Unite

Guide to work-related
Stress

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Introduction

In the UK today a third of all new incidences of work-related ill health can be attributed to stress, each case of work-related stress and resulting ill health leads to an average of 30.2 working days lost. The HSE figures for 2006/2007 report that 13.8 million working days were lost due to work-related stress, depression and anxiety. In all of the TUC biennial surveys since 1996, by far the most common concern for safety reps is overwork or stress.

Stress can cause misery, both at work and at home for the individuals affected. But it can also affect the whole workplace. Low morale and productivity, increased levels of absenteeism, high staff turnover, lack of innovation and poor safety performance are a few of the 'workplace' symptoms that stress can give rise to.

Stress affects people in different ways. A level of pressure which one person might find stimulating may cause a serious problem to another. What is of concern are not so much the particular reactions a person may have to a cause of stress, but rather the extent of that reaction, and whether or not the person concerned can cope with it. As a result of the differences in individuals' reactions, stress is often seen as an individual problem, in spite of the fact that stress affects everyone to a greater, or lesser, extent.

Employers will often use the excuse that stress is an individual problem that is caused by factors outside of work, normal day-to-day pressures, domestic and family problems, difficulties with transport, health, noisy neighbours etc.

Work is still one of the main causes of stress and can intensify problems which result from stress caused by personal factors.

Unite safety reps have a major part to play in ensuring that the employer takes their responsibilities to tackle work-related stress seriously. Dealing with stress highlights the fact that health and safety is not divorced from the rest of a union's industrial activity. Unions and employers working together to invest in health and safety can result in a vast improvement in other aspects of industrial relations and a working environment in which stress is managed properly.

Definition

The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them'

A distinction is made between the level of pressure that is an acceptable challenge which speeds our reactions and sharpens our perceptions to produce good results in the workplace, and the destructive nature of stress where lives are dominated by sleepless nights, anxiety, dread, depression and physical ill health, reactions to demands and unacceptable pressures that an individual perceives they cannot cope with.

The Symptoms of stress

Symptoms of stress are evident from physical, mental or behavioural changes. Effects of work- related stress on the body can be divided into two categories.

Short term

Anxiety, boredom	Irritability, depression
Headaches, fatigue	Muscular tension, pain, difficulty sleeping
Indigestion, heartburn	Dry skin and rashes
Dry mouth, lump in throat	

Long term

Neurosis	Cough and asthma
Insomnia	Gastrointestinal disorders, ulcers
Hypertension and chest pains	Impotence in men and menstrual disorders in women

These lists are not definitive and because a symptom does not appear on them it does not mean that the particular illness is NOT caused by stress. On the other hand, many of the symptoms shown are indicative of problems other than stress. Some might be problems for which medical attention should be sought as soon as possible, others might be problems caused by the physical properties of the work environment, e.g. photocopier fumes etc.

Once the symptom(s) has made itself apparent, it can then be treated but this is not the end of the story. If the symptom only is treated and nothing is done about the underlying causes the problem will not go away, it will just be hidden from view, possibly to reappear in another form at a later date.

Causes and consequences of stress

Causes
In order to reduce stress at work it is necessary to find the causes of the problems. Listed below are some of the more common known causes of stress.

Poor work practices
Lack of control or influence over demands placed upon individuals, low pay, shift work, Long hours culture, job security, unsociable hours, lack of promotion opportunities, rigid supervision, lack of clear job description, performance related pay, inadequate time to complete tasks.

Lack of social support and poor management techniques
Bad relationships with supervisors/colleagues, harassment and discrimination, prolonged conflict between individuals, customer/ clients complaints, impersonal treatment of work, lack of communication and listening skills within organisation, no recognition or reward for good job performance, lean production, total quality management systems.

Poor working environment
Noise, heat, cold, poor lighting, poor ventilation, badly designed layout of workplace and equipment, unpleasant and hazardous working conditions, overcrowding.

Poor job design
Technology controlling pace of work, too much or too little work, repetitive work, boredom, lack of job satisfaction, working alone.

Consequences

While stress itself is not an illness, if an individual is exposed to it for any length of time, it can lead to mental and/or physical ill health, and may be recognised by one or any combination of different symptoms. There can often be an increase of unhealthy behaviours excessive drinking, heavy smoking and poor diet.

