

stop

stress

at work

a guide for workers



ACTU

ACTU OHS Unit April 2003



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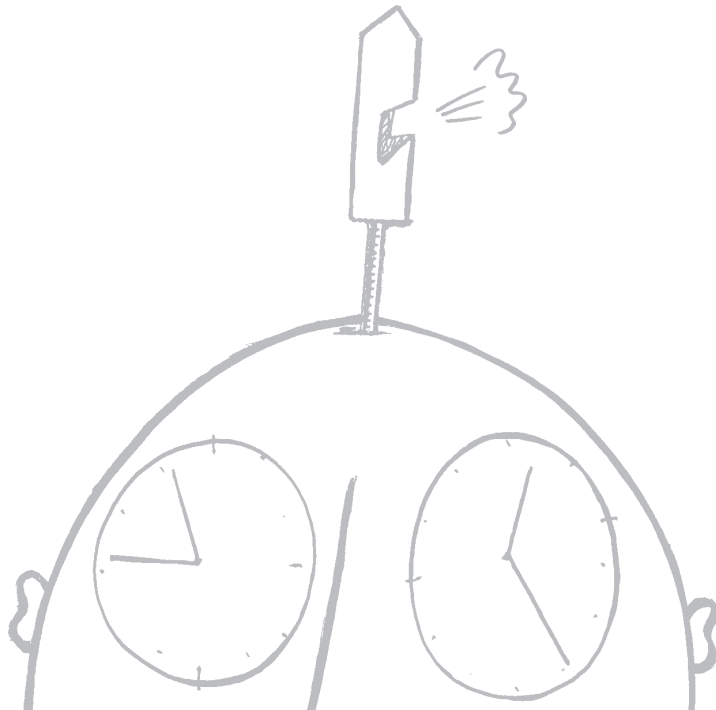
This guide aims to provide workers with information to help them and their workplace representatives deal with work-related stress.

It contains information about the day-to-day working conditions which are causing stress and provides ideas and strategies to help prevent or reduce it.

***'The answer to stress at work
is in the workplace'***

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"If they didn't keep such a close check on us, we wouldn't feel like we were being pressured all the time to perform. I find it easier to work to my ability without having someone watching over my shoulder waiting for me to make a mistake."

(female, 20-30, clerk).

"Stress is the natural outcome of lack of confidence in the future of our jobs, and what new jobs we may have to do to retain employment."

(female, 50+, library officer).

"A sense of being overwhelmed to perform to management expectations with fewer human resources."

(male, 30-40, administration officer).

"Excessive demands to do a 'complete' job, but you're stretched left/right, past capacity."

(female, 20-30, customer service representative).
From the ACTU 1997 survey on stress at work

"Workload is increasing day by day and workers get told at the last minute."

(male, 20-30, labourer).



Is this your workplace?

Work-related stress is caused by exposure to a range of working conditions, pressures or demands placed on workers. Common causes consistently identified by studies and surveys from around the world, as well as by the ACTU 1997 National Survey on Work-Related Stress, include:

- **Communication difficulties between workers and management** - no formal or effective communication or consultation structures or procedures; people feel unable to voice their concerns or problems with management, or feel insecure if they do.
- **Bullying, harassment or intimidation** - a growing problem; workers are much more likely to be bullied by employers, managers or supervisors than by co-workers.
- **Work overload** - unreasonable demands, impossible targets, inadequate time and resources to complete jobs satisfactorily, working too hard or too fast, and feelings of being overwhelmed or exhausted.
- **Job insecurity** - fear of redundancy, lack of permanency, short-term or casual contracts, few career opportunities, little recognition or reward for a job well done, particularly where the pay is low.
- **Too much change** - restructuring of the workplace and the way work is organised, made worse by declining services provided to clients, customers, patients and the public.
- **Inadequate staff** - when staff leave they are not replaced and those left behind are expected to pick up the workload, resulting in a lack of rest and recuperation breaks throughout the day and difficulties in taking sick leave or annual and other recreational leave.
- **Inadequate resources** - or equipment that is continually breaking down because it is poorly maintained or overdue for replacement.
- **Unresolved health and safety issues** - for example, exposure to chemicals, noise, extremes of temperature, overcrowding, poor facilities, manual handling hazards, working alone.
- **Excessive performance monitoring and surveillance** - directly by management or electronically.
- **Poor work organisation** - lack of clear job descriptions, conflicting demands, too much or too little work, boring or repetitive work, no job satisfaction.
- **Insufficient training** - loss of experienced staff, increased use of casuals, new technology and rapid change mean many workers are doing work which they do not feel adequately trained to handle.
- **Dangerous hours** - expectations to work longer hours or more overtime, to work through breaks, to take work home; shift rosters that are unpredictable or make it difficult to balance work and family life.
- **Difficulties dealing with clients/general public** - in occupations which involve contact with the public, abuse and threats of violence from clients and customers as a result of poor management and communication, declining standards of service or reductions in benefits provided by governments.
- **Lack of control over how work is done** - unnecessary levels of control and surveillance, lots of responsibility but little authority or decision making, little or no say in how work is done.

The more of these conditions that we have in our workplaces, the higher the risk that people will feel stressed.

What is stress?

Stress is a natural reaction to excessive pressure. It's the name we give to the physical or emotional reactions that we experience when we feel unable to cope with the pressures or demands upon us. It isn't a disease, but if stress is excessive and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill health.

The European Union defines work-related stress as 'caused by a poor match between us and our work, by conflicts between our roles at work and outside it, and by not having a reasonable degree of control over our own work and our own life. Stress at work can be caused by a multitude of stressors. Some common ones include:

- work overload and underload
- inadequate time to complete our job to our own and others' satisfaction
- lack of a clear job description, or chain of command
- no recognition, or reward, for good job performance
- no opportunity to voice complaints
- too many responsibilities, but little authority or decision making capacity
- uncooperative or unsupportive superiors, co-workers, or subordinates
- no control, or pride, over the finished product of your work
- job insecurity, no permanence of position
- exposure to prejudice regarding age, gender, race, ethnicity, or religion
- exposure to violence, threats, or bullying
- unpleasant or hazardous physical work conditions
- no opportunity to utilise personal talents or abilities effectively
- chances of a small error or momentary lapse of attention having serious or even disastrous consequences
- any combination of the above.'

"...stress isn't a disease, but it can lead to mental and physical ill health."

Can stress be good for us?

Some people claim that stress can motivate us and improve job performance. While it is desirable to have jobs and workplaces which are interesting, stimulating or challenging, where there is excessive and negative stress there will be health and safety effects which are not good for anyone.

