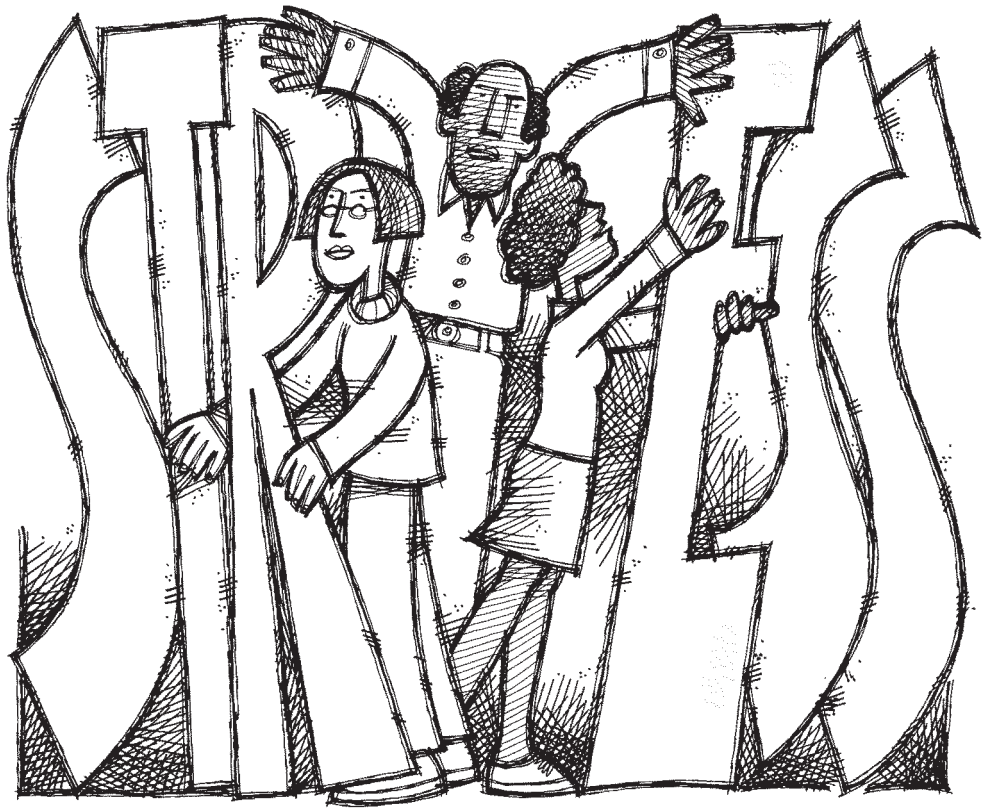


HEALTH AND SAFETY GUIDELINES

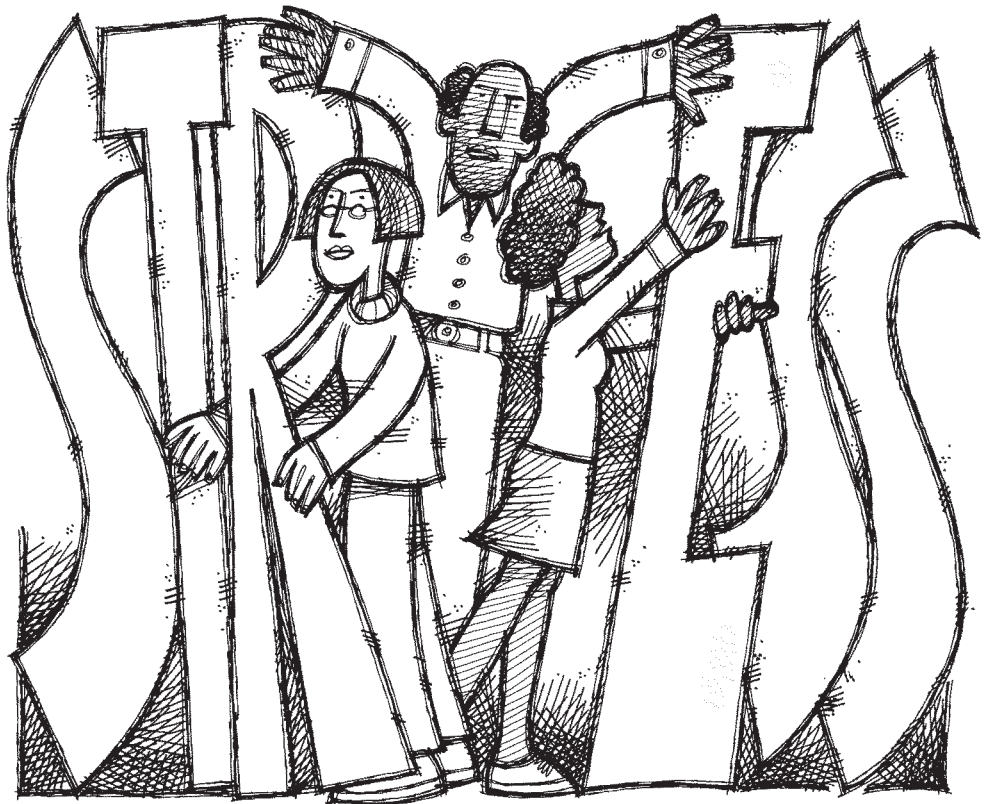


Enough Workplace Stress: Organizing for Change



Canadian Union of Public Employees – Health and Safety Branch cupe.ca

Enough Workplace Stress: Organizing for Change



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Foreword

This guideline – written by CUPE’s National Health and Safety Branch – is part of our union’s broader efforts to eliminate workplