

What is Stress?

Workplace stress is a serious health and safety hazard that can have devastating effects. Stress occurs when there is a poor match between workplace demands and a worker's degree of control. We feel stress as a result of demands that are placed upon our mind and body. Like violence and overwork, stress is a health and safety hazard directly related to how work is organized.

There are two forms of stress. Normal stress generally follows this process:

1. Stress comes, usually when facing an immediate threat or demand.
2. Stress begins to go away as we deal with the stress.
3. Stress is over, and the body relaxes and no longer feels stressed).

An example of normal stress is short-term anxiety because you have lost something important.

Toxic stress is different and follows this process:

1. Stress comes when facing a demand or threat that does not stop.
2. Stress stays with you, and you have no way of dealing with the stress
3. Stress builds up, you can never relax and the stress is not eliminated

Workers can experience toxic stress due to staff shortages, harassment, bullying, noise and other hazards. This form of stress often leads to negative physical and psychosocial effects.

Generalized Stress Response is the term used to describe a variety of physical reactions to stress, such as:

- increased metabolism
- blood pressure
- cholesterol and fatty acids in the bloodstream
- decreased protein synthesis
- faster blood clotting
- increased production of stomach acids, blood sugar for energy
- localized inflammation
- tensed up muscles
- excessive sweating to cool muscles

Stress can be associated with severe physical and/or psychological effects, such as:

- sleep disorders
- fatigue
- chronic aches and pains
- depression
- changes in sexual activity
- conflict with family, friends, and co-workers
- rapid weight gain or weight loss
- greater susceptibility to injury

- immune system depression
- greater vulnerability to illness and disease

What causes stress?

Stress is largely caused by poor organization of work that includes:

- lack of control and conflicting work demands
- lack of participation in decision-making
- lack of training and direction
- unclear work responsibilities
- privatization, outsourcing, downsizing, mergers, staff cutbacks, and restructuring
- overwork and poor work shift schedules

Cutbacks, privatization, reorganizations and downsizing, in particular, have contributed to a heightened sense of job insecurity.

Lack of control at work is a factor linked to stress.,Not having the ability to decide how a job is done can make workers sick.

Excessive demands also cause stress. When lack of control is combined with high demands, a worker will almost certainly suffer high stress levels. These conditions can create toxic workplace stress, causing depression, exhaustion, low self-esteem, musculoskeletal disorders of the upper extremity, heart disease and possibly death.

Physical working conditions such as noise and vibration, extreme temperatures, overcrowding, exposure to toxic substances and poor indoor air quality also cause stress. Bullying, harassment and violence can cause stress and are also linked to poor work organization.

What are the hazards?

Stress affects the physical and psychological health of workers, including PSAC members. But it also spills out of the workplace, negatively affecting the family lives of workers. The cumulative effects of stress can be devastating.

Major outcomes of stress are:

- Psychological disease and social behavioural changes (e.g., depression, anxiety, sexual dysfunction and suicidal thoughts)
- Heart disease
- Various physiological symptoms (e.g., headaches and migraines, poor digestion, ulcers and diabetes)
- Personal and family life conflict
- Divided workers
- Work-related musculoskeletal disorders
- Burnout
- The combination of stress and other diseases (i.e., stress can make other diseases and disorders worse)

- Critical incident stress

Identify the problem

The first step is to recognize that stress is a health and safety hazard in your workplace. If any of the conditions mentioned above are affecting your members, stress is likely a significant contributor.

Surveys and mapping techniques are excellent tools to identify the hazards in your workplace. A survey can be done in co-operation with the employer, but the union should approve the survey and be involved in collecting and assessing the results.

The union should conduct its own stress survey if the employer resists the idea or denies that there is a problem. Body mapping, hazard mapping and “your world” mapping techniques can be used – instead of or in addition to surveys – to identify stress hazards.

Actions

Stress hazards largely centre on issues of control and work organization. Taking action on stress involves workers exercising their own control at work.

To help combat stress, you can:

- Refuse unsafe stressful working conditions
- Take your breaks
- Report stress-related health and safety hazards
- Take stress issues to your joint health and safety committee

Strategies for change

On top of taking action, workplaces need to be reorganized to eliminate stress by:

- Giving workers real control (e.g., more autonomy, more participation in decision making and more opportunities for self-directed work)
- Respecting the workers’ right to refuse overtime
- Decreasing workloads and making sure there are enough staff to do the work
- Eliminating monotonous work
- Redesigning the work environment (e.g., minimize noise, introduce natural lighting and ensure that there’s proper ventilation)
- Increasing public sector spending by governments to counter staff shortages, overwork and other stressors Reducing, by the employer, sudden changes in the workplace (e.g., new technologies, abrupt work shift arrangements).
- Providing training to identify stress hazards should be instituted, preferably provided by the union

Workers need control for their jobs to be fulfilling. Work must be a meaningful part of our lives. Many of these recommendations will provide workers with greater control. A more democratic workplace is a safer and healthier workplace.

A stress policy is a good starting point for change. The health and safety committee in your workplace should table and push for the adoption of a workplace stress prevention policy. Stress can also be addressed through collective bargaining, as agreements aim to improve workers' health and safety. Because stress is largely caused by poor work organization, reorganization of work can be negotiated into collective agreements.

While Canada has no explicit stress legislation or regulations, the responsibility for providing a healthy and safe workplace still rests with employers. This responsibility is known as the general duty clause. But it does not go far enough to prevent stress hazards. Legislation is needed that explicitly covers stress as a health and safety hazard.

PSAC members can get compensation for stress-related injuries and illnesses in some parts of the country. Compensation boards are reluctant to open what they perceive to be the floodgates on stress claims by compensating stress-related illnesses and "accidents." But it's vital that PSAC members file for compensation in cases of toxic stress. Pressuring compensation boards by filing stress claims, as well as arguing the stress component of other claims (e.g., ergonomic injuries), can help workers reverse the current practice.

PSAC is committed to eliminating workplace stress by recognizing that it is a health and safety issue. Ending stress in PSAC workplaces requires the same diligence and dedication as other health and safety issues.