



## HEALTH AND SAFETY **FACT SHEET**

# Stress

### 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 mind and body. Like violence and overwork, stress is a significant health and safety hazard directly related to how work is organized.

There are two forms of stress. Normal stress is characterized by:

- Stress comes (facing an immediate threat/demand).
- Stress goes (dealing with the stress).
- Stress is over (the body relaxes, no longer feeling stressed).

An example of normal stress is short-term anxiety because you have lost something important. Toxic stress is different, characterized by:

- Stress comes (facing a demand or threat that does not stop).
- Stress stays with you (you have no way of dealing with the stress).
- Stress builds up (you can never relax and the stress is not eliminated).

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

The Generalized Stress Response is the phrase used to describe a variety of physical reactions to stress: 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; and 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; weight gain or weight loss; greater susceptibility to injury; immune system depression; and greater vulnerability to illness and disease.

### What causes stress?

Stress is largely caused by poor work organization factors such as: lack of

control and conflicting work demands; lack of decision-making participation; lack of training and direction; unclear work responsibilities; privatization, outsourcing, downsizing, mergers, staff cutbacks, and restructuring; overwork and poor work shift schedules. Cutbacks, privatization, re-orgs, and downsizing have contributed to a heightened sense of job insecurity. All of these factors cause or compound workplace stress.

Control is central work organization factor linked to stress. Lack of control at work, 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 factors can create toxic workplace stress, causing increased heart disease and possibly death, depression, exhaustion, low self-esteem, and increased upper extremity musculoskeletal disorders.

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

### **What are the hazards?**

Stress affects the physical and psychological health of CUPE members. But it also spills out of the workplace, negatively affecting members' family lives. 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 outcomes (e.g., headaches and migraines, impaired digestion, ulcers and diabetes).
- Personal and family life conflict.
- Workers divided.
- Work-related musculoskeletal disorders.
- Burnout.
- Synergistic (combined) effects of stress and other diseases (i.e., stress can make worse other diseases and disorders).
- Critical incident stress.

### **Identify the problem**

A first step is to recognize that stress is a health and safety hazard in your workplace. If the negative health outcomes 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, in which case the union approves the survey and is involved in collecting and assessing the information generated. 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 members exercising their own control at work.

The following actions can help combat stress:

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

## **Strategies for change**

The strategies outlined below complement the actions already described. CUPE workplaces need to be reorganized to eliminate stress by:

- Giving workers real control (e.g., more autonomy, more participation in decision making and more opportunity for self-directed work).
- Workers should have the right to refuse overtime.
- Workloads must be decreased and sufficient staff levels must be set.
- Monotonous work should be eliminated.
- Physical work features should be redesigned to lower stress hazards (e.g., minimize noise, introduce natural lighting, and ensure proper ventilation is in place).
- Governments should increase public sector spending to counter staff shortages, overwork and other stressors.
- Employers should reduce sudden changes in the workplace (e.g., new

technologies, abrupt work shift arrangements).

- Training to identify stress hazards should be instituted, preferably union-provided training.

Workers need control for their jobs to be fulfilling. Work must be a meaningful part of our lives. Acted on, many of these recommendations will provide greater worker 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 be instrumental in tabling and pushing for the adoption of a workplace stress prevention policy. Stress can be addressed through collective bargaining, as agreements should always aim to improve workers' health and safety. Because stress is largely caused by how work is organized, collective agreements can be used to *reorganize* work to eliminate stress hazards.

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. CUPE 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 for stress-related illnesses and 'accidents'. But it's vital that CUPE members file for compensation in cases of toxic stress. Only by pressuring compensation boards by filing stress claims, as well as arguing the stress component of other claims (e.g., ergonomic injuries), is there any hope to reverse the current practice. CUPE is committed to eliminating workplace stress by recognizing it is a health and safety issue. Ending stress in CUPE workplaces requires the same diligence and dedication as other health and safety issues demand.

This fact sheet provides some information to address the hazard. More detailed information is presented in the CUPE health and safety guideline *Enough Workplace Stress: Organizing for Change*.

For more information contact:

CUPE National Health and Safety Branch  
1375 St-Laurent Boulevard  
OTTAWA, ON K1G 0Z7  
Tel: (613) 237-1590  
Fax: (613) 237-5508  
Email: [health\\_safety@cupe.ca](mailto:health_safety@cupe.ca)  
[www.cupe.ca](http://www.cupe.ca)

cope 491  
Updated November 2007  
K:\FACTSHEETS - 2007\Stress.doc