Workplace stress is a serious issue that affects business productivity and performance as well as the health and well being of the individual.

The HSE estimate that stress related sick leave cost industry £7.1 million every week, without taking into account the hidden cost of lost production, social and medical support. Overall the estimated cost to society is around £3.7 billion per year (based on1995/96 prices).

Even where problems outside of work may be the cause of stress, employers still need to ensure that the workplace does not make the situation worse. It is in the employer's interest to be sympathetic as the employee may be more vulnerable to workplace stress, and may have difficulty in carrying out their role.

If stress is successfully tackled in the workplace the organisation can enjoy a healthier workforce, lower absence due to sickness, improved performance and service, lower accident rates and better internal and external relationships.

Stress and the law

Trade Unions have been campaigning for specific legislation to make risk assessment for stress a legal duty on employers but to date that has not happened. However the HSE agrees with the TUC, and Unite that work-related stress should be treated as any other workplace hazard. It also emphasises that it is subject to risk assessment as required by the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999. To assist with this process, HSE has developed Management Standards to assist in carrying out this duty. (Covered in next chapter)

A number of laws and regulations may apply when dealing with the many causes and outcomes of work-related stress,

Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
Section 2 of the Act places a general duty upon all employers to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
Section 3 of the regulation places a duty on all employers to make (and record if they have more than 5 employees) a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to the health and safety of their employees, to which they are exposed at work. Employers must ensure that there are proper control measures in place to avoid these risks wherever possible. Where it is not possible to avoid risk, steps must be taken to reduce them so far, as is reasonably practicable.

Safety representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 (SRSCR 1977)
This set of regulations along with the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regs 1999 give safety representatives' strong legal rights.

All employers must consult any such safety reps to make and maintain arrangements so that employees can co-operate effectively to promote health and safety measures in the workplace and check the effectiveness of those measures.

Safety reps are entitled to;

- Investigate potential hazards and dangerous occurrences and examine the causes of accidents at the workplace.

- Carry out inspections as part of an active approach to identifying and preventing potential danger and harm in the workplace.

- Consultation with members (there are also rights to facilities, a private room to talk to members, internal and external mail and telephone systems)

- Consult with management in good time, well in advance of changes taking place.

- Request information about any changes planned which may affect the future health and safety of those represented.

- Information and knowledge over and above employees generally where it is necessary to allow them to play an informed part in health and safety issues in the workplace; anonymous stress surveys, consultants reports, sickness records.

The Working Time Regulations 1998 and The Working Time (Amendment) Regulations 2003
Long hours and shift work can be clearly linked to stress. The Working Time Regs draws attention to entitlement of:

- a limit of an average of 48 hours a week which a worker can be required to work (though workers can choose to work more if they want to)
- a limit of an average of eight hours work in 24 which night workers can be required to work
- a right for night workers to receive free health assessments
- a right to 11 hours rest a day
- a right to a day off each week
- a right to an in-work rest break if the working day is longer that six hours
- a right to 4 weeks paid leave per year

Sex Discrimination act 1975 with (amendment) Regulations2008
Race Relations Act 1976 with (Amendment) Regulations 2000 and 2003
Employment Equality (sexual orientation) Regulations 2003
Employment Equality (religion or Belief) Regulations 2003
Employments Equality (Age) Regulations 2006

Where there is a sexual, sexual orientation or racial element to any unacceptable be-haviour causing stress, the employer could be held vicariously liable for the actions of a harassing, bullying employee, even where they were not aware of the behaviours. Under the religion or belief and age legislation, discriminatory behaviour is illegal and employer liabilities can be tested in an Employment Tribunal.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

The Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in employment, and their access to goods, services, transport and education.

Dignity at Work

The Dignity at Work Partnership is a project set up by Amicus (now part of Unite), to raise awareness of bullying and harassment and the damaging effect they have on employees and organisational development.

An action pack has been produced to provide information, advice and solutions to dealing with workforce bullying and harassment, and other forms of unacceptable behaviour. It consists of case studies, templates, checklists and examples of good practice; providing you with some of the latest thinking on how to encourage a more positive approach to workplace relationships and to promoting dignity at work.

If you would like a copy of the 'Dignity at Work Action Pack' contact your Regional Office.

Tackling the Problem

The Health and Safety Executive Management Standards for Work-related stress

The Management Standards and accompanying guidance have been designed to assist employers in identifying causes of stress in the workplace and develop and implement solutions to minimise the effects on workers. Unite has welcomed this development as it gives real support to employers wishing to tackle stress at work. The standards also give health and safety enforcement officers a means of assessing whether an employer is failing to manage stress.

Unite wants the standards to be used to enforce the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999 when employers fail to manage stress at work despite the assistance and advice given in the standards by the HSE. Unite believes that, in the absence of specific legislation, the HSE's Stress Management Standards are the most effective way of dealing with stress. However it is important that unions are involved in the introduction of the standards at every stage. If employers simply try to introduce them without proper consultation they are unlikely to be effective.

The Standards aim to simplify the risk assessment process and at the same time provide a yardstick by which organisations can gauge their performance in tackling the key causes of stress.

In each of the Standards the 'what should be happening/states to be achieved' sections defines a desirable set of conditions for organisations to work towards.

The six HSE Management Standards are:
(taken from HSE Managing the causes of work-related stress)

Demands

Includes issues like workload, work patterns, and the environment.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work;
- people's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands;
- jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees; and
- employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

Control

How much say a person has in the way they do their work.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- where possible, employees have control over their pace of work;
- employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work;
- where possible employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work;
- the organisation encourages employees to develop their skills;
- employees have a say over when breaks can be taken;
- employees are consulted over their work patterns.

Support

Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation has policies and procedures to adequately support employees;
- systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff;
- systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues;
- employees know what support is available and how to and when to access it;
- employees know how to access the required resources to do their job; and
- employees receive regular and constructive feedback.

Relationships

Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, e.g. bullying at work; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation promotes behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness;
- employees share information relevant to their work;
- the organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour;
- systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour, and
- systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

Role

Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles.

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation ensures that, as far as possible the different requirements it places upon employees are compatible;
- the organisation provides information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities;
- the organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon employees are clear; and
- systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

Change

How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation

The Standard is that:

- employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/States to be achieved:

- the organisation provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes;
- the organisation ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals;
- employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs, If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs;
- employees are aware of timetables for changes; and
- employees have access to relevant support during changes.

The Practicalities –
What you and your employer need to do

The first step for an organisation implementing the standards is to set up a group to oversee the stress risk assessment process. This can be the existing safety committee or a group set up specifically for this purpose. There should be union involvement, but it is also important that both HR and Occupational Health specialists are on the group. The group will be responsible for introducing and implementing the standards.

It is important that the group has realistic timescales and that the organisation is committed to providing the resources necessary to implement the findings of the risk assessment. Tackling stress is not something that can be done overnight and it will involve both management and safety reps in a long process. That means that the Unite safety rep must ensure they are given sufficient time off to deal with the additional demands.

Management must also realise that simply using the standards to produce reports will achieve nothing. The process should lead to proposals for change that must be implemented. These can include some quite uncomfortable options in some cases, such as tackling long hour's culture or increasing staffing levels. That is why it is crucial to get commitment from the top. There is no point in starting the process if half way through management backs out because they are not prepared to fund the changes needed. That will just feed the frustration of your members.

Unite would also recommend that all members of the group receive full training on the standards right from the start, although at some stage all managers and safety reps will need training. A good communication strategy is crucial, as the workforce must feel both informed and involved at every stage.

Often the impetus to tackle work-related stress will come from the unions, but the first step is to gather information on the current state of the organisation. The employer is advised to carry out an audit or a survey to establish a picture of what is happening and to give an overall view of the workplace. An indicator tool / questionnaire tapping into the six Management Standard areas can be found on the HSE's website at www.hse.go.uk/stress. This will give an idea of priority areas that may need further discussion

Using the HSE questionnaire will allow organisations to measure how they are currently performing against the standards. Data from the questionnaire can be fed into an analysis tool which is also available on the HSE website. The analysis tool can be used to indicate possible hot spots and prioritise areas for action. It also sets interim targets for the organisation to aim towards. The questionnaire can be repeated following the implementation of practical controls and progress to achieving the standards can be measured.

