

Stress at Work

What is Stress?

Stress is the body's response to physical and mental demands.

Stress is not just a problem in our minds. Our bodies have an "emergency response" that occurs when we are under stress. For example, when we have to run for a bus, parts of our body gear up to deal with the emergency. This response helps us run fast enough to get the bus. Our heart rate and blood pressure increase. Sugar is released into the blood. Our breathing becomes faster. Other parts of our body slow down. Our digestion slows down. Our immune (disease-fighting) system partly shuts down.

Once we get on the bus, our bodies quickly relax. The body needs this time to rest and recover after being stressed. Workers are at risk for health problems when their bodies are always responding to stress and not easily able to return to a relaxed state.

Early signs of stress include:

- Headache
- Upset stomach
- Sleep problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Quick to get angry



What is workplace stress?

We experience stress at work when we are not able to meet the demands of our job. You may not be able to meet the demands of your job for reasons such as:

- The amount of time you have to finish a task
- The tools you have to do a job
- The workplace rules you must follow

The most stressful jobs place heavy demands on the worker but give the worker very little control over how to do the job. Examples of high stress jobs are assembly line workers, data entry operators, and retail service clerks.

How Stress at Work Affects Your Health

Stress can affect your health when you are exposed to stressful working conditions over a long period. Your ability to cope with stress decreases with time. Stress at work often affects your life outside work. It affects you:

- Mental and emotional well-being
- Behavior
- Physical health

People respond to stress in different ways. You may feel frustrated, angry or nervous. Your behavior may change. You may increase your use of alcohol or smoke more. You may not want to see friends and family.

Stress over a long period of time can also cause or worsen health problems such as:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Stomach and bowel problems
- Asthma
- Rheumatoid arthritis



What causes stress at work?

Physical work environment

- Noise
- Poor ventilation
- Poor lighting
- Too hot or too cold
- Poor workstation or tool design

Job design

- Too much supervision
- Shift work
- Too much work
- No decision-making
- Not enough different kinds of tasks
- Unclear job demands



(continued)

- **Social & economic conditions**

- No job security
- Discrimination (based on race, disability, age, sex)
- Changes or layoffs at work
- New technology
- High unemployment
- Increased competition

What can employers do?

Workplace stress is a serious health concern. The best way to reduce stressful work is to eliminate its causes. Employers can better design jobs in these ways:

- Clearly define jobs and responsibilities
- Give workers a say in how they do their jobs
- Give workers opportunities to learn new skills
- Allow time for social interactions among workers
- Make work schedules flexible for responsibilities outside of work
- Clearly communicate about job security and change

Support from others helps reduce the negative effects of stress. There are many places to find support in the workplace coworkers, management and union. Some ways to provide support to workers include:

- Start a program to give counseling to individuals for personal and work-related problems
- Create "family-friendly" programs such as on-site child care and flexible work hours
- Develop ways to resolve workplace conflict

What can you do?

There is no simple solution to workplace stress. A good first step is to identify the causes of stress at your workplace. Some problems may be easier to solve than others.

Bring your workplace stress concerns to your joint health and safety committee, if you have one. Join with others at your workplace to reduce stress for everyone.



Try some of these ideas to help you deal with stress. Use the ones best suited for you. Remember, these ideas work best if the causes of stress at work are reduced.

- Exercise regularly
- Get enough sleep
- Eat a healthy diet
- Limit caffeine and alcohol use
- Try relaxation exercises such as yoga, deep breathing or meditation
- Talk about your feelings with someone you trust.



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