Technically, not all stress is negative, but in both ordinary and clinical usage the term 'stress' is used to mean 'distress'. Therefore, in this guide, 'stress' means negative stress as it is commonly understood. Terms such as 'good stress' and 'bad stress' are not helpful and can lead to blaming the victim for feeling stressed by causes beyond their control.

What is burnout?

Ongoing exposure to stressful working conditions can result in burnout. This is an extreme stress response – a state of physical and mental exhaustion brought about by unrelieved stress, generally over an extended period.

Symptoms include:

- total physical or mental exhaustion
- extreme negative feelings and deteriorating self-image
- feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- depression and anxiety.

Burnout typically results in long periods of debilitation for sufferers, severely reducing their capacity to participate in daily life.

Post-traumatic stress disorder

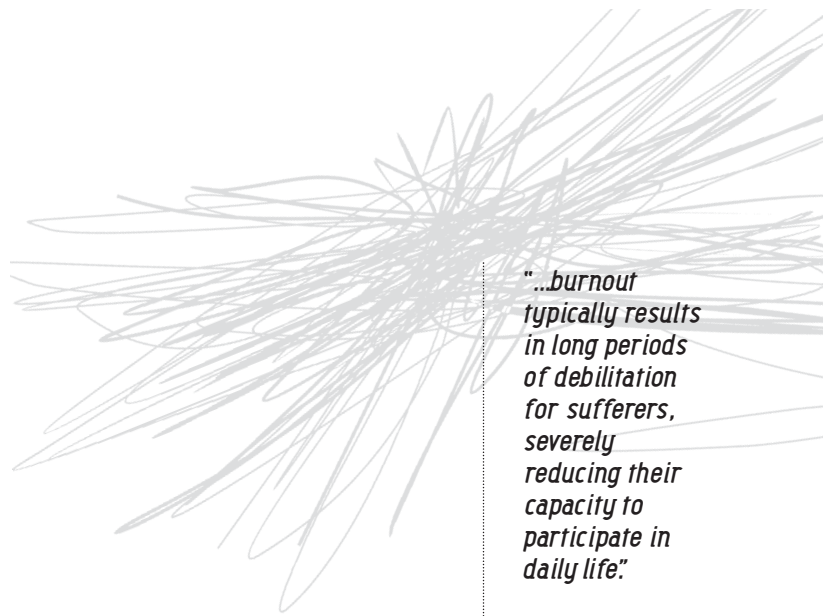
In some jobs where people are exposed to situations which involve the suffering of others, such as natural disasters, road accidents or assaults – all of which may involve severe traumatic injuries or deaths – they may experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This can also result from a single traumatic incident, such as abuse or assault by a client, customer or patient, or from bullying by an employer, manager, supervisor or fellow worker.

Employers are responsible for ensuring that appropriate counselling and other services are available in jobs where the risk of PTSD is high.

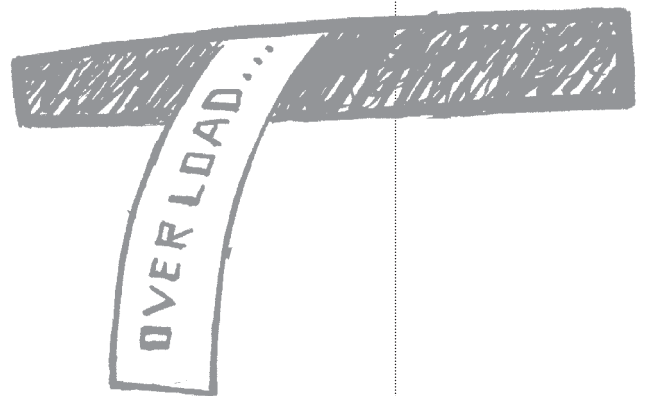
PTSD is a very severe emotional reaction to traumatic events and is characterised by re-experiencing the trauma (through dreams or waking thoughts) and by persistent avoidance of things associated with the trauma or emotional responses to associated things.

Sufferers from PTSD require professional counselling and care.

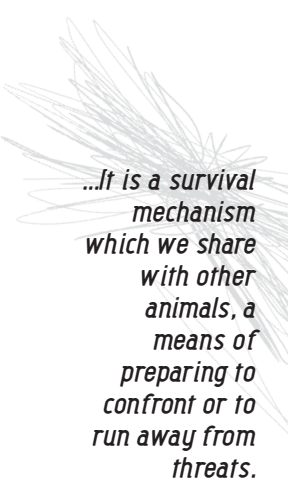
The measures described in this guide are **not** intended to deal with PTSD.



"...burnout typically results in long periods of debilitation for sufferers, severely reducing their capacity to participate in daily life."



Why stress is a health & safety issue



...It is a survival mechanism which we share with other animals, a means of preparing to confront or to run away from threats.

Work-related stress is a major health and safety issue. While some jobs, such as hospital and emergency services, air traffic control, social work and teaching, are more often associated with stress, there are few working environments which are immune from it. The need to prevent work-related stress must be acknowledged and addressed in all jobs and industries.

Health and safety problems arise when we are continually exposed to stressors at work and feel that we cannot escape or avoid them. Human beings react to the external world through complex physical, biochemical and psychological systems which interact with and affect each other. What happens to the body affects how we feel and think, and our mental state can directly affect the way our body functions.

What happens in the body when we feel stressed?

When faced with external physical or mental demands or threats – or stressors – the human body automatically undergoes a series of physical and biochemical responses. This is sometimes called the 'fight or flight' response. It is a survival mechanism which we share with other animals, a means of preparing to confront or to run away from threats.

Adrenaline and other hormones, cholesterol and fatty acids are released into the bloodstream, the heart beats faster and the nervous system 'revs up'. We may perspire more, the muscles tense involuntarily and we breathe faster and more shallowly.

This stress response prepares the body for a short burst of physical activity, such as running. The body then quickly returns to a 'non-stressed' state. The stress response is not meant to be prolonged.

Chronic or prolonged stress results in the physical and biochemical changes being sustained over long periods. This affects our health, and can lead to an increase of cholesterol and fats in the arteries, a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

This kind of chronic stress is typical in workplaces where there are overwhelming demands, little control over the situation and no relief in sight.

How does stress affect mental health?

According to the World Federation for Mental Health, the 'darker side of the global economy' has resulted in a crisis in mental health. After heart disease, depression is set to become the world's second most serious public and occupational health issue. Both can be linked to work-related stress.

When we find ourselves in stressful situations and can neither overcome them nor run away, a common reaction is to suppress our feelings and 'soldier on'. However, internalising stress in this way can produce not only the physical and biochemical effects described above, but also psychological effects.