Safety rep can also do their own surveys locally to find out the levels of stress and the causes. Unite and the TUC have produced a simple 'Stress MOT' that safety reps can use to find out if there is likely to be a major problem, which can be downloaded from www.unitetheunion.com

The Process – Risk Assessment

The next step is the Risk Assessment process. Risk assessment is designed to help prevent people being harmed at work, physically or psychologically. If work causes stress, then all the risks – not just the psychological risks – must be assessed. Sometimes this will take you out of straightforward health and safety issues. You may have to deal with employment rights and welfare issues such as job description or parental leave or care for a dependant.

The approach to risk assessment is the same for stress as for other risks. It needs to focus on the causes, not just the effects. But there are different methods that can be used. It is important to get the starting point right. The HSE recommends using the five steps to Risk Assessment that are used for other risks. The Stress Management Standards have been designed to follow the five steps to risk assessment process. Your employer is responsible for carrying this out, although they should consult you at each stage.

The five steps (along with some examples) are:
Step 1. Look for the hazards – what could cause harm and how?
The employer can use the survey results and can also carry out an inspection of the workplace to check for physical sources of stress. For example, under **Demands** they could check to ensure the proper design and installation of machinery to avoid muscular-skeletal problems or RSI. Check on noise levels and vibrations. Even noise levels that do not cause damage to hearing can have a negative effect on the heart and circulatory systems. They can look for toxic chemicals or biological hazards that can have an increased risk for stressed workers because of the body's reduced ability to fight off infection. Also they should check on environment issues such as temperature and ventilation and on lighting conditions. Working in poorly lit rooms without any natural light can be very demanding and sometimes painful on the eyes causing stress – including headaches etc. Provision and maintenance of toilets and staff rooms are an indication of managements' regard/respect for staff or staff's opinion of the workplace.

Step 2. Identify people at risk who could be harmed, and how?
Is anyone particularly vulnerable?
For example under **Support** the employer should have established what lines of supervision exists, but is there an issue of competency of those supervisors? Is there a need for training and if so what kind? This is a good issue to involve learning reps in. Remember also that people may be vulnerable because of what is happening in their life outside of the workplace. In these circumstances the organisation's attitude towards flexible working, carers leave or recognition of staff medical conditions can play a vital role.

Step 3. Evaluate the risks

What preventative measures are in place? – Preventative measures are summed up in the standards. For instance members have some **control** over their working life or their **support** includes appropriate training where necessary on a regular basis.

What else needs to be done? – Is the information flow sufficient and appropriate? For instance are employees involved, as well as informed of **Change** in the organisation? Does the organisation have access to personnel or occupational health advice? Many organisations, especially small businesses, may not need such advice in the short-term on a full time basis but as a safety rep you could discuss the need for such advice with management and the possible ways this could be provided, including ensuring a close working relationship with the HSE.

What are the priorities? – The survey should have given the employer an idea of where the gaps are in the organisations approach to the standards.

Step 4. Record the main findings (and implement them)

By now the organisation should have a story to tell which is packed with information. It is essential that this information is accurately recorded. This will be the basic reference point. The employer will be using it to inform others of the stress issues at the workplace and working with them to form possible solutions.

Union safety reps will be able to use the document, or indeed the set of documents, as a checklist against the activities of the organisation as they develop their stress management programme.

Having collected the information let members know the outcome of your investigation and report the outcomes to your health and safety committee.

Ensure that the implementation of the HSE Standards in your workplace is a regular item in the Health and Safety Committee agenda. Your findings will be an important tool in how management, in discussion with the committee, carries out their own risk assessment and ensures the HSE Standards are met.

The committee needs to establish a programme of work to implement the standards. If such a committee does not exist then discussion directly with the employer will be needed. If your employer is uncooperative then call the HSE. The implementation of the standards is a key HSE priority and they can help.

Step 5. Monitor and review the effectiveness of any control measures (revise them if necessary)

Have control measures been implemented properly?
Are they working effectively?
Are they still valid?
Has anything changed?

This is why keeping a record of your findings is important.

A risk assessment carried out by an organisation is a 'live' document and needs to be kept up to date. Workplaces physically change, the staff change and technology and ways of working change. The stress risk assessment needs to reflect and take account of those changes. Ask yourself if the employers approach to implementing the standards is delivering the intended outcome of preventing and controlling stress at work? Is it answering all the union's concerns you have identified through your survey and assessment?

