

# Stress

## - Work-related stress is a health and safety issue -

Stress at work is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon affecting all categories of workers, all workplaces and all countries. It can have harmful consequences for physical, mental and social well-being. A healthy workplace is not only one with minimal levels of injury and illness, but also one with “balanced and appropriate internal relations conducive to good health and well-being”.

### Definition

Stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”.  
**Work-related stress is a symptom of an organisational problem, not an individual weakness.**

### Symptoms of work-related stress

Work-related stress can manifest itself as physical and emotional health problems, and as altered ways of behaving at work and at home.

#### Physical symptoms

- increased susceptibility to colds and other infections
- muscular tension
- excessive tiredness
- digestive problems
- increased sweating
- skin rashes
- headaches
- backache and neckache
- difficulty sleeping
- raised heart rate
- lower sex drive
- blurred vision

#### Emotional and behavioural changes

- wanting to cry much of the time
- short temperedness at work and at home
- eating when you're not hungry
- smoking and drinking to get you through the day
- getting less work done
- loss of motivation and commitment
- feeling that you can't cope
- feeling that you've achieved nothing at the end of the day
- losing your appetite
- inability to plan, concentrate and control work
- poor relationships with colleagues or clients

It is common for customer service reps to receive additional remuneration. This could lead to the operators trying to increase their working speed in order to get more remuneration. Too much focus on remuneration may also affect the atmosphere among them and have a negative impact on solidarity at the company.

- **There has to be a balance between the reward (wages, promotion and benefits) and the effort that the work involves.**

### Self-help

It is impossible to escape pressure at work altogether. There are a number of ways in which you can reduce the negative impact of stress, most of which involve taking a good look at how you function within your work setting and beyond.

### Changes at work

*Make time to relax at work by stretching and breathing deeply.* This will help you to keep focused and prevent tired muscles. Simply ensuring you *get outside for a walk during your lunch break* can be helpful.

*Identify which situations stress you most. Assess the risk and potential causes of stress risk factors") that can be causes of work-related stress. These are:*

- the **demands** of your job
- the **support** you receive from managers and colleagues
- your **role in the organisation**
- your **control** over your work
- your **relationships** at work
- **change** and how it's managed

It can seem hard to confront the causes of workplace stress and to ask for help. But sometimes, support and advice is necessary to help you deal with difficulties at work, whether it is to clarify your job role and responsibilities, or to deal with workplace bullying. But it is important that you *talk to your trade union or health&safety rep*, to your supervisor or HR department.

In workplaces that provide a service outside normal working hours, it can be difficult to meet the demands of the service without compromising the work-life balance of individual members of staff. *Your trade union reps can help you create individual customized solutions that help employees deal with their personal sources of pressure*, while continuing to meet the demands of the service.

### **Lifestyle changes**

*Regular physical activity helps to reduce stress levels.* It provides valuable "time out" and can trigger brain chemicals that improve mood. A brisk daily walk is ideal, but the main thing is to choose an activity that you enjoy.

*Learning to relax* can improve sleep and relieve stress-related physical pains such as stomach pains and headaches. Get details of adult education classes where you can learn helpful techniques. Libraries loan books, tapes or computer-based packages.

*Avoid unhelpful responses to stress such as increased alcohol intake, smoking, and high caffeine intake as these all increase stress levels.* Regular meals and a balanced, high-fibre diet will provide sustained levels of energy.

At the end of the day, *reflect on what you've achieved rather than worrying about future work.* Don't be too hard on yourself and remember to take each day as it comes.

### **Action for Call Centre Workers**

- Raise issues of concern with your Trade Union or Safety Rep, supervisor or HR Department.
- Accept opportunities for counselling when recommended.
- Make sure you take regular breaks
- Learn relaxation techniques and take up a regular physical activity

### **Action for Trade Unions:**

In order to achieve justice for those already injured and protecting those at risk in the future, unions should

- Provide workers with specialist advice and awareness training on stress;
- Demand call centre employers to consult with Trade Union Safety Representatives on all proposed action relating to the prevention of workplace stress;
- Support workers who have been off sick with stress and advise them and their management on a planned return to work;
- Demand call centre employers to train and support managers in implementing stress risk assessments;

- Inform the workers, call centre employer and the health & safety committee of any changes and developments in the field of stress at work;
- Demand call centre employers to ensure that the workload is in line with workers' capabilities and resources;
- Refer workers to workplace counsellors or specialist agencies as required;
- Demand call centre employers to clearly define workers' roles & responsibilities and to design jobs that provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunities for workers to use their skills;
- Monitor and review the effectiveness of measures to reduce stress;
- Demand call centre employers to give workers opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs;
- Together with call centre employers develop a workplace policy which ensures that bullying and harassment is not tolerated;
- Demand call centre employers to establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job;
- Demand call centre employers to improve communications inside the company in order to reduce uncertainty about career development and future employment prospects.

### **The Role of Trade Union Safety Representatives:**

- Safety Representatives should be meaningfully consulted on any changes to work practices or work design that could precipitate stress;
- Safety Representatives should be meaningfully involved in the risk assessment process;
- Safety Representatives should conduct joint inspections of the workplace at least every three months to ensure that environmental stressors are properly controlled;
- Safety Representatives must be able to consult with members on the issue of stress including conducting any workplace surveys;
- Safety Representatives should be allowed access to collective and anonymous data from HR;
- Safety Representatives should be provided with paid time away from normal duties to attend any Trade Union training relating to workplace stress.

# How to Change the Workplace to Prevent Work-Related Stress

## A Checklist for Trade Unions

The below actions should be discussed and implemented in cooperation with the employer.

### Step 1 – Identify the Problem

- Hold group discussions with workers.
- Design an employee survey.
- Measure employee perceptions of job conditions, stress, health, and satisfaction.
- Collect objective data.
- Analyse data to identify problem locations and stressful job conditions.

### Step 2 – Design and Implement Interventions

- Target source of stress for change.
- Propose and prioritise intervention strategies to deal with the identified problems.
- Communicate planned interventions to workers.
- Implement interventions.

Before any intervention occurs, workers should be informed about actions that will be taken and when they will occur. A joint information meeting by both, trade union and employer, where the purpose of the intervention is being explained, might be useful.

### Step 3 – Evaluate the Interventions

- Conduct both short and long-term evaluations.
- Measure worker perceptions of job conditions, stress, health, and satisfaction.
- Include objective measures.
- Refine the intervention strategy and return to Step 1.

The job stress prevention process does not end with evaluation. Rather, job stress prevention should be seen as a continuous process that uses evaluation data to refine or redirect the intervention strategy.

### Advise regarding the design of the working environment and equipment

Design of the working environment and equipment is important for the productivity and quality of the computer-produced work. It is important that:

- Furniture and equipment can be adjusted to each individual.
- Customer Service Rep has the appropriate knowledge about how to adjust and use the equipment in an optimal way.

On average the Customer Service Reps spend 80 per cent of the working day seated. This may lead to fewer opportunities to get physical variation. Long periods of constrained sitting may lead to musculoskeletal disorders