The psychological effects of prolonged stress are very real. We may lose concentration, confidence and motivation, and feel frustrated, anxious or angry. Chronic stress can cause anxiety, a sense of helplessness or depression. In extreme cases, work-related stress could lead to suicide.

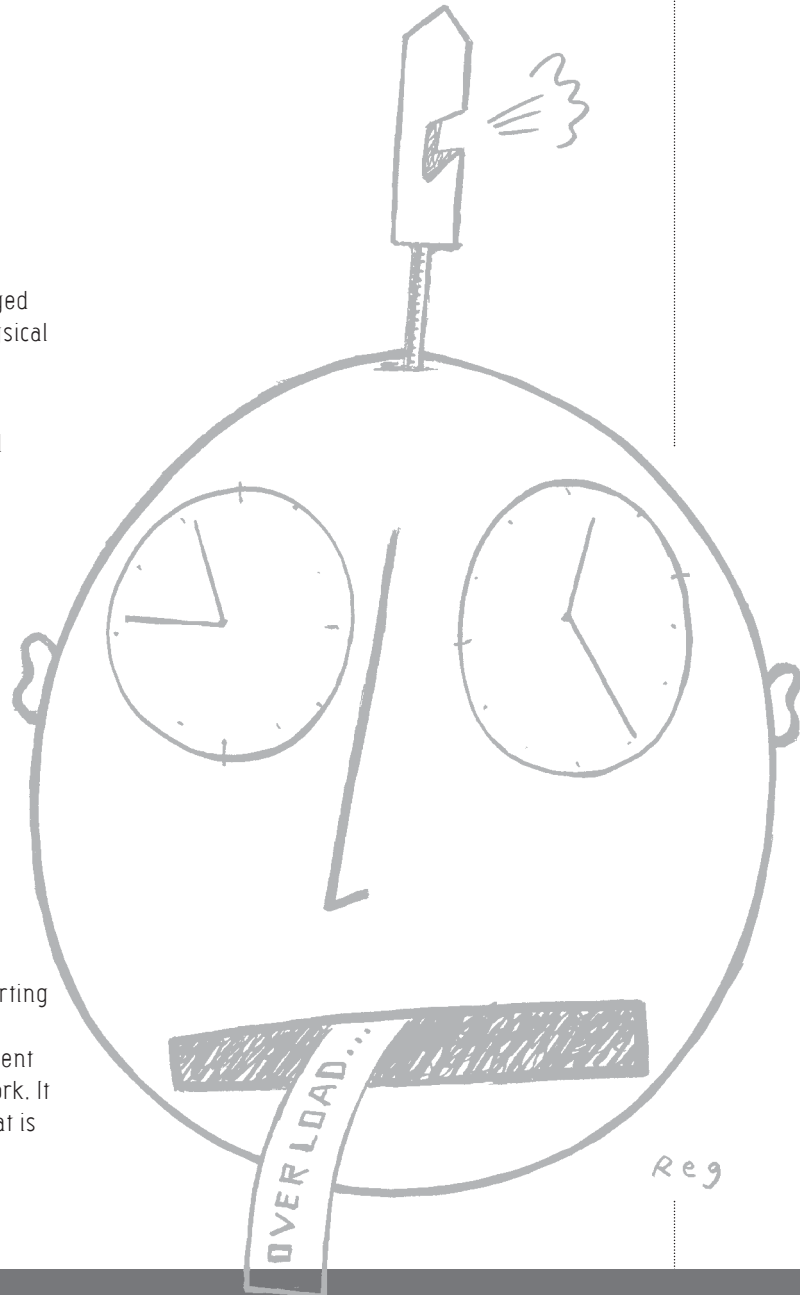
... those who suffer most from the ill health effects of stress are those with the least control over the way their work is done.

How stress can make us feel

When we are exposed to chronic and prolonged work-related stress, we may experience physical and psychological symptoms, such as:

- headaches
- backaches and other muscular aches and pains
- cramps in the neck, shoulders or arms
- poor memory, difficulty in concentrating
- feeling frustrated, irritable or angry
- feeling weepy or tearful
- loss of energy and motivation
- feeling anxious, helpless or afraid
- apathy and hopelessness
- changes in appetite and weight
- sleep difficulties
- continual tiredness, even exhaustion
- generally feeling worn out or run down.

These symptoms are not signs of personal weakness. People all over Australia are reporting job insecurity, understaffing, increasing workloads, longer hours and poor management practices as the main causes of stress at work. It is continually having to do more with less that is the problem.



...people exposed to chronic stress are three to five times more likely to catch a cold.

How stress can make us sick

Many people think that stress mostly affects those in positions of responsibility, such as managers and senior executives. It is true that these positions can be stressful, but those who suffer most from the ill health effects of stress are those with the least control over the way their work is done.

Having little control has been strongly related to increased risks of lower back pain and cardiovascular disease. Inability to change or get away from stressful situations is a strong predictor of developing heart problems.

The Whitehall Study which tracked the health of over 10,000 British civil servants for fifteen years confirmed that our health is related to our position in society. It found that health follows a 'social gradient'.

Senior executives suffer fewer health effects than middle management, who in turn suffer fewer than clerical workers. Ill health increased with every step down the pay/social structure. This is independent of other disease risk factors, such as smoking.

Chronic stress can cause or worsen a range of ill health problems which severely affect quality of life. These include:

- asthma
- psoriasis
- peptic ulcers
- digestive disorders and irritable bowel syndrome
- sexual problems
- depression
- alcohol and drug use.

Over the long term, prolonged exposure to stress has been linked to serious illnesses, including:

- diabetes
- heart disease
- suppression of the immune system cells involved in fighting cancer.

Work-related stress causes significant harm to the immune system. A 1998 study (quoted in the Hospital Employees Union guide) showed that people exposed to chronic stress are three to five times more likely to catch a cold. It also found that those who faced one major stressful event in a year were not especially vulnerable to colds. It is chronic stress that is more harmful.

How stress affects safety at work

Work-related stress doesn't only hurt our health, it also makes us more at risk of injury.

Where stress levels are high, injuries are also high. There are two inter-related reasons:

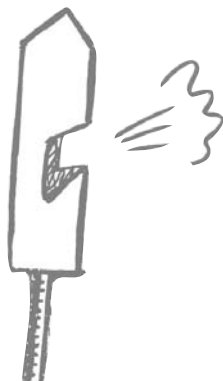
- working conditions that cause stress can also cause injury
- when we are overworked, under pressure, unsupported or even bullied, we are more vulnerable to injury.

Stressed workers get hurt more often, especially when:

- working in dangerous situations, such as construction sites
- handling or using plant and equipment
- lifting, moving or carrying heavy objects or people
- maintaining static or awkward postures
- carrying out boring or repetitive tasks, such as process work and using computers
- having to concentrate or maintain constant vigilance.

An International Labour Organisation study found that in all the factors related to the causes of accidents, the common denominator was a high level of stress at the time the accident occurred.

Research also shows that when workers are afraid of losing their jobs, they have more accidents, strain injuries and sick leave.



How stress affects relations with fellow workers

Stress can show itself in frustration or anger, so the risk of conflict between workers will be higher in stressed workplaces. Often workers are deliberately forced to compete with each other through management techniques such as targets, electronic surveillance and performance monitoring. Rather than pulling together, they may feel isolated, resentful and powerless, which obviously leads to low workplace morale.

It's not your fault!

Most people react to the same kinds of stress in similar or identical ways. Being affected by work-related stress is not a sign of personal weakness.

It is also common for management to blame workers for being stressed or to talk about the need to have better 'coping' skills. We are often told that we are stressed because we don't know how to relax or that we don't have healthy lifestyles.

Often, little or nothing is done to remove the real causes of work-related stress or to put the responsibility for safe and healthy workplaces where it belongs – with employers and management.

How stress impacts on personal, community and social life

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing, not just the absence of injury or disease. Wellbeing includes self-esteem, job satisfaction and a sense of control over our lives. It also means being able to participate in the community, pursue personal and collective dreams and enjoy the full benefits of society.

In 1998, the WHO released a report called *The Solid Facts: The Social Determinants of Health* which names work-related stress and stress in life generally as two of the ten key determinants of poor health. It concludes that work-related stress increases the risk of disease. This risk is independent of individual psychological characteristics and is more related to the environments we work in.

Our lives outside work can be greatly influenced by work-related stress. Feelings of irritability, frustration and anger can interfere with our personal and social lives. We may feel that we don't have enough time for personal relationships and activities. Continual tiredness and a reduced interest in sex can be an additional source of strain.

The more stress we are exposed to at work, the greater the effect on our lives outside work. Work demands can make it hard to balance work and family. Working parents face additional burdens such as inadequate income, exhaustion and difficulties with shift-work rosters and organising childcare.

Work-related stress can affect our participation in social, community and cultural events. These are not optional or luxury activities. We all have the right to enough time, energy and enthusiasm after work to enjoy our families, friends, hobbies and other interests.

Stress from causes external to work can also affect the workplace. Where employers have programs in place to assist with such issues or family-friendly policies and practices, the effects can be minimised.

Why is it happening?

"It's quite simple:

1. Increase staffing to adequate levels

2. Share workload and employment equitably

3. Break the vicious cycle of escalating demands for both quantity and quality of output while cutting funding

4. Refute the assumption that we have no family commitments and need for recreation."

(male, 40-50, academic).

"Because there are no promotion opportunities, allow people to do the task they are good at and can cope with. Instead, because of understaffing, they are enforcing 'multi-skilling' which is only 'multi-tasking' and some feel under stress to out-perform their capabilities."

(male, 40-50, customer service operator). From the ACTU 1997 survey on stress at work

Increased stress at work is the result of major changes in the industrial relations environment over the last 20 years.

These can be summarised as:

- changes in work time
- changes in job security
- changes in task demands
- changes in union presence and management sophistication.

These changes mean:

- full-time workers are working longer hours, while there is also a growth in part-time, casual and other non-standard hours
- working hours and other conditions are no longer set as community standards, but have to be 'bargained for' at the workplace level
- this bargaining has not always led to improvements for workers; in many cases, basic welfare conditions have been traded off in the pursuit of 'productivity'
- where enterprise bargaining has led to better working conditions, these have largely been confined to the well organised (unionised) workplaces, while conditions and protections for other workers may have stagnated or fallen behind
- forced redundancies and increasing staff turnover are common.

Accompanying these changes is a trend to increase responsibility down the line, while at the same time stripping or severely reducing the staff and resources provided to cope with it. This growing mismatch between the demands placed upon workers and their capacity to meet them is giving rise to increasing work-related stress.

Management can play a significant role in either causing work-related stress - through uncaring, authoritarian practices, intimidation and bullying - or in preventing it through good communication and fair and reasonable organisation of rosters and workloads.

Surveys, both here and overseas, show that bullying is a major cause of work-related stress. Hundreds of callers to the ACTU bullying helpline have reported pressure arising from impossible tasks, having to stay back to finish work or additional tasks, and demands to perform tasks without adequate training. Some are forced to accept individual contracts or are threatened with 'the sack'.

Others report intimidating behaviour - shouting, ordering, belittling, abusive language, nasty or hurtful teasing and jokes, and oppressive and unhappy workplaces. Some have to endure physically threatening behaviour, interference with personal belongings or work equipment, and even assault.

Most report that this bullying behaviour is perpetrated by managers or supervisors. Consequently, people are afraid to speak up about these behaviours, or health and safety.

Employers and governments who are pushing for even further deregulation of the economy and of industrial relations don't want to acknowledge the negative effects of these policies, including the rise in work-related stress. However, it is employers and governments who have the primary responsibility for ensuring that workplaces are healthy and safe.

In the end, the health and social impacts of work-related stress are paid for by society through hospital and medical costs and increased social problems.

The role of employers, governments and workers

Employers and management

Unfortunately, many employers assume little responsibility for the protection of their workers' health, safety and wellbeing. Some do not even know that they have this duty. This lack of attention by employers, and the resulting exposures of workers to a range of health and safety hazards, means that work-related accidents and ill health are common in all parts of the world.

Under all health and safety laws in Australia, employers have a legal duty to provide a healthy and safe workplace and safe systems of work. This includes a working environment where the risk of stress is eliminated or minimised.

Employers have such an obligation whether workers are full-time, part-time or casual, and not only to direct employees, but also to employees of labour-hire companies and to contractors and their employees.

The details of health and safety laws vary, but there are certain basic requirements which employers must fulfil. These include:

- consultation with workers and elected representatives on any intended changes to working conditions or practices which may affect health and safety
- appropriate and timely action to eliminate or control health and safety hazards
- provision of appropriate information, training, instruction and supervision
- monitoring of working conditions and workers' health
- provision of appropriate welfare facilities
- maintaining information and records about working conditions and any dangerous occurrences.

Many employers fail to genuinely involve workers in decision making, despite the evidence that this results in fewer health and safety problems and better working environments.

Unfortunately, managers often claim they are consulting when really they are just telling workers about decisions they have already made. Watch out if:

- a few token staff are consulted, but there are no formal mechanisms for everyone to have some input or to give ongoing feedback
- workers are given more responsibility, but little discretion or control over the work.

Better management practices and more communication and consultation are a key part of the solution to work-related stress. Management must also ensure that impossible demands are not placed on workers and that they receive appropriate support, training and resources.

Employers largely control where we work, when we work and how we work. While they have the power to determine those things, they also have the duty to ensure that the places where we work are healthy and safe. When it isn't safe, or when people are made sick, it's the employer's fault. It is that simple."

AMWU Health & Safety Booklet, 2000

"Management need to be reminded of their accountability. They have become arrogant, inaccessible and dishonest"

(female, 30-40, community nurse).

"Where a manager asks 'Would I be happy/satisfied if this was done to me?' and means it! Management should adopt the ethic of 'Is it right, is it true, will it do harm?'"

(male, 40-50, public servant)

"Less secretive management - very important. Management should involve workers in changes re decision making"

(female, 30-40, customer service representative).

From the ACTU 1997 survey on stress at work

Governments

Governments have a clear responsibility to ensure that people are not killed, maimed or made sick by their work. They must be actively involved in preventing work-related injury and disease.

Changes to work organisation, the design of jobs, the speed of work, increased working time, insecure contracts, inadequate wages and lack of training are harming workers' health and wellbeing. Unions and workers are campaigning to get government and employer action on the rising incidence of these work hazards, including stress-related or psycho-social hazards.

Governments must:

- set appropriate health and safety standards
- enact legislation and regulations and ensure they are enforced
- conduct research into current and emerging health and safety problems, to discover their nature and extent and to find solutions
- ensure that the whole community knows about health and safety issues and their solutions, and their rights and responsibilities with regard to health and safety at work.

It is not good enough for governments to rely on the duty of care alone. Codes of practice or approved codes of conduct which specifically deal with work-related stress are needed. These should focus on the acknowledged causes of stress and include concrete measures for employers to use to prevent it.

Governments are hiding their continuing inaction behind the need for more 'scientific' research. We don't need any more research to show that there is a problem with work-related stress in Australia.

Workers are saying that there is a problem. Many researchers have made and continue to make links between these hazards and adverse health outcomes. Governments now need to shoulder their responsibility and do something about it.

Government health and safety inspectors must be better trained to recognise the signs and symptoms of stress so that they can take appropriate action, including supporting and assisting stressed workers.

Where employers are responsible for stress-related injuries and illness, they should be prosecuted as they are for any other injury caused by work.

Workers

To the extent that they have control, workers should not put themselves or others at risk and must cooperate with policies and procedures developed to protect health and safety in the workplace.

However, too often workers have little control. They are unable to fully participate in developing health and safety policies, and unable to refuse to undertake work which is a risk to their health and safety, due to threats of discrimination, harassment or job loss.

Workers frequently find it hard to comply with safe work practices, due to lack of staff, onerous workloads or poor equipment and maintenance. This conflict between getting the job done or complying with health and safety policies and requirements when it is impossible to do both adds to stress.

Organising to stop stress at work

Governments and employers are responsible for ensuring that people's health and safety are not put at risk by their work. However, history shows that little will be done without pressure from workers and unions at the workplace, industry and government levels.

Improvements to working conditions have been led by ordinary people speaking up in their workplaces and in the wider community. Good health and safety is more likely where workers and unions are fully involved in identifying problems and developing solutions. This applies to the prevention of stress, as to any other occupational health and safety issue.

We need to:

- make the prevention of work-related stress a central issue for workers, employers and occupational health and safety authorities
- organise to prevent stressful working conditions
- stop workplace bullying and harassment
- improve health and safety legislation to reduce work-related stress
- use awards and collective agreements to ensure that working conditions do not lead to or increase work-related stress
- reject 'productivity increases' which lead to unreasonable demands and workloads.

Getting started

Work-related injury and ill health arise from the hazards at work. These can include the organisation of work, the design of work processes, and the materials, substances, machinery and equipment used.

The causes of work-related stress should be treated in the same way as other health and safety hazards. The recognised process for addressing them is called risk management. This involves:

- identifying the hazards
- assessing the risks posed by the hazards
- eliminating or controlling the hazards.

Identify the hazards

Often, the first step towards solving stress problems is simply to talk about them. Are other people at work experiencing any of the symptoms associated with stress? Do they feel that the workplace is a stressful environment?

You can use a **checklist** like the one in **Appendix 1** to start the ball rolling. Collect and distribute information such as posters, stickers, leaflets or other material about work-related stress. Sometimes just leaving information in places where people can see and read it can spark discussion.

You can also:

- carry out a survey of workers, as in **Appendix 2**
- look at the table in **Appendix 3** for signs and symptoms which could be associated with stress at work
- use techniques, such as 'body mapping', so that workers themselves can identify what they think are the causes, effects and solutions to stress in their workplace. Contact your state Trades and Labour Council for more information.
- If you have access to the internet, go to www.ohsrep.org.au/resources and click on 'body mapping', or go to www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/ses/index.htm and click on 'barefoot research'.

These techniques are not meant to be 'scientific'. However, the information collected can help to identify the hazards, strengthen a collective approach to the issues by workers, and assist in developing possible solutions.

The most effective means of improving health and safety is to ensure that workers can:

- determine what problems exist
- set their own priorities
- collectively pressure for improvements.

Organise meetings

It is useful to hold meetings of workers to discuss the causes, effects and possible solutions to stress in your workplace.

Start with your health and safety representative or committee, or your shop steward if you have one. If there is no workplace representative or committee, this is a good time to elect them.

There is no need to hold these meetings in the workplace. In fact, if conditions there are stressful, it may be much more productive to meet elsewhere.

At the meetings, people should have the opportunity to express their feelings, but without causing conflict between workers. Use the checklist or survey results, workplace or 'body maps' to help discussion and identify the hazards.

Document the issues

Many types of records can be useful:

- workers may like to keep individual health and safety diaries
- check the first aid and sick leave records (if available) to see if there are high levels of absenteeism or injuries and whether these have changed over time
- keep a record of events and findings for the whole work area, including any approaches made to the employer or management.

Keeping these records helps to:

- identify causes and possible solutions
- ensure that details and events are not forgotten or misrepresented later
- ensure that employers won't be able to argue that they were not aware of work-related stress.

Talking, recording and carrying out surveys are all excellent ways of supporting each other.

Assess the risks

Assessing the risks means deciding which hazards in the workplace are the most serious or urgent to fix, that is, which are likely to cause the most health and safety problems.

Factors to consider in assessing the risks posed by the hazards include:

- type of work and workload
- effects on health, safety and life outside work
- personal needs and work experience
- special circumstances on the site.

Develop solutions

It is a basic health and safety principle that, as far as practicable, work should be adapted to the worker. Unfortunately, many employers appear to believe that things should be the other way round.

