systems through quality audits and the establishment of partnership committees, there remains a clear need for communication channels to be enhanced. Initiatives such as developing mechanisms to give staff feedback, and the provision of an intercom system should be considered to improve communication.

Faced with government cutbacks in public spending, all Health Boards are facing reductions

in the availability of resources. This appears to be impacting on staff in Community Services Roscommon and is a major cause of stress in the workplace. Understaffing, inadequate cover for sick leave and holiday leave and the use of temporary staff are significant areas of concern. The majority of staff have to work extra hours to get the job done and many staff in the focus groups reported that they had to take work home with them. Whilst resources are limited, they should not be cut back to the extent that they have significant impacts on the health of staff. Staffing levels should be reviewed to identify and develop a mechanism to deal with understaffing and excess workloads.

Another area of concern was that of coming to work when not well enough, this relates to the lack of support from management and cover for staff when on sick leave or on holidays. Increased administration and meetings in particular was another major cause of stress for the employees. Whilst being included in meetings was perceived as a step forward, the number of meetings was highlighted as having an impact on workload resulting in stress. The number of meetings people attend should be reviewed with their line manager to help minimise excess workload.

There was a consensus in relation to job satisfaction and career prospects that an employee doesn't get the same satisfaction when under a lot of pressure or when very stressed out, this was also identified in the quantitative results. Additionally, significantly more people who reported being stressed everyday were dissatisfied with their jobs, a direct relationship which many international studies have demonstrated (9,10). Job dissatisfaction may lead to high staff turnover and may also affect the quality of work. This again demonstrates the need to introduce stress reduction mechanisms.

Almost half of respondents stated that workplace stress affected their lives outside of work, an issue that also emerged from the qualitative research. Stress affected home lives in a number of ways including, having to bring work home to finish it, finding it difficult to unwind after a stressful day and being short-tempered as a result.

Because the emotional and physical strain that accompanies stress is uncomfortable, people

are motivated to do things to reduce their stress i.e. to help them cope. Coping can be defined as

> *'The process by which people try to manage the perceived discrepancy between the demands and resources they appraise in a stressful situation'.* *(11)*

There is no one 'best' method of coping. No single method is uniformly applied or effective with all stressful situations (12,13)ʼ. In dealing with stress a number of strategies were identified both by the survey respondents and participants of the focus groups. Peer support was identified as a key coping mechanism. As highlighted in the results (section 4.3) most respondents reported that they *'talk to colleagues within work'* to help them deal with stress. Many researchers have identified this social support as a coping mechanism. This finding is promising as it suggests that Community Services Roscommon, has a working environment where many staff support each other when experiencing stress. This should be built upon in the development of any further stress reduction initiatives. Exercise was also identified as a key coping mechanism by 86% of respondents. This highlights the potential of introducing workplace exercise programmes.   Research has shown that exercise and physical fitness can protect people from the harmful effects of stress on health (14).   A number of studies have also shown that *'laughter is the best medicine'* (15,16)ʼ . John Cleese, of Monty Python fame, was asked if he thought there were times when humor might *not* help. He replied,

> *"Yes, if you're attacking a machine gun emplacement, it's no time for jokes, pies in the face, or dropping your trousers to amuse the enemy ... but when the job is done, you had better find something to laugh about, or spend some time relaxing and having fun."*

A high proportion of respondents reported that they have no way in dealing with stress and that they *'just get on with things'.* This could have serious implications for both the mental

and physical well-being of the individual and highlights the need to develop stress coping mechanisms in the workplace.

In the present study, employees were asked their opinion on what types of initiatives should be in place to help alleviate their stress levels. Whilst the majority of initiatives were perceived to be effective mechanisms to deal with stress, those dealing with enhancing communications, and getting *'recognition for work done'* received the most positive responses. These should be prioritised in developing future initiatives. In addition, the focus groups highlighted positive feedback in terms of stress management courses, which were organised in the past. It was also suggested that management attend courses in dealing with stress amongst their staff. These should also be given priority whilst developing future initiatives.

