

What is work related stress?

In terms of occupational health and safety, stress is the result of a misfit between a worker's needs and capabilities, and what the workplace offers and demands. Another definition is "the reaction people have to excessive demands or pressures, arising when people try to cope with tasks, responsibilities or other types of pressure connected with their jobs, but find difficulty; strain or worry in doing so" (Health and Safety Executive, UK).

Stress is one of the major OHS issues confronting workers in Australian workplaces. The ACTU conducted a survey in 1997 receiving over 12,000 responses. The survey showed:

- One in four people took time off due to stress at work.
- The most stressful conditions at work reported were management issues including lack of communication and consultation; increased workload; organisational change and restructuring; and job insecurity.
- People reported a range of symptoms. More than 60% reported headaches; continual tiredness; anger and sleeplessness.
- Over half the respondents nominated better management, including more communication and consultation, as the solution to stress at work. Other solutions included less workload; less performance monitoring; better work organisation; more training; job security and better career opportunities.

Despite this, and the fact that stress has been recognised as a major occupational hazard by unions and government OHS authorities world wide, the amount of attention paid to stress by employers varies considerably.

What are the causes of stress?

A 'good job' usually involves a measure of positive stimuli, which encourages the worker to perform well and gain job satisfaction as a result - this is not stress. Many jobs involve negative factors that put unwanted pressure (stress) on the worker, leading to adverse consequences. Stress is not a disease or injury in itself, but can lead to mental and physical ill health, and can also be a factor in workplace accidents. (see list opposite).

Workers attempt to cope with stress in a number of ways and with varying degrees of success. However, if the person is consistently exposed to stressful situations, adverse consequences will result. When the body is exposed to a stress, the level of hormones in the body increases to mobilise energy resources in preparation to 'fight or flee' the situation. This response may be appropriate in the case of a Stone Age person confronted by a wild beast, but should be out of place in today's work environment.

Many work factors can be identified as potential causes of stress, or stressors, and most can be divided into three areas.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Too hot or too cold
Too noisy
Poor equipment / work station
Inadequate security
Poor lighting
Overcrowding
Inflexible work schedules
Unpredictable hours
Toxic fumes and chemicals
Vibration
Poor maintenance

DOING THE JOB

Lack of control over work
Excessive workload or long hours
Boring or repetitive work
Deadline pressures
Too little training or support
Confusion over, or too much, responsibility for others
Organisational change/relocation
Unnecessary monitoring of employees
Job insecurity
Inadequate pay and conditions
Confusion over priorities, timeframes and standards
Inadequate or unclear procedures: eg disciplinary, promotion, transfer, etc

WORK RELATIONSHIPS

Bullying or harassment
Discrimination
Client hostility
Conflict with supervisors/ managers
Poor relationships with colleagues
Lack of communication or consultation between manager and employees
Negative culture based on blame for and denial of problems



How the ASU can help

The ASU provides advice and information to members regarding workplace rights and obligations. ASU members can contact their State ASU office for more information. If required the ASU provides members with individual representation.

To obtain the contact details of your local ASU Branch visit the ASU national website www.asu.asn.au or contact the JSA National Project Coordinator on (03) 9342 1400 or help@employmentservicesunion.org.au

www.employmentservicesunion.org.au

What are the health effects of exposure to stress?

The symptoms of stress can include indecision, anxiety, depression, altered appetite, changes in weight, headache, backache, skin rashes and difficulty sleeping. They may lead to heart disease and other long term ill health.

DISEASES OF THE BLOOD CIRCULATION SYSTEM

- Hyertension
- Coronary heart disease
- Angina
- Heart attacks

DISEASES OF THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM

- Colitis (inflammation of the bowel)

OTHER PROBLEMS INCLUDE

- Fatigue
- Headaches, backaches
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Hostility and aggression
- Psychosomatic complaints
- Neuroses

Just as the ways the body reacts to stress can be harmful if stress is prolonged, so too are some of the ways which people can use to try to cope with stress. As levels of stress increase, so too can the consumption of alcohol, cigarettes and prescription/ non-prescription drugs.

If you have an Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) concern at your workplace you should inform your Occupational Health & Safety Representative (OH&S Rep). An elected OH&S Rep has legal powers to take action regarding an ongoing known and unaddressed OH&S violation which a Union Delegate does not. If you do not know who your OH&S Rep is at your workplace contact your Delegate for that information. If there is no OH&S Rep at your workplace contact the ASU office for specific OH&S advice.