

Stress at work

Occupational stress arises when workers perceive they cannot adequately cope with the demands made on them or with threats to their jobs and the circumstances in which they are carried out. Stress is on the increase as employment conditions become tougher and new systems of staff supervision are introduced (CCTV, electronic productivity monitoring); it disproportionately affects people at the lower end of the job hierarchy. It is an issue for safety representatives because workers health, jobs and careers are on the line and because for many years now it has been the top concern of people at work in the UK.

Stress is a controllable factor in a work environment. When workers perceive they cannot adequately cope with the demands made on them or feel their jobs are threatened, it constitutes harmful stress. Excess amounts of stress can lead to a lack of productivity, loss of confidence and the inability to perform routine tasks. It can lead to long term (chronic) health problems that lead to premature death.

Occupational stress encompasses a host of other factors within the working environment that include chemical agents, physical agents (noise, heat, radiation, cold), hazards that cause fear and an uncomfortable work area. These can contribute to single or multiple factors that impact upon the worker to induce stress at work.

Causes and Symptoms

Stress can result in both health and behavioural problems. They can be categorised as physical symptoms (headaches, stomach problems, over & under eating, sleep disturbances, chronic mild fatigue, muscle aches & pains and skin rashes) and psychological symptoms (forgetfulness, anger, frustration, anxiety, irritability, use of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs and sleeping pills), depression, feeling powerless and isolation. These can be

transferred into absenteeism, increased accident rates, relationship problems and drug and alcohol abuse. The most extreme form of stress is sudden death, i.e. people work themselves to death. However, many symptoms are transient and disappear when the source of stress is removed. But if stress is prolonged, permanent illness, either physical and/or mental may result. Common long term symptoms of stress include physical conditions (hypertension, heart disease, strokes, diabetes, ulcers, infectious diseases and spastic colon) and psychological problems (serious depression, accidents, domestic violence, suicidal behaviour, substance abuse and other debilitating psychological disorders). It is important to note that stress affects different people in different ways while some take workplace stress home others make personal adjustments and changes to deal with stress.

Duty of Care – Legal Requirements

Employers have a duty to safeguard the health and safety of their employees under Section 2 of the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act (HASWA).

Under Regulation 3 of the 1992 Management of Health and Safety at Work (MHSW) Regulations, employers are obliged to carry out an assessment of the risks in jobs and reduce these as far as possible. These legal duties apply to occupational stress. Employers are legally required to consult with safety representatives on all aspects of health and safety, including stress risk assessments.

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HSE's management standards for stress

These standards point out the issues to be taken into account when addressing

occupational stress. While they are only guidance and therefore carry no weight in criminal law, they can be useful for safety reps and safety committees in negotiations, especially on the content and extent of stress risk assessments, which should cover all the aspects spelt out in the HSE standards. They are not as useful a tool as new laws on stress would be but can offer supporting processes that encourage employers, employees and reps to work in partnership to address work related stress. It also provides a yardstick by which organisations can gauge their performance in tackling the key causes of stress.

It is to be noted when a stress compensation claim is being considered in the Civil Courts, the courts will use these HSE standards to judge whether an employer as gone "as far as is reasonably practicable" in addressing the issue of stress brought to their attention by the stressed worker or their trade union safety representative. This fact is also persuasive when negotiating.

The Management Standards cover six key aspects of work

- ▲ **Demands:** Includes issues like workload, work patterns, and the work environment.
- ▲ **Control:** How much say the person has in the way they do their work?
- ▲ **Support:** Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
- ▲ **Relationship:** Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
- ▲ **Role:** Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles.
- ▲ **Change:** How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Disability law

- ▲ Disability Discrimination Act 1995 – stress may turn out to be the sign of an underlying condition that would amount to a disability. Under the Act, employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace, such as reducing the employee's workload or pressures on an employee who is under stress. While this is a useful piece of law it is not simple to apply in these circumstances and help should be sought if trying to use it in a stress case.
- ▲ Discrimination legislation – if someone is being treated unfairly by, say, a line manager who treats female staff in an overbearing and dominating way, they may be able to argue that such behaviour amounts to sex discrimination.

Strategies for combatting Job Stress

Since stress at work has multiple causes, it suggests it should have multiple solutions. Interventions with the individual although important will not solve the problems of occupational stress but organisational change must also occur. There are three major changes that must occur in any well designed stress reduction application. Firstly there must be individual change that encourages the individual to cope more effectively with stress for example, diet, exercise, assertiveness, relaxation etc. Secondly, small support group interventions which help workers develop more social support both at the job and at home for example, team building, family counselling, sensitivity training around racism and sexism etc. Thirdly, structural or organisational changes towards improving the conditions at work, for example,

modifying shifts, reducing physical hazards, job rotation, workers decision making, increasing skills level etc.

Safety representatives

Safety reps are trade union reps created by the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1978 which entitle them to:

- ▲ inspect the workplace
- ▲ investigate incidents and accidents
 - have paid time off for training and for the performance of their duties
 - represent their members interests on health and safety

Safety reps must be consulted by employers on all issues around occupational stress, especially risk assessments.

Education and Awareness

Whilst stress is such a major issue of concern to workers they may need to be persuaded that their health is at risk or that action by themselves and their safety rep can improve their conditions. This can be done by:

- ▲ circulating leaflets, feature articles and posters on the hazards of stress.
- ▲ holding discussions at workplace meetings, perhaps with an invited speaker.
- ▲ investigating key indicators of stress such as sickness absence figures.
 - conducting a survey of the incidence of stress among members
 - encouraging employees to risk assess themselves to find out for example which muscle group is more used while doing their job.

Representing Individual Members

The first priority is to protect the workers health and job where these are threatened by stress or by management responses. The second is to try and

secure the solution the member wants. This could entail:

- ▲ ensuring behavioural problems are not treated as a disciplinary issue.
- ▲ negotiating leave, a transfer or reallocation of work.
- ▲ obtaining a second medical opinion if required.
- ▲ resisting retirement on medical grounds or dismissal on grounds of inability to work.
- ▲ helping the member access the right sort of professional help.
- ▲ pressing the management to remove or reduce the causes of stress.

Collective Agreements

These can be of two types, an overall agreement aimed at eliminating or reducing stress or specific agreements on particular employment conditions. The alternative is to negotiate anti-stress provisions into employment conditions such as staffing levels, working hours, shift patterns, performance etc. The two approaches are not incompatible.

Employer Responses

Employer responses to occupational stress have favoured the provision of counselling, occupational health programmes, employee assistance programme and healthy life-style campaigns. These do not address the factors in the job which produce stress and they tend to transfer responsibility for the condition from the employer to the individual worker.

Also see

- ▲ TUC stress resource pages www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm?mins=37
- ▲ Management standards for stress HSE www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/standards.htm

Factsheets online www.lhc.org.uk London advice 020 7794 5999



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