Research indicates that the most positive outcomes in dealing with stress were obtained with a combination of two or more techniques (17). Stress management in work settings can be effective in enhancing worker physical and psychological health but the choice of stress-management technique to use should be based on the specific health outcomes that are targeted for change.

A number of main priority issues were identified from the *'Work Positive'* pack, which supported the results from the main questionnaire, and those of the focus groups. Most of the issues revolved around communication, or rather the lack of communication and the lack of involvement in decision making. These problems were similar to those of another healthcare institution within the Republic of Ireland where the *Work Positive* Pack was used (18). In that particular situation the main issues identified were shift-work patterns, communication issues (feedback, follow-up of meeting, career appraisals, lack of consultation, involvement in decision making) and workload.

Other issues revealed by the research that warrant attention are security and overcrowding.

Security was a concern for staff who had spent time in the community. A recent security review in the workplace has been undertaken by Community Services, Roscommon and it is suggested that its recommendations be implemented (19). In terms of overcrowding, the focus groups highlight that this was a contributing factor to raising stress levels. Efforts should be made to minimise overcrowding to enhance the work environment.

CHAPTER 7   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1   Conclusions

Intervention at the organisational rather than the individual level is gaining greater attention in workplace health promotion efforts. The results from each of the three strands of this research highlight the problems associated with working in a stressful environment and indicate the need to address the issue of stress within the workplace. Particular focus must be placed on addressing the communication issues, and emphasising the need for increased communication across all sectors in the workplace. Further emphasis needs to be placed on getting recognition for work done and increased support for staff.

7.2   Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made from the present study to help alleviate stress amongst Community Services Staff, Roscommon, which should be given consideration when developing future policies and initiatives.

1. Communication channels between management and 'front line' staff need to be opened/ increased. In particular :

   ➢ Systems should be developed to increase the feedback staff receive from management about their work for example regular progress meetings between line manager and staff

   ➢ The feasibility of providing an intercom system should be assessed.

   ➢ Management should regularly meet their staff and review the number of meetings they attend, to agree an appropriate number of meetings in terms of their current workload.

   ➢ Career progression within Community Services Roscommon and the Western Health Board should be discussed with each staff member by management in an annual review

> ➢ All departments should have regular team meetings.

2. Mechanisms to help staff deal with stress in the workplace should be introduced. These should include the following:

> ➢ promotion of regular exercise in the workplace
>
> ➢ consideration to recruiting a staff welfare officer for Roscommon
>
> ➢ the re-introduction of stress management courses for staff
>
> ➢ the development of induction courses for new staff that include a stress management component

3. All management should receive training in dealing with stress in their staff.

4. The *'Risk Reduction Table'* (appendix 3) should be reviewed to address issues associated with stress and possible solutions to these problems.

5. Staffing levels should be reviewed to identify and develop a mechanism to deal with understaffing. In particular, the need to reduce the proportion of temporary staff and the provision of sick leave/holiday cover should be addressed.

6. Efforts should be made to enhance the working environment, particularly in terms of minimising overcrowding.

7. The recommendations of the review of security in the workplace (21) should be implemented.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1:   Selected Focus Group Quotes

5.2   Sources of stress

"there is definitely stress happening at work but there are varying factors, there are things that make your blood pressure rise or give you course to be anxious or to be worried that sort of thing. And I think that there are a variety of contributing factors".

5.2.1   Communication

"maybe there could be a better effort to get all the disciplines together and say we have to communicate better with one another. I'm not getting myself off the hook either or any of us of the hook, we are all guilty of it because of the pressure of work a lot of time".

"You have no intercom system or anything like that"

" an intercom system or something is vital. You could be in the building and you could want to contact somebody quite urgently you know ……..and they could be in any other office but you just couldn't be going to door to door to find them"

"Well it is very hard to locate people like and you have to ring someone else to get through to someone else kind of. Say people will be ringing in and they are saying that this is their 3rd time ringing now, is she in and half the time you don't know if someone is in because nobody tells you if they are not in until you go ringing looking for them and you are ringing, they might have their voice mail on. And its someone else that tells you this person isn't in, so when someone rings in looking for them you are not aware who's in and who's not in, so you do spend a lot of time looking for people and locate them, ringing through to different people numbers to say is such a person in you know, so, definitely an intercom would be a lot better in finding someone in the building because they cant be sitting at their seat all the time anyway at their desk

"we were told yesterday by our line manager, a line manager, that the secretary was there, that's what she was there for, to answer the phone and

we, if there was anything urgent to come and it wasn't urgent that it had to be left in the post room, end of story."