Make a list of the possible solutions to stress in your workplace. They will probably mirror the causes already identified. Put them in order of importance according to level of severity or where improvements are most immediately possible.

Develop practical proposals which will help to eliminate or reduce stress, not just vague ideas. It's hard to argue against well thought out, fair and reasonable solutions.

Put your proposals to the employer or management in writing. They will provide a starting point for discussion between workers, workplace representatives and management. Sometimes negotiations may result in outcomes which will be different from your original proposals.

Always include a time line for action and for progress reports back to workers. This can be done at health and safety meetings or other union meetings.

You can:

- negotiate for more staff
- refuse excessive workloads and overtime, especially if unpaid
- take your rest and meal breaks instead of working through
- ensure that workers are consulted about change
- insist on appropriate and adequate training
- reduce exposure to noise, chemicals and other hazards.

Don't be timid - problems are never solved without taking the first steps.

Insist that procedures and processes are in place for effective consultation.

Consultation

Employers are required to consult with workers or their representatives about health and safety. This includes shift workers, casuals and contract workers.

Those who include workers in planning and analysis of working conditions have found that problems are solved faster and better, often improving working relationships and productivity.

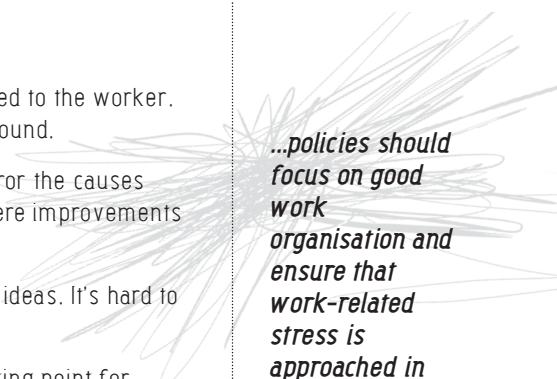
Stress prevention policies

If workers are reporting work-related stress, the employers or management need to provide information, training and advice to workers and supervisors, and stress prevention policies should be developed jointly with workers and their representatives.

Policies should:

- recognise that stress arises from the organisation of work
- acknowledge that stress is a health and safety issue which is preventable and fixable
- identify the key factors which contribute to work-related stress
- outline simple and clear procedures for workers to raise their concerns, without fear of intimidation or discrimination
- include processes for ongoing review and evaluation.

Policies should focus on good work organisation and ensure



...policies should focus on good work organisation and ensure that work-related stress is approached in the same way as other health and safety hazards

that work-related stress is approached in the same way as other health and safety hazards. Where possible, the hazards should be eliminated. If this cannot be done, they should be minimised. That means better ways of organising work need to be found that eliminate or reduce the causes of work-related stress.

Some basic requirements include:

- consultative management styles, so that workers participate in deciding the expectations of the job and their own work situation, including any changes or restructuring
- workloads that are distributed fairly with realistic expectations
- hours of work including rosters, rest breaks and overtime that allow adequate, regular rest and recuperation from the physical and mental demands of work
- access to adequate leave provisions, since time off is necessary for recovery from the demands of work
- pay arrangements that do not encourage excessive overtime
- avoidance of performance or target-based pay systems
- avoidance of unpaid overtime, and proper compensation with time off in lieu
- adequate family and sick leave so that workers are not using other forms of leave for these purposes
- a safe and comfortable work environment, with adequate welfare facilities for workers, customers and clients.

Monitoring and evaluation

Where stress or other health and safety problems are identified, there should be monitoring and analysis of the working environment. This should include accident/injury rates, near misses, absenteeism, staff turnover, reasons for resignation, error rates or other productivity measures.

Evaluation could include repeating earlier surveys to ascertain whether any improvements that have been introduced are actually working.

Health and safety laws

Health and safety laws vary in each state and territory. Check the legal position with your union or Trades and Labour Council.

Generally, the laws give rights and protections to workplace health and safety committees and elected health and safety representatives. Use these rights and workplace processes to participate in developing policies and solutions.

If there is an immediate risk to health and safety, every worker has the common law right to stop doing this work.

If the problems cannot be solved at the workplace, a union organiser or health and safety officer may be able to help. Contact your union for advice.

If you are not in a union but would like to join, contact the appropriate union or the **ACTU helpline** on **1300 362 223**.

If the employer is unwilling to listen or to make improvements, it may be necessary to use other methods, for example:

Provisional Improvement, written or default notices

In Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, the ACT and Commonwealth government workplaces, elected health and safety representatives have the legal right to issue a Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN), a written notice or a default notice to order an employer to fix health and safety problems.

PINs and other notices can be used for stress, as for any other health and safety issue. Through issuing a notice, the health and safety representative gives the employer time to fix the problems.

Cease work orders

Commonwealth and some state laws allow health and safety representatives to order that the work stop immediately.

Government health and safety inspectors

You have the right to request assistance from a government health and safety inspector, including a workplace inspection. Inspectors have the power to stop work that is a risk to health and safety.

A list of state and territory health and safety authorities is in **Appendix 4**.

Industrial awards

Many working conditions that can have an impact on levels of work-related stress, such as hours of work, rest breaks and the various forms of leave (annual, long service, sick leave, personal carers and family leave), are award matters and should be enforceable by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission through conciliation or arbitration.

Staffing levels and workloads may be 'incidental' to allowable award matters, or considered necessary for the 'proper administration of the award'.

Collective agreements

Collective agreements should always aim to improve working conditions and health and safety. When negotiating, care must be taken that hours of work, staffing levels, workloads and work organisation do not increase the risk of stress or any other health and safety hazards.

Collective agreements which have been certified by the Industrial Relations Commission are not limited to allowable award matters. They can be used to secure enforceable employer commitments to health and safety issues that are not adequately covered by legislation, but are still 'industrial' matters in the workplace.

Better shift arrangements, work breaks, staffing levels, parental leave and childcare provisions, and training and education (including health and safety training) can all help to reduce work-related stress.

Agreements should avoid incentive and bonus schemes. Rewards for getting the job done quickly often result in cutting corners and putting health and safety at risk.

The terms of certified agreements are subject to conciliation and arbitration in the Industrial Relations Commission through disputes handling procedures that are legally required in all collective agreements. Where necessary, parties have access to a low cost tribunal for settlement or to determination in the courts, as certified agreements are legally binding on the parties.

Many Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) now contain stress-related clauses. Examples which may provide useful models to build on can be found at **www.osiris.gov.au**.

Individual agreements

Individual contracts or Australian Workplace Agreements which replace collective agreements are not supported by the union movement. They are generally used by employers to get maximum 'flexibility' from workers and to lower costs, often at the expense of health and safety and reasonable hours and working conditions. They have contributed to the growth of work-related stress over the last decade.

Caring for stressed workers

It is important that we support each other at work and do not fall into the trap of blaming ourselves or each other for feeling stressed.

Breaking the isolation, which may often be deliberately encouraged or fostered by management, is critical. We should not be made to feel that work-related stress is a private matter which we must overcome by ourselves.

Workers may be taking time off due to work-related stress. Most will be using their sick leave, annual leave or other entitlements. Others may know that they need time off but, for various reasons, feel compelled to 'soldier on'.

Very few will claim workers' compensation – to which they are entitled for a work-related injury – due to limitations in some states and territories on stress claims or the difficulties and extra stress which can be involved in establishing a case. Some jurisdictions specifically exclude actions by the employer such as demotion, transfer or disciplinary actions from the ambit of workers' compensation, despite the genuine stress which may be caused if these are handled badly.

Stress management programs

While the solution to work-related stress is to remove the causes, it is important that procedures are developed by management, workers and their representatives to support and assist people suffering from stress-related symptoms or illness.

Stress management programs and stress counselling provided by employers can have some benefits, but are not a solution by themselves. They only deal with the symptoms, not with the causes in the workplace.

A study by the International Labour Organisation concluded that most counselling and relaxation programs are ineffective in improving the work environment.

Techniques for relieving stress symptoms at work such as taking breaks to 'stretch your legs', 'give your mind a rest', 'have a coffee' and so on are fine for those with some control over how and when their work is done. However, for many workers these are not an option.

Only two per cent of respondents to the ACTU national survey on stress at work nominated stress management programs or counselling as an answer. The vast majority believed that 'the answer to stress at work is in the workplace'.

Medical advice

People who have difficulties in coping with work-related stress should seek advice from their medical practitioner and ensure that the practitioner knows about their working arrangements. In severe cases, they may need referral for specialised medical treatment.

Some states have workers' health centres which can provide advice. Contact your union or Trades and Labour Council for details.

Workers' compensation or legal advice

Injured workers should not be using their sick leave or recreational leave if they are suffering from an illness or injury caused by work-related stress.

Many unions and Trades and Labour Councils have workers' compensation officers who can provide advice and assistance. Most can also assist with legal advice, or you can call the ACTU helpline on 1300 362 223.

People suffering the symptoms of work-related stress should seek advice early, even if it does not lead to a workers' compensation claim.

Superannuation

Some superannuation schemes may have provisions by which injured or impaired workers who are not eligible for sick leave or workers' compensation can have access to part of their superannuation fund.

Contact your union or superannuation fund for advice.



Some tips for alleviating the effects of stress at work

Diet and nutrition

This guide is about eliminating the causes of work-related stress. However, it will not always be possible to easily or quickly remove stressors from the workplace. The stress alleviation techniques described below may assist in reducing the effects for people who cannot avoid work stress.

Stressful working environments may mean that people skip breaks, including lunch and other meals. This is a risk to health and safety, as we all need to eat and drink at regular intervals. Employers must ensure that appropriate meal breaks are provided. In remote or shift work, they should ensure that nutritious meals are available or provide facilities for cooking and keeping food fresh.

Some workers exposed to stress gain weight through over-eating, while others lose weight due to stress-related loss of appetite.

Regular exercise

Regular exercise is important for our general health. Exercise and maintaining physical fitness can reduce the severity of our responses to stressful events.

Regular aerobic exercise increases sleep length and decreases general fatigue. It can also reduce musculoskeletal and psychological symptoms associated with stress.

Regular aerobic exercise, in which the activity of the heart and lungs is increased, is also beneficial for general health. Examples include brisk walking or jogging, cycling, swimming or aerobic exercise classes.

When people feel stressed, it may be difficult for them to maintain motivation for an exercise program, but the benefits are worth the effort.

Relaxation & meditation

Relaxation and meditation techniques have also been shown to ease our stress responses. However, they are only effective if practised regularly over extended periods of time.

Family and social life

Lack of interest in or feeling too tired for family and social life is frequently reported as a consequence of work-related stress. Irritability or difficulty in 'switching off' from work may also negatively affect our personal and social relationships.

Additional effort and planning to spend regular time with friends and family and to make time for hobbies and other non-work-related activities may be necessary to overcome these effects.

Tobacco, alcohol and other drugs

In trying to overcome the effects of work-related stress, people may use more tobacco, alcohol, caffeine or over-the-counter and prescription drugs.

Obviously it is best to eliminate tobacco and to limit the use of alcohol, caffeine and any other drugs.

Caffeine may provide a short-lived boost when we have a lot to do or are working long hours, but general intake should be kept low to avoid sleep disruptions. Coffee, tea and many soft drinks can have high concentrations of caffeine.

The use of over-the-counter analgesics and other substances should be limited to short-term alleviation of headaches or other pain. Prolonged use can have a range of negative health effects.

If you feel you are over-using alcohol or other drugs as a result of work-related stress or for any other reason, you should seek medical advice.

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Quick checklist for a stress-free workplace

This checklist is designed to give an indication of the likelihood of stress being a problem in the workplace and to identify possible problem areas.

Only tick the box if the answer is 'yes' – the more ticks, the less risk of work-related stress in your workplace

- employer / management is consultative and supportive, and workers are aware of expectations
- there are procedures to prevent discrimination, bullying or harassment by management or by other workers
- workloads / demands are not excessive
- workloads and hours of work are distributed fairly.
- hours of work and shift arrangements are predictable
- the needs of clients / customers can usually be met without overtime
- any overtime is reasonable and paid
- there are regular breaks away from the work station
- there is appropriate training and supervision
- targets and time lines are realistic
- the pace of work can be controlled by workers
- performance pay is eliminated.
- the general work environment is clean and comfortable
- lighting is appropriate to the tasks
- noise is not excessive or a source of constant irritation.
- thermal comfort and ventilation are appropriate
- jobs and positions in the workplace are reasonably secure
- restructuring and changing of work roles is minimised
- there is mutual support from other workers and supervisors
- there are security arrangements where they are needed, particularly in areas dealing with the public

Total score (out of 20) ____

- 16 – 20** *Fairly low risk of work-related stress*
- 10 – 15** *Could be moderate levels of work-related stress*
- 6 – 10** *Likely to be high levels of work-related stress*
- 0 – 5** *Most probably an unhealthy, even dangerous, workplace*

Sample stress survey

This survey is designed for you to provide your views about the causes of stress in your workplace. There is no need to put your name on the survey.

