

Psychology for Work

Occupational Stress:
Causes and
Consequences



Occupation

What is STRESS?



Stress

A natural reaction
to excessive
pressure

No such thing as positive
stress – only positive
pressure. Stress is **always**
negative

Not a disease, but
excessive/prolonged stress
can lead to mental and
physical ill health

When perceived demands
exceed the individual's
ability to cope

What is stress?

- Hinckle (1973) - External forces exerting pressure upon an individual, producing strain
- Cannon (1929) – defined stress in terms of the internal physiological state of people exposed to threatening or exciting situations
 - ‘Fight’ or ‘Flight’ occurs in stressful situations
- Selye (1946) provided a more elaborate model of the human response to stressors.
 - The General Adaptation Syndrome

What is stress?



I. Pressure caused by an outside stimulus

- Engineering model (physics)
 - External forces exert pressure and produce strain
 - E.g., focus on daily hassle/stressful life events
 - We can easily measure the stress a person is subjected to (Hinckle, 1973)
 - Does not take account for individual differences!
- 

What is stress?



2. Cannon (1929) – ‘Fight’ or ‘Flight’ occurs under stressful situations

- Defines stress in terms of the internal physiological state of people exposed to threatening or exciting situations
 - Selye (1946) provided a more elaborate model of the human response to stressors.
 - The General Adaptation Syndrome
- 

- Stress response involves three stages:

Selye's 1946 General Adaptation Syndrome

1) ALARM REACTION

- Lowered resistance initially, followed by the activation of defence mechanisms (e.g., adrenalin)

2) RESISTANCE

- Stage of max. adaptation and hopefully the successful return to equilibrium. This will not happen if the stress agent continues. They will move on to the next stage.

3) EXHAUSTION

- Failure of defence/adaptive mechanisms

Why is stress relevant in the workplace?



- Most people spend at least 1/3 of their lives at work
- This makes the workplace a dominant source of demands or stressors
- The workplace can also be a dominant source of reward and other resources that support our psychological well-being
- Unfortunately, chronic (recurring) exposure to stressors within the job environment can be really damaging over time

What is WORK STRESS?



Why is stress relevant in the workplace?



- Prolonged stress can lead to burnout, anxiety, depression, and other debilitating symptoms such as HBP, insomnia, stomach problems (IBS) and back pain
- **HSE:**
 - Work related stress the biggest contributor to number of working days lost per year
- **Labour Force Survey (LFS)**
 - Estimated that over 50% of days lost per year in 2018/19 were as a result of stress, depression or anxiety caused or made worse by work
 - Average of 21 days per case (person)



HSE Definition

Work-stress is the process that arises where work demands of various types and combinations exceed the person's capacity and capability to cope

Discussion points...

- Have you ever worked in a job that was often “stressful”?
Why do you think it felt this way (so) frequently?
- What would a very high stress or low stress occupation look like to you?
- What strategies do you use currently to manage the stress you feel related to your work as a student? Do you think these same strategies will work for you once/if you are in a full-time job?

Work-related stress

- **Is not:**

- High work load
- Work related absence

- **Is:**

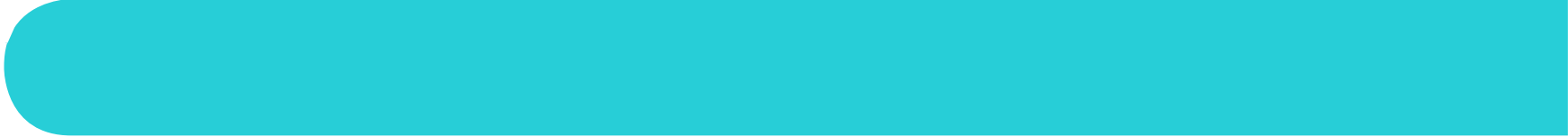
- The negative emotional state that arises from pressures at work
 - E.g., high workload is a potential cause of stress
- Something that is caused or made worse by work

Models of work-related stress



Structural

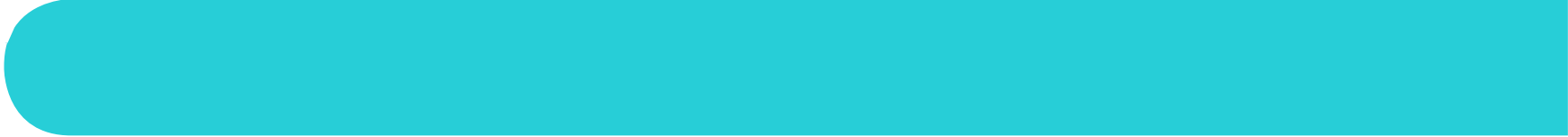
Transactional



Most theories of work-related stress describe stress as resulting from a lack of fit between an individual's capacity and the demands of their particular work environment



Structural approaches to work-related stress



Structural approaches

- Focus on describing the aspects of work (and the interactions between them) that are thought to lead to the negative emotional state of stress and, in turn, poor employee well-being
- **The Demand-Control model (Karasek, 1979)**

1) DEMANDS

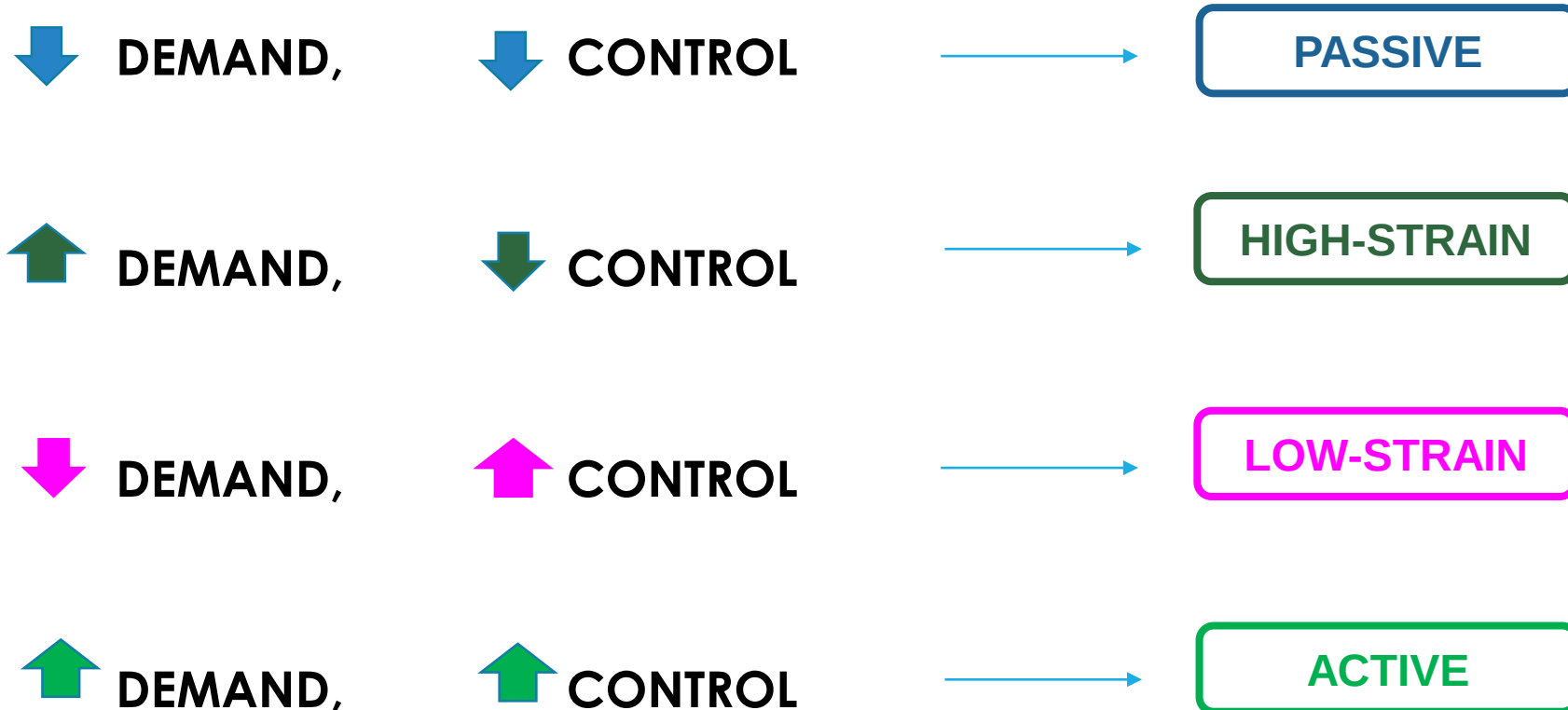
- Related to the amount of work a person does, but also factors such as time pressures and amount of mental/physical effort involved