"most of our line managers used to say 'my door is always open' but if we go to him it's a nuisance"

"they are so far removed from the practicalities of the coal face, I mean they are in cuckoo land….and all the solutions have to come down from above and maybe the one at the coalface would give a much more practical solution to the problem and they're not listened to"

"I think it should be compulsory for every line manager to spend at least one week a year at the coalface and bring them back down to normal and let them see what's going on"

"they are all at meetings about strategies and sure they've no idea…they're on a different planet altogether".

5.2.2   Management

"Then you also have managers in place that shouldn't be managers, because they don't know the service and it's quite obvious."

"you have to ask the question whether people who are qualified to manage a particular department necessarily need to be the person to implement A strategy or B strategy, that it may be easier to get other people who would be, would have more specific skills in that area to free up people to do things"

"they (managers) don't know how to tackle it, they don't have the skills, they don't have the training, and at one level they don't want to acknowledge the levels that are there".

"they (managers) think 'Oh God they are only grade three's or grade four's'……but at the end of the day we're human too"

"The health board are getting damn good value for money, I think and they

don't (appreciate the staff)*, that's the nature, maybe they are not supposed to appreciate us, and pat us on the back"*

5.2.3   Resources

"But I think it is disgraceful the system and the policy they have in the health board and I'm sure its in Galway as well as here the idea of taking the girls in for 11 months and letting them off, brilliant girls, I mean they are brilliant in their job and all of a sudden they have to walk out after 11 months is horrendous, its just disgraceful."

"I find one of the most irritating things as a worker within the service is the rotation of staff"

"your dealing with new people all the time and they don't know what your on about, plus reception, you ring up looking for people, they don't know who you're looking for"

"It erodes the morale of the organisation, it's not just specific departments, it's just all, they're in and out and I can't keep track of the people anywhere".

"They need somebody permanent on that position first of all, who knows the people and who knows the course of things and knows the services."

"The most important in the building is the receptionist and they should be well, permanent".

"It's the face of service you know really"

"I heard a man once say, and I think it's very true that, he said ' that the most intelligent person should be in reception and enquiries' and I've heard some of the answers that people have got and you know, it's unbelievable"

5.2.4   Job insecurity

"……it was a management decision and we will slip it on there, she is not

going to argue the toss because she has to have her contract signed every couple of months. The permanent person will argue the toss and say no way and there will be a whole big debate about it, so it suites people to have people in certain posts temporary."

"There needs to be a complete re-shuffle and then have a look and say, somebody has worked in that for 2 years, there needs to be a permanent post there"

5.2.5 Lack of support

"There should be a floating person for holidays really".

"If we go on holidays or sick, no cover, if I go on a holiday or sick nobody, I pay salaries, nobody knows how to pay my salaries but yet if I am going out and the salaries are due and I come back and they weren't paid, no body would take the flack for me and my line manager wouldn't stand up for me because I know it has happened before with different things and they just won't stand up for you ".

"Certainly there is less of a feeling of belonging"

"Nobody cares if you come in on one leg or two legs"

"No support. Do you know what I mean. You cannot say if you have a big problem or whatever, that you go to your line manager and expect support. You have no support, you have no one to go to, you're on your own".

5.2.6 Increased Administration and meetings

"Well the amount of time that's put into trying to source resources, especially kind of family support people, I mean from my point of view. Like it's administrative work and you could spend a lot of time at it".

