



Practical Advice for Workers on Tackling Work-related Stress and its Causes

Introduction

More than one in four workers are affected by work-related stress in the European Union. It is a big problem for everyone – employers, workers and our society – as it can cause health problems, increase absence and reduces business productivity and competitiveness. For this reason, the theme for the European Week for Safety and Health at Work 2002 is 'Working on Stress'.

Who is this fact sheet for?

Anyone can be affected by stress at work. This fact sheet gives information and suggestions for workers on tackling work-related stress and its causes. You may be for example a manager or supervisor, a professional or technician, or a production worker. Stress at work can have a considerable impact on your home life, so this fact sheet is also to help relatives and friends give support. Details of how to find other information to help tackle stress are in the final section of this fact sheet.

What is work-related stress?

Work-related stress is experienced when the demands of the work environment exceed the workers' ability to cope with (or control) them.

Stress isn't a disease, but if it is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill-health (such as depression, nervous breakdown and heart disease). Working under some *pressure* can improve performance and give satisfaction when challenging objectives are met. But when demand and pressure become too much, they lead to *stress*. Stress can be caused by problems at work or away from work, or both. This fact sheet is about work-related stress – stress that is caused by or is made worse by work.

What causes stress at work?

Stress can be caused by the way work is organised in your workplace and the job you do. Risk factors to watch out for are:

- **Atmosphere** (or 'culture') in your workplace and how stress is viewed;
- **Demands** on you, such as whether you have too much or too little work to do and are exposed to physical hazards such as dangerous chemicals or noise;
- **Control** – how much influence you have in how you do your job;
- **Relationships** in your workplace, including whether there is bullying;
- **Change** – how much information you get about changes and whether they seem well planned;
- **Role** – how clear you are on what your job is and whether there are any conflicts;
- **Support** from colleagues and managers; and
- **Training** to give you the skills to do your job.

What should my employer be doing to reduce my work-related stress?

Your employer has a legal duty to protect your health and safety at work. Labour inspectors help to make sure that employers do this.

Your employer should identify the causes of work-related stress, assess the risk and take preventive action before workers are made ill. You, or your representative, should be consulted about workplace changes that affect your health and safety, including those which might lead to stress at work.

You should cooperate by following policies and helping to identify problems and solutions.

Remember – work-related stress is a symptom of an organisational problem, not an individual weakness!

Is there a problem with work-related stress in my workplace?

Your answers to these questions will give you an idea if there is a problem:

Atmosphere

Do you feel that you have to work long hours to keep your job or get promoted?

Is suffering from stress seen as a weakness or is it taken seriously?

Are your work and suggestions valued?

Is there a constant feeling of pressure to do more, faster?

Demands

Have you got too much work to do in too little time?

Do you find your work too difficult?

Is your work satisfying?

Does your work make you bored?

Is your workplace too noisy, is the temperature comfortable, and what about ventilation and lighting?

Are you worried about hazards in your workplace, such as the use of chemicals?

Do you feel at risk of violence from customers, clients or members of public?

Control

Can you influence the way your job is done?

Are you involved in making decisions?

Relationships

Is your relationship with your boss OK?

How about your relationship with colleagues, or your staff if you are a manager?

Are you bullied by anyone in your workplace, by for example experiencing insults, offensive behaviour or that your bosses abuse their power?

Are you harassed because of your colour, sex, ethnic origin, disability etc?

Change

Are you given information about changes in your workplace?

Are you involved in making changes to your job?

Are you given support during changes?

Does it feel like there is too much change, or maybe not enough?

Role

Are you clear about what your job is and your responsibilities?

Do you have to do tasks which you think are not part of your job?
Do you ever have conflicting roles?

Support

Do you have the support of your boss and colleagues?
Are you praised when you do a good job?
Do you receive constructive comments or do you feel you only get criticism?

Training

Do you have the right skills to do your job?
Are you encouraged to develop your skills?

Tell-tale symptoms of work-related stress to watch out for:

- Changes in mood or behaviour, for example, problems with colleagues, feeling irritable and indecisive, problems with job performance;
- Feelings of not being able to cope or not being in control;
- Drinking more alcohol or smoking more, or even turning to illegal drugs; and
- Health complaints such as frequent headaches, not being able to sleep, heart problems and upset stomach.

How should I help to tackle work-related stress?

Your employer is responsible for preventing stress at work. However, for best effect, you should work together with your employer, manager and trade union or other employee representative. Some ideas include:

- Talk to your employer and trade union or other employee representative if there are problems; if there are difficulties in going directly to your employer, your representative could raise the issue for you;
- Help to identify problems, their possible solutions and how they could be implemented by getting involved with your employer's stress risk assessment; it should help to use the questions above to identify problems and then think of solutions for your workplace;
- Help to check that the solutions work;
- Discuss your situation with your organisation's occupational health service or employee assistance service, if available;
- If none of these options are effective, you could contact your labour inspectorate for further advice; and
- Go to see your doctor if you are worried about your health.

Ideas for working together to find solutions for stress at work:

Atmosphere

- ✓ Try putting forward constructive ideas for how things could be improved.

Demands

- ✓ Prioritise your work, and if there is too much, suggest what could be dropped, put on hold or passed on, without putting too many demands on others.
- ✓ Tell your manager or trade union or other employee representative if you are beginning to feel you can't cope, and make suggestions about how the situation could be improved.
- ✓ Identify new tasks you could do if you want more variety.
- ✓ Ask for information about hazards and precautions in your workplace if you are worried.
- ✓ Make sure you follow relevant policies, where they exist.

Control

- ✓ Ask for more responsibility in planning your own work.
- ✓ Ask to be involved in decision-making about your work area.

Relationships

- ✓ If you think you are being bullied, take action early by talking to your manager, employee representative, or other supportive colleague. If your manager is part of the problem, perhaps talk to your manager's boss. Be prepared to give evidence to back up your claim; this may include keeping a record of when you feel you have been bullied with details.
- ✓ Make sure your behaviour to others always sets a good example.

Change

- ✓ Ask for information about changes – how they will affect you, what the timetable is and the likely benefits and disadvantages.

Role

- ✓ Talk to your manager if the responsibilities in your job are not clear; may be ask for a new job description.

Support

- ✓ Ask for feedback on how you do your job. If you get criticism, ask for suggestions instead.

Training

- ✓ If you feel you need to develop your skills, suggest how you could do this.

Working on life-style improvements will also help; these will not solve the problem but should help in avoiding or reducing harm. These improvements include healthier eating, taking more exercise, keeping within guidelines for alcohol consumption, trying to reduce or stop smoking and keeping up with family and friends.

What should I do after a stress-related illness?

Again you should talk to your employer and trade union or other employee representative about why you became ill and how to prevent further problems. Try to do this before returning to work if you have been off work, or as soon as possible when you return.

How can I help my colleagues, family members or friends if they are suffering from stress at work?

Support is very helpful. Encourage your colleague, relative or friend to discuss problems with their manager or trade union or other employee representative, as a first step. If the manager is part of the problem, you may be able to represent your colleague or you could suggest another manager that could help to deal with the situation. It will always be helpful to identify possible solutions to the problem, and you could help with this.

Where else can I get information on work-related stress and its causes?

Further information is available at <http://osha.eu.int/ew2002/>. Other fact sheets available in this series on stress, bullying and violence are available here.

The Agency's website is <http://agency.osha.eu.int>