2) CONTROL

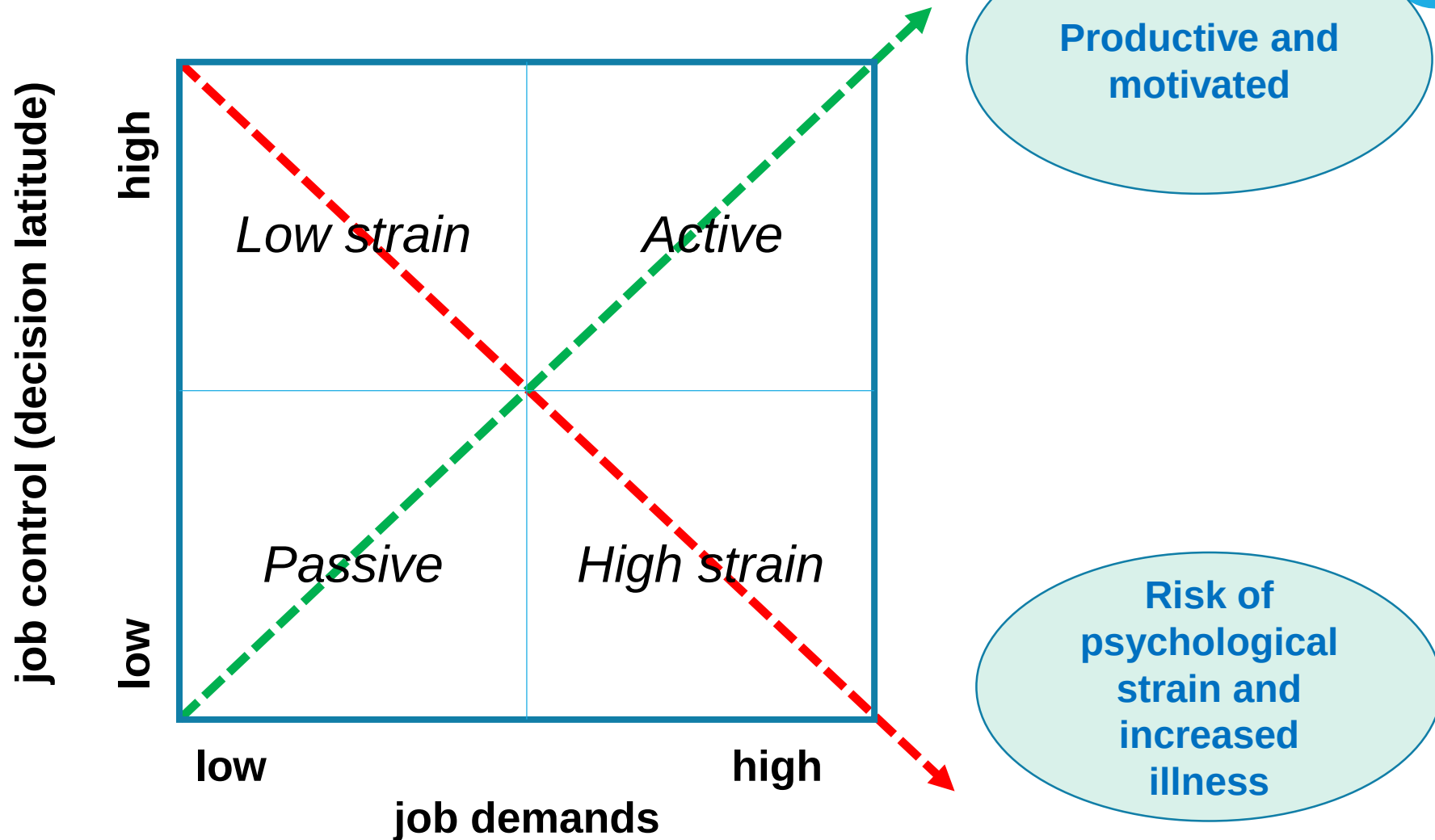
- Extent to which the job allows employee to use their skills/capabilities (skill discretion)
- Amount of control employee has over their work situation (decision latitude)