5.2.7 Working Environment

"And the environment that you work in as well can be very stressful and I know for example we talk about the account section alone in community

services and there can be at any one time 10 people working down on a desk there and they are supposed to be doing salaries and travel and figures and payments and so forth and so on and you have a hugh volume of traffic coming in and out at all times"

"People standing at the door and calling in and you would not see anybody because it's a big office and you know, there is constant interuption that way and there is constant phone calls and queries coming through because it's a main department and you are trying to work out your figures and if somebody interrupts you or whatever, you would love to be able to close the door and lock it and just get on with your work"

*"It can be lethal. Actually it was fifteen (*people sharing the office) *we counted it last Friday in our offices. I know it's a big room but you still have that amount of people, voices, computers, telephones and there's temps in as well. We've tried to address the issue and it's just basically the same".*

5.2.8   High demands

"I think the stress levels have gone so high that an awful lot of people have gone beyond recognising the symptoms that they are actually presenting with. When I started to work here first the Health Board had no money, the expectations of the public were lower. We've gone through a period of economic growth where people's expectations are higher, it's not just being aware of their rights, people have rights and entitlements but what people are being sold as their right and their entitlement is not what we're able to deliver and that is the bottom line".

"We're the first to meet the public, they could annihilate you, you know if it's a problem or whatever if your not able to deal with it and give them a right answer"

*"We have a receptionist and they screen which departments they (*phone queries) *go to but I mean if somebody comes on the phone they might say well I wanted to find out about one other thing and they ask you 20 other things while they are on the telephone and that" the nature of human beings, once they find that they have got a human voice over the phone and that's it you are held in and you could be tied up for 30 minutes sometimes or even longer if you are sorting out a query but at the same time you are expected to get the*

work done that you are doing. It's also a contributor to stress in the workplace".

5.2.9   Security

"you are going in blind sometimes into a house or into a situation and I think they are slipping very badly in that they are not looking after using that way or giving us the tools"

"I had a dog jump straight up on top of me. I was attacked by a dog in my work situation. I was standing in the door way and a dog came up, caught me by the neck, jumped up on my back and I was highly pregnant at the time. I ended up in the maternity unit that night"

5.3 Stress and Career Prospects

"you get a grade four, that's it, goodbye really isn't it?"

5.3.1   Job satisfaction

"You don't get the same satisfaction if you are under a lot of pressure or stress or you are trying to go from one job to another"

"You wouldn't have the same energy and enthusiasm for the job"

"…to think that a line manager can come in and demoralise your job and this person never sat at any job in that office, doesn't know anything about any job in that office and never will more than likely, you know, but to come in and demoralise somebody's job "

"You are not able to cope with the amount of work you have to do"

"They (line managers) *give you extra work or something like that and then come down and ask if you are kept busy and if you want more..you feel like dead man walking half the time".*

"You have people breathing down your neck and saying that you are not getting your job done and your not, but you are trying to explain but they are not listening to you"

5.4 Stress, health and relationships

5.4.1 Working at home

"That's what I find now, that with the change of staff you end up taking home all the work that's their job, that's happened us over and over again and I have been up until 11 and 12 o'clock some nights just getting things ready for the next day, with little or no appreciation"

5.4.2 Relationships

"I know when I go home, you don't speak to me for half an hour, you just leave me alone and I go and make myself a cup of tea, don't tell me there are any problems, don't tell me anything is wrong, discuss nothing with me"

"They (children) *want to get your attention and they want this and they want that and they want their homework done and you are there and you had a day and a half of it at work do you know"*

"If you're working in the same office as people and they are clearly very stressed it's hard not to absorb that, and I suppose you have to be fairly patient and we try to do all of that and understand, but it's hard".

"You are sitting there with somebody that is relaxed and reading a newspaper and you are getting your desk loaded, do you know, you would be very uptight and angry and resentful and of course it would cause bad relations".

5.5 Dealing with Stress

5.5.1 Peer Support

"We have a lot of peer support within the office generally"

"Well I think being with other colleagues and actually discussing whatever your source of stress is with them. That's why I think it's very healthy to be working with other people and having that period of time in the morning to bounce it off somebody and it does certainly , you get their little bit of input or whatever"

"Well that's fine if it's a member of the public and you can say 'that auld wagon' or whatever it is, but if it happens to be a colleague or a line manager,

often there is no channel or avenue and often you feel that there is no one. Sometimes, depending on the personality some people are more empowered to confront and actually say how they feel. Other people feel less empowered and I think that can fester with a lot of people, unless they have the skills to just accepting well this is the way I am, either I'm challenging or I'm not, if I'm not how do I let it go or can I let it go."

5.6 Initiatives to deal with stress

5.6.3   Team Work

"If they had more team meetings, a lot of people work in teams, you have the opportunity not to say well has anybody got any grievances but people would say are there any issues that we need to be aware of".

"you can build up a bit of a rapport with the other people that you work with, and say like in the nursing home section, you are dealing with the area medical officer, public health nurses, cwo's etc and there is a full team there. So you start to get a feel for everyone's work area, do you know and you become a little more respectful of the other departments and it has an ongoing affect."

"If there was a little bit more team building and that kind of thing. But then again this comes down to, these things have to be led by management. There are people that are being paid big salaries to supposedly manage and have attend a million courses to supposedly manage and build up teams with other staff and they are not doing it. It's not happening".

"More access to the community care management team and the people at the top".

"Well the general manager is in the building right over me and I haven't seen him in three or four months."

"they don't know how to tackle it (stress), they don't have the skills, they don't have the training, and at one level they don't want to acknowledge the levels that are there".

"the initiatives need to come from the top down. The information will come from the bottom up no problem but it needs to start from the top down I feel.

And a lot of it is just through lack of proper training. These people have been taken on these jobs and responsibilities, they haven't been given the tools to do the job properly do you know, they have not been given the training for dealing with the people and people skills and how to deal with the issues. There seems to be a real bury your head in the sand if an issue comes up, if I ignore it, it might go away but what it really does is snowball and cause stress to a lot of people".

5.6.4   Other Comments

"I don't know what happens with yourselves, but certainly to do anything in your own time and at your own initiative causes further stress, because you know you're going to have a huge workload plus you have preparation for exams and very little time to prepare."

"Keeping up to date and abreast of new changes and procedures is difficult, then you have new recruits fresh from college taking jobs because they have new skills which we're not able to do because we can't get the training"

Appendix 2:   Questionnaire Specific to Community Care Roscommon

SURVEY OF STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

STAFF OF ROSCOMMON COMMUNITY SERVICES,
WESTERN HEALTH BOARD

Community Services, Roscommon in conjunction with the Department of Public Health are conducting a survey to determine the causes and extent of work-related stress levels of employees of Community Care. This is to facilitate the development of measures aimed to reduce stress levels within the workplace.

We would greatly appreciate it, if you would fill out this questionnaire, it will only take you a few minutes, and your responses will be strictly **PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL**. Please complete the questionnaire by circling the number which corresponds to your answer (e.g. 2) and return using the FREEPOST envelope provided.

We would like to acknowledge and thank participants of the discussion groups who helped formulate topics for the questionnaire

Section 1: About you and your workplace

Q1   Are you

Male	1
Female	2

Q2   To which age category do you belong?

16-25 years	1
26-35years	2
36-45 years	3
46-55 years	4
56-65 years	5

Q4   Do you work <u>mainly</u> in North or South

North	1
South	2

Q5   What is your occupation?

     NOTE: If you are a head of discipline

Community Welfare Officer	1
Public Health Nurse	2
Dental Hygienist	3
Dental Surgery Assistant	4
Dental Surgeon	5
Speech and language therapist	6
Social worker	7
Child care worker	8
Home help	9
Home management advisor	10
Physiotherapist	11
Environmental Health Officer	12
Psychologist	13
Area Medical Officer	14
Ophthalmologist	15
Chiropodist	16
Clerical Staff	17
Management	18
Other (specify)_____	19

Q6   How long have you been in your present job (to the nearest year)? _____ **years**

Q7   What is current job arrangement?

Full-time permanent	1
Tempory	2
Flexible Working	3
Other	4

Q8   How many hours do you work in a typical week?_____**hours**

Q9   Would you normally work extra hours in

Yes	1
No (*go to Q10)*	2

Q9a   If you do extra hours, what is your

Through choice	1
Expected to	2
To get the job done	3
Other (specify)_____	4

Q9b   Do you get compensated for your extra

Yes	1
No	2
Not applicable	8

Q10   How satisfied are you with your current

Very dissatisfied	1
Dissatisfied	2
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	3
Satisfied	4
Very satisfied	5

Q11   How satisfied are you with your current

Very dissatisfied	1
Dissatisfied	2
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	3
Satisfied	4
Very satisfied	5

Q 12   Which aspects of your job are you satisfied with?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q 13   Which aspects of your job are you dissatisfied with?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Section 2: Stress

Q14   How often do you suffer from stress as a result of

Every day	1
2-3 times a week	2
Once a week	3
Once a fortnight	4
Once a month	5
Once in 3 months	6
Once in 6 months	7
Once a year	8
Once in two years	9
Less often	10
Never	11
Don't know	12

Q16　In your opinion what are the *FIVE* main sources of stress within your job?

Please rank your top five sources, from 1 being the **most important** source of stress to 5 being the **5ᵗʰ most important** source

Q17　Has stress affected your job or career in anyway?

Yes	1
No *go to Q18*	2
Don't know	3

Q17a　If yes, how?

	Yes	No
Lack of job satisfaction leading to decreased motivation	1	2
Overworked, not being able to give 100% to everything	1	2
No career opportunities	1	2
Other	1	2
Please specify_____		

Q18　Has workplace stress had an adverse affect on your relation-

Yes	1
No	2
Don't know	3

Q18a　If yes, how?_____

Q19　Has workplace stress affected your life outside work?

Yes	1
No	2

Q19a   If yes, how?

	Yes	No
Have to bring work home to get it finished	1	2
Short tempered at home after a stressful day	1	2
Find it hard to unwind	1	2
Have been ill as a result of being over-stressed	1	2
Other	1	2
Please specify_____		

Q20   How do you usually deal with stress?

	Yes	No
I don't, I just get on with things	1	2
Exercise	1	2
Talk to colleagues within work (peer support)	1	2
Talk to someone outside of work	1	2
De-stress while driving home in car	1	2
Comfort Eating	1	2
Smoke a Cigarette	1	2
Have a drink of wine/beer/spirits	1	2
Other	1	2
If other, please specify_____		

Section 3: Stress Reduction

Q21   How effective would you think the following initiatives would be at helping to reduce the stress levels within Community Care Roscommon?

Initiative	Very Effective	Fairly Effective	Neither Effective or Inef-	Ineffective	Very Ineffective	Q22 RANK
Initiatives to support staff with families	1	2	3	4	5	
Increased communication channels between managers and frontline	1	2	3	4	5	
Staff welfare officer specific to the region to support staff with any	1	2	3	4	5	
Effective management courses for management	1	2	3	4	5	
Regular team meetings in all sectors	1	2	3	4	5	
Better access to management	1	2	3	4	5	
Induction courses for new staff	1	2	3	4	5	
Increased emphasis on team work	1	2	3	4	5	
More team leaders	1	2	3	4	5	
Stress management courses available to all staff	1	2	3	4	5	
Honesty from management	1	2	3	4	5	
Health Promotion initiatives for staff	1	2	3	4	5	
Supports for staff e.g. employee assistance	1	2	3	4	5	
Training and upskilling	1	2	3	4	5	
Recognition for work done	1	2	3	4	5	
Physical rewards for work done	1	2	3	4	5	
Increased job security	1	2	3	4	5	
Increased physical security in the workplace e.g. out in the commu-	1	2	3	4	5	
Improved physical environment	1	2	3	4	5	

Q22   In your opinion what would be the *THREE* main initiatives, which you think, should be put in place to help reduce stress in the work place?

Please rank your top three sources, from 1 being the **most important**; 2 being the **second most important** and 3 being the **third most important**

Q23   *Approximately, how many sick days have you taken in the last year?*

_____*days*

Q24   *Approximately, how many of these sick days have been due to stress-related conditions?*

_____ *days*

Q25   *What is your current salary?*

€_____

(*NOTE: This question is being asked so as to approximate how much money is lost due to stress-related leave on a yearly basis, and for no other purpose*)

Q26   Please feel free to make any other comments you feel appropriate to this survey and/or to indicate what you would like to happen within Community Care, Roscommon to help improve stress levels within the workplace.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION

Please put the questionnaire in the freepost envelope provided and return before October 29th. You do not need to put a stamp on the envelope.