Please return the survey to

Please provide the following information:

- | | | | | | |
|-------------|--------------|--------------------------|-------------|--------|--------------------------|
| Age: | Under 20 yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> | Sex: | Male | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 20-29 yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> | | Female | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| | 30-39 yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> | | | |
| | 40-49 yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> | | | |
| | 50+ yrs | <input type="checkbox"/> | | | |

Job title or description:

Union:

1. Do any of the following conditions contribute to stress in your workplace? (please tick)

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Organisational change/restructuring | <input type="checkbox"/> | Increased workload | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Insufficient training | <input type="checkbox"/> | Childcare difficulties | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Uncomfortable temperatures | <input type="checkbox"/> | Communication difficulties | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Excessive performance monitoring | <input type="checkbox"/> | Difficult relations with clients/public | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Harassment or bullying | <input type="checkbox"/> | Unresolved health and safety issues | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Job insecurity | <input type="checkbox"/> | Poor career opportunities | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Excessive noise | <input type="checkbox"/> | Conflict with management | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Poor work organisation | <input type="checkbox"/> | Long hours | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not enough rest breaks | <input type="checkbox"/> | Poor communication with management | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other (please specify):

2. Please list, in order of priority, the three most stressful conditions in your workplace

(from the above list or any others you experience).

1.
2.
3.

3. Do you suffer from any of the following symptoms as a result of work-related stress?

| | Frequently | Sometimes | Never | | Frequently | Sometimes | Never |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Headaches | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Feeling anxious | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Indigestion | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Anger | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Continual tiredness | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Sleeplessness | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Loss of concentration | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Increased smoking/ alcohol use | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Memory loss | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Muscular cramps | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling distrustful | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Ulcers | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling depressed | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | High blood pressure | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other (please specify): | | | | | | | |

4. Have you taken time off from work during the past twelve months due to work-related stress?

Yes
 No

5. If 'YES' to Question 4, what type of leave did you take?

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Sick leave | <input type="checkbox"/> | Recreation leave | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Annual leave | <input type="checkbox"/> | Workers' compensation | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Leave without pay | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |
| Other (please specify): | | | |

6. Why did you use that form of leave?

.....

7. Please list THREE things that you feel would be the solutions to stress in your workplace.

1.

2.

3.

*Thank you for
 your participation
 in this survey.*

Some signs & symptoms of work-related stress

| <i>Body area</i> | <i>Symptoms</i> | <i>Possible work causes</i> |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Head | Headache, migraine, anxiety, depression, feeling angry or hopeless, sleep difficulties, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, poor memory, loss of energy or motivation | Long hours, insufficient rest breaks, work overload, shift work, bullying, harassment, difficulties with management / colleagues, violence from patients / customers / clients, exposure to noise, uncomfortable temperatures, some solvents, boring and repetitive work |
| Eyes | Tiredness, redness, irritation, dryness, watering | Long hours, insufficient breaks, fumes, dust, wind, sun, poor air quality, low humidity, computer screens |
| Ears | Tinnitus, ringing or other ear irritation / pain, hearing loss | Loud machinery / vehicles, headsets, noisy working environment |
| Nose, throat | Sneezing, coughing, dryness, soreness, hoarseness, voice loss | Poor air quality / humidity, overcrowding, fumes, dust, voice overuse, exposure to chemicals, infectious diseases |
| Neck, back | Soreness, pain, stiffness, cramps, headaches, migraine | Poor job design, heavy lifting, awkward postures, boring and repetitive work, long hours, inadequate breaks, bullying, harassment, anxiety, poor furniture or work stations |
| Chest, lungs | Wheezing, shortness of breath, asthma, lung disease | Fumes, dust, exposure to chemicals, poor air quality / humidity, overcrowding, infectious diseases, anxiety, fear |
| Arms, wrists, hands | Pain, stiffness, soreness, pins and needles, cramps, loss of sensation in fingertips | Boring and repetitive work, poor ergonomics, poor work routine, insufficient rest breaks, heavy lifting |
| Reproductive system | Miscarriage, irregular periods, reduced sperm count, erection difficulties | Chemicals, heavy lifting, shift work, long hours, stress |
| | Weight gain or loss, eating disorders | Shift work, long hours, stress, work overload, bullying, harassment, difficult with management / colleagues, violence from patients / customers / clients |
| | Use of tobacco, alcohol, caffeine, pain killers or other drugs | Long hours, insufficient rest breaks, work overload, shift work, bullying, harassment, difficult with management / colleagues, violence from patients / customers / clients, exposure to noise, uncomfortable temperatures, some solvents, boring and repetitive work |
| Blood, heart | Palpitations, poor circulation, high blood pressure, heart disease | Working in heat, shift work, long hours, work overload, heavy physical work, bullying, fear, anxiety |
| Legs, feet, knees, ankles | Stiffness, numbness, cramps, aches, pains, pins and needles, referred back pains | Walking / standing for long periods, inadequate flooring, rapid or repetitive foot movements, vibration, foot pedals |

Australian state and territory OHS authorities

ACT WorkCover

- ✉ Level 4, Eclipse House, 197 London Circuit
Canberra City 2600
- ☎ (02) 6205 0200
- 🌐 www.workcover.act.gov.au

WorkCover NSW

- ✉ Locked Bag 2906
Lisarow 2252
- ☎ 13 10 50, (02) 4321 5000
- 🌐 www.workcover.nsw.gov.au

Work Health Authority

- ✉ Minerals House, 66 The Esplanade
Darwin 0800
- ☎ (08) 8999 5010
- 🌐 www.deet.nt.gov.au/wha

Division of Workplace Health and Safety

- ✉ GPO Box 69
Brisbane 4001
- ☎ 1300 369 915, (07) 32474850
- 🌐 www.whs.qld.gov.au

WorkCover Corporation

- ✉ 100 Waymouth St
Adelaide 5000
- ☎ 13 18 55, (08) 8233 2990
- 🌐 www.workcover.com

Workplace Standards Tasmania

- ✉ 30 Gordons Hill Rd
Rosny Park 7018
- ☎ 1300 366 322, (03) 6233 7657
- 🌐 www.wst.tas.gov.au

Victorian WorkCover Authority

- ✉ 222 Exhibition St
Melbourne 3000
- ☎ 1800 136 089, (03) 9641 1444
- 🌐 www.workcover.vic.gov.au

WorkSafe WA

- ✉ 1260 Hay St
West Perth 6005
- ☎ (08) 9327 8777
- 🌐 www.safetyline.wa.gov.au

Comcare

(all Commonwealth government employees)

- ✉ Level 1, 14 Moore St
Canberra 2600
- ☎ 1300 366 979
- 🌐 www.comcare.gov.au