The Job Demand-control model (Karasek, 1979)

- Four categories of job were described through combining levels of **demand** and **control**:



The Job Demand-control model (Karasek, 1979)



The Job Demand-control model (Karasek, 1979)

Karasek and Theorell (1990):

Employees in high strain jobs were at increased risk of various health problems, including serious psychological and physical health problems.

Interestingly, control has a positive role in employee well-being.

Those in active job roles (high control and high demands) were found to be the healthiest.

Support at work

Johnson and Hall (1988) – The Demand-Control-Support Model

- In this model, high levels of support are thought to act as a buffer against negative effects of work demands
- Jobs with higher levels of support, but equal levels of demands, tend to be healthier

Support at work

- Two hypotheses:

1. The Strain Hypothesis:

- Employees working in a high-strain job (high D, low C) experience the lowest well-being/highest stress
- The strain hypothesis – emotional/practical support can help reduce the impact of high work demands.

2. The Learning Hypothesis:

- High C, high D plus support can lead to improved motivation and satisfaction at work

Evaluation?

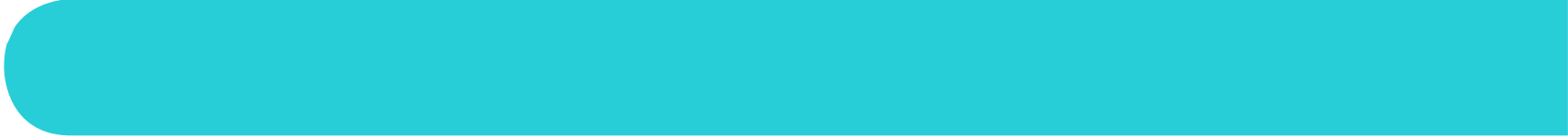


Evaluation?

- Lots of support for the strain hypothesis
 - Low control and high demands interaction
- Moderating influence of social support is less consistent
- Measures are broad (responsibility pressure, quality concern, role conflict, work overload and job control)
- Certain people are more vulnerable to strain and others benefit more from control



Transactional Models



Transactional approaches to work-related stress

- Psychological emphasis – Stress exists when the person FEELS they cannot cope with the demands of the environment
- Interaction of person and environment
- Transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
 - Importance of **cognitive appraisals**

The Transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)



- According to the transactional model, the stress and coping process involves two main elements:

an **evaluation** of a situation that produces negative emotions

coping efforts which attempt to reduce these negative emotions

This process of evaluation is known as **Cognitive Appraisal**

- an individual's evaluation of the meaning of a particular encounter for well-being
- 

The Transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

- Stress is a result of an interaction between an individual's characteristics and appraisals, the external or internal event (stressor) environment, and the internal or external resources a person has available to them.

Lazarus's initial model maintained that when individuals confront a new or changing environment they engage in a process of **appraisal**, which is of two types: Primary and Secondary

The Transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

1) Primary Appraisal



- a) *What is at stake in this encounter?*
- b) Motivational relevance
- c) Motivational congruence

Three kinds of stressor:

- 1) Pose harm
- 2) Threaten
- 3) Challenge

2) Secondary Appraisal

- a) *What can I do to cope and how effective will this be?*
- b) Emotion-focused coping potential
- c) Problem-focused coping potential

The Transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)

- Stress experienced when harm or threat is **HIGH** and perceived coping ability is **LOW**
- If perceived coping ability appraised to be HIGH, stress is likely to be minimal

STRESS ARISES FROM A MISMATCH BETWEEN PERCEIVED DEMANDS AND
RESOURCES

(Both of which can change over time)

What is coping?



- A response to negative events or emotions, and involves cognitive and/or behavioural efforts to manage to adapt to the stressful situation
 - Psychological theories of coping attempt to identify the mechanisms through which individuals cope with events that are **perceived** to be stressful or threatening
 - Emotions and coping are often considered to be part of the same adaptational system
 - *E.g., Lazarus and Folkman (1984); Folkman and Lazarus (1988)*
- 

Dimensions of coping



1) Problem focused coping

- a) targets the causes of stress in practical ways which tackles the problem or stressful situation that is causing stress, consequently directly reducing the stress
- b) aim to remove or reduce the cause of the stressor



Problem focused coping

- **Taking control:** Changing or escaping from the stress/removing the stress
- **Information seeking:** Rational action. Trying to understand the situation and putting cognitive strategies into place to avoid it in the future.
- **Evaluating pros and cons** of different options for dealing with the stressor.

Dimensions of coping

2) *Emotion focused coping*

- a) involves trying to reduce the negative emotional responses associated with stress.
- b) sometimes the only realistic option when the source of stress is outside the person's control
- c) drug therapy can be seen as emotion focused coping

Emotion focused coping

- Keeping busy
- Letting off steam
- Distraction techniques
- Building oneself up to expect the worst

Dimensions of coping

Avoidant coping: Can putting your head in the sand ever be a good thing??



Avoidant coping



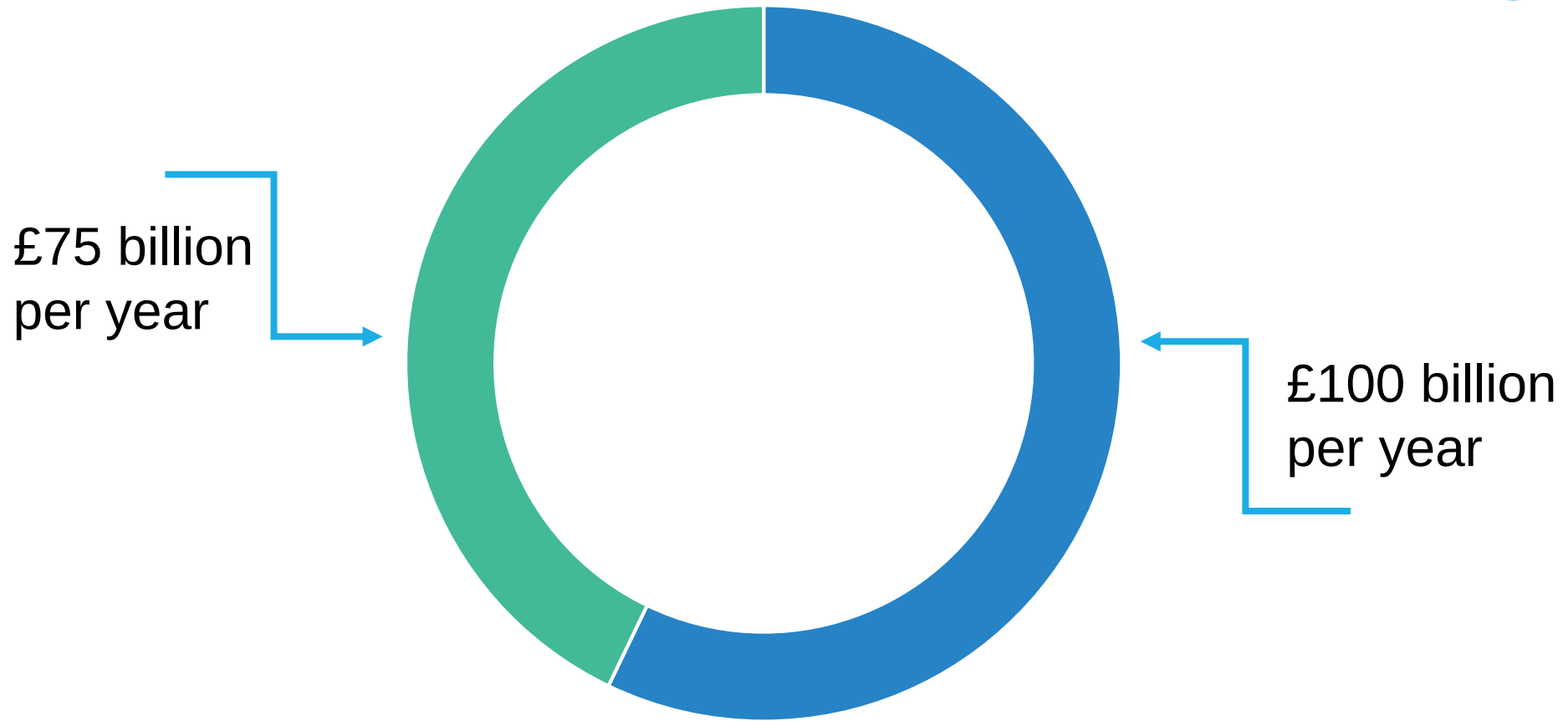
Avoidant coping:

- May be adaptive at an early stage in a stressful encounter, when we lack the resources to engage in problem-focused coping
 - However, in the longer term, and if faced with an ongoing stressor, avoidance will prevent adaptation to and mastery over the situation
 - Some types of avoidance (e.g., drug or alcohol misuse) are more dangerous and less adaptive than other types of avoidance (e.g., distraction)
- 

The background features several abstract geometric shapes in shades of blue and teal. These include a large teal shape in the top right, a horizontal teal bar on the left, a teal semi-circle on the bottom left, a small teal circle on the bottom right, and a large teal shape on the bottom right. The text is centered in the middle of the slide.

Consequences and costs of work stress

Stress costs a LOT!



- Lost in productivity, including sick leave
- Direct costs such as medical treatment

The scale of the problem

Occupations with the highest estimated prevalence rate of work-related stress in Great Britain, averaged over the last three years (2009/10 - 2011/12)



Nurses with
2,730 cases
per 100,000 people



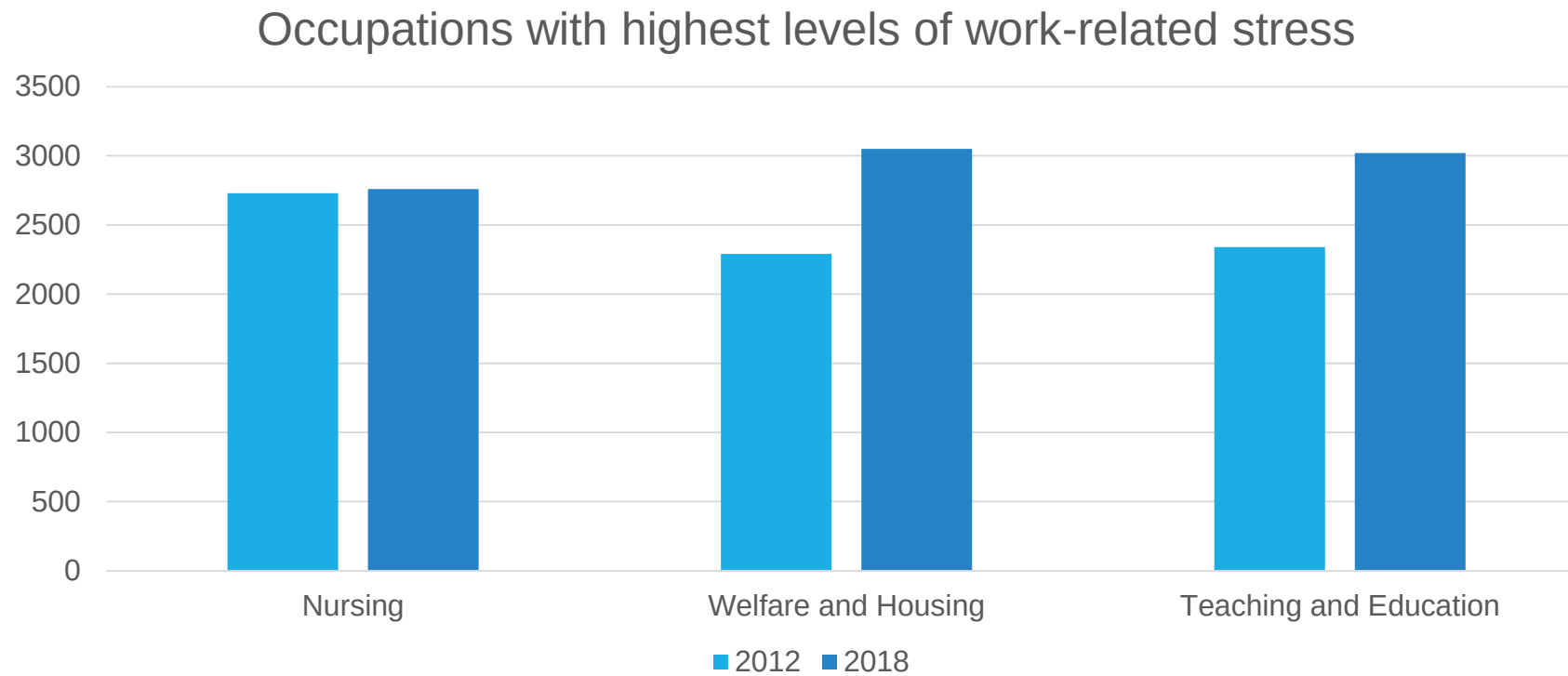
Teaching and education
professionals
2,340 cases
per 100,000 people



Welfare and housing
professionals
2,290 cases
per 100,000 people

Health professionals; teaching and education professionals, and caring personal services

2015/16 – 2017/18



The scale of the problem

- The main work activities attributed by respondents as causing their work-related stress, or making it worse, were:

1. **Work pressure:**

- Hours worked or workload
- Lack of clarity on roles / responsibilities
- Limited opportunity to manage own work patterns

80% of workers experiencing work-related stress in the UK state job reorganisation or job insecurity as the main factor/cause of their stress

The scale of the problem

- The main work activities attributed by respondents as causing their work-related stress, or making it worse, were:

2. Lack of managerial support

- Lack of support from colleagues OR superiors (68%)
- 37% of managers/team leaders say they have had no proper leadership or management training

The scale of the problem

- The main work activities attributed by respondents as causing their work-related stress, or making it worse, were:

3. Workplace bullying

- 63% of workers report being subject to unacceptable behaviours such as harassment or bullying
- 8 out of ten managers know that bullying is an issue in their own workplace

Why should organisations intervene?



- Improved quality of life for workforce
 - A healthier, more productive workforce
 - Underperformance
 - Time off through illness
 - Business benefits from reduced sickness absence – increased productivity
- 