If you have mislaid the return envelope, please post the questionnaire to:

Janas Harrington

FREEPOST,

Department of Public Health,

Western Health Board,

Merlin Park Hospital,

Galway.

Appendix 3:   Risk Reduction Table

Issues associated with stress	Possible solutions
Sickness absence	Sickness absence figures can be systematically recorded and trends monitored in order to establish the causes of absence. Is there a generally high level of absence? Are there any cases of long-term absence caused by stress? Assess whether the absence levels are 'normal' for your organisation
High staff turnover	Conduct exit interviews to establish why people are leaving and take action appropriately. Try to replace staff quickly or provide temporary resources, if necessary, to reduce the increased workload on remaining staff.
Poor communication between teams	Try to establish open forums for communication of information, such as team meetings, group meetings etc. Look at the systems in place for top-down communication (e.g. company policy, performance etc.), bottom-up communication (feedback from staff, involvement of staff in decision making) and cross-functional communication (between colleagues/teams). Are these means of communication effective for the type of information that is being communicated? It may be helpful to set up a group to review current systems, types of information to be communicated and the most appropriate means of communication for each
Bullying	Provide training for staff involved to improve interpersonal skills. Establish a formal bullying and violence policy to communicate the seriousness of such inappropriate behaviour. Establish and communicate avenues for reporting bullying
Lack of feedback on performance	Establish an appropriate performance management system with performance indicators that are agreed in colsultation with employees. Make sure it is a two-way process including positive feedback on performance, areas for improvement, future goals, and objectives, training needs, and any other issues. Include performance review as a performance indicator for staff managers to communicate the importance of the procedure. Feedback on performance should not be restricted to performance reviews. Try to instil a culture of positive feedback across the workforce
Value and contribution	If people feel undervalued it may be that their contribution to the business is not recognised. This often associated with lack of feedback on performance. Try to instil a culture whereby all staff acknowledge the contribution of their colleagues. Managers should lead by example in this by providing informal feedback to employees on a regular basis.
Technological change	If there has been new technology introduced, check that staff are comfortable with its use; are there any problems associated with it? Provide refresher training as an option.
Lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities	Review current roles and responsibilities. If current roles are appropriate, clarify these by producing job descriptions. These should be conducted in conjunction with staff and made available to all staff. If they are not appropriate, establish revised roles in consultation with staff.

Issues associated with stress	Possible solutions
One-off incidents	If there have been one-off incidents that have caused stress in the past, analyse them to identify whether they were managed well. What could have been done differently to reduce pressure on staff?
Uncomfortable workplace	Consult employees about the workplace and why they are not happy with the working environment. Small changes can have a big impact, particularly if employees have control over the way that it is set out and are involved in choosing the equipment, furniture etc. Remember that you may be required by law to look at specific aspects of the work environment, such as noise, computer workstations, lighting, hazardous substances etc.
Working long hours	Monitor the hours that are currently being worked by staff. Is workload evenly distributed? Is there a culture of working late, is this necessary to get the job done? Can the work by rationalised or can temporary staff be brought in during peak times of high workload to support permanent staff during these times?
Boring and mundane work	Is it possible to rotate jons so that people are not doing the same job all of the time? A workforce which is 'mulit-skilled' is more flexible/
Lack of training	Establish a system for identifying training needs. This may be simply asking staff if they feel that they require training to improve their performance. Remember to do this for all staff. Identify the priority areas and communicate these to all staff, explaining why these have been chosen as priority areas.
Dissatisfaction with non-monetary benefits	Re-assess non-monetary benefits such as holidays, flexible hours, Christmas bonus etc. Often token benefits that do not cost very much can be much appreciated, e.g. increased holiday entitlement with service, shopping vouchers as Christmas bonus, more flexible working hours, subsidised access to local leisure facilities, etc.