Stress policy

A stress policy can be a useful mechanism to reduce and prevent occupational stress. It is essential that such policies are developed and monitored jointly by management and union safety reps.

The objectives of the policy should be to prevent stress by identifying the causes and eliminating them, to deal with problems as they arise, to promote openness and guarantee a 'blame free' culture, and rehabilitation of employees suffering from stress through confidential independent counselling.

The effective stress policy must
- recognise stress as an occupational health and safety issue
- set out who is responsible for preventative measures
- identify who to contact in the event of a problem arising
- set out the organisations work patterns and acceptable hours
- have commitment from the very top levels of management
- identify systems and procedures to deal with and monitor stress
- include commitment for the provision of suitable training for managers and workforce
- contain arrangements for supportive and confidential health monitoring
- be relevant and effective, it should be carefully monitored, reviewed and if necessary revised. The mechanism for doing this should involve all parties and be contained in the policy itself

HSE provides a useful model policy, available at **www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/pdfs/examplepolicy.pdf.**

Rehabilitation and support for stressed workers

Employers should offer support and care for anyone who is affected by work-related stress. Where there is unavoidable stress in the workplace, stress management courses and education can help people recognise the early signs of stress and develop skills to cope with and manage stress.

A return to work interview is helpful to determine whether an employee is able to resume their role in the workplace, or whether re-introduction is necessary and/or changes in some areas of their work. During this process, progress can be monitored with follow-up interviews. The outcome of any rehabilitation program is to get people affected by stress, back into the workplace to carryout their role confidently and continue to contribute to the organisation.

This may involve a complete change of job role, job rotation or a period of part time employment. It is important to note that as with stress each individual's response to rehabilitation may be different depending on attitudes, beliefs and experience.

Check list for Safety representatives

- Is stress a problem in your workplace

- Does the employer already have a stress management system in place, If not suggest that the organisation develop a strategy using the HSE management Standards in consultation with trade union representatives.

- If there is an existing system, review with the safety committee to make sure it is suitable for your workplace, does it adopt a risk assessment approach to dealing with stress.

- Ask the employer for regular updates on the implementation and outcomes of their stress management systems.

- Do you have a relevant and suitable policy created in consultation by management and union safety representatives? Is it monitored and reviewed on a regular basis?

- Talk to members about work related stress, what do they think are the main causes 'stressors' in the workplace, what ideas do they have which may help to solve the problem.

- Use your legal rights to take up members concerns with employers. (SRSCR 77)

- Make sure members know who the union safety representatives are and how to contact them if they have a concern or problem with stress.

- Raise member awareness of stress in the workplace, circulate helpful information, use health & safety notice board.

- Include workplace 'stressors in your next workplace inspection.

- If someone approaches you with a stress-related problem, it is important to remember to take time to talk with them, encourage them to talk through their problems. Listening to them without judgement can help to make them feel a great deal better about a stressful and emotional situation.

Other Sources of information

HSE work-related stress website
The HSE has a dedicated micro site drawing together information on work-related stress in one place at **www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm**
Here you can find more information on the management Standards access free leaflets and also priced publications including the new HSE revised guidance' Managing the causes of work-related stress – a step –by-step approach using the Management Standards' – (HSG218 ISBN 9780717662739) priced £10.95

The TUC publication 'Tackling Stress at Work' (£5) is available from TUC Publications at Congress House, Great Russell Street, London, WC1B 3LS – 020 7467 1294
www.tuc.org.uk/publications/index.cfm

Hazards magazine which has excellent news and useful resources
www.hazards.org
As a unite member you can subscribe to the magazine at a reduced cost for information contact Jawad Qasrawi tel: 0114 201 4265 sub@hazards.org

Greater Manchester Hazards
Provide information and advice for sufferers of occupational illness on any aspect of work
www.gmhazards.org
Tel: 0161 636 1557

The UK National Work-stress Network
An organisation that aims to educate and raise awareness of work-stress and to improve health & safety legislation through campaigning.
www.workstress.net

Labour Research Department
www.lrd.org.uk
Tel:020 7928 3649

Work Positive: Prioritising organisational stress is a resource pack developed by Health Scotland aimed at small organisations.
www.workpositive.co.uk