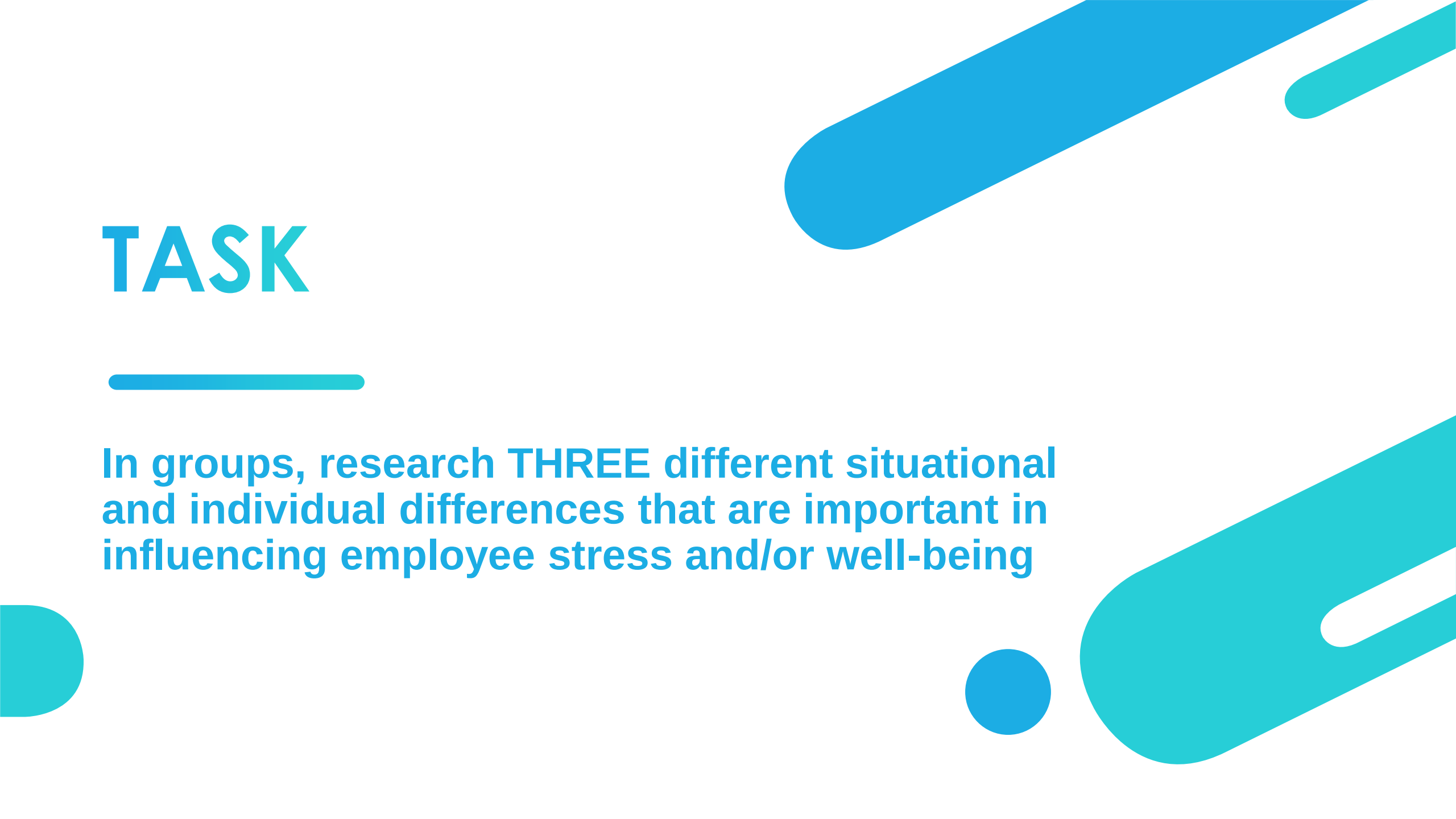
Why should organisations intervene?

- Litigation / fulfilment of statutory duties
 - Health and Safety at Work Act
- Power struggle
 - The rights of employees to health versus the needs of the company
 - Perception of rights and needs

Conditions that influence employee well-being

- Aspects of the **situation** and **individual differences** are both important in determining the impact of work on individual employees
- **Situational factors:**
 - What factors are a source of stress for people in workplaces? Is this the case for ALL people in ALL workplaces?
- **Individual differences:**
 - Are some people more vulnerable to stress? What types of people? Are cognitions and emotions implicated?

TASK

The slide features several abstract shapes in shades of blue and teal. A large teal shape is in the top right corner. A smaller teal shape is below it. A large blue shape is in the bottom right corner. A small blue circle is in the bottom center. A teal shape is on the left edge. A horizontal teal line is below the word 'TASK'.

In groups, research **THREE** different situational and individual differences that are important in influencing employee stress and/or well-being

TASK PART TWO



Present your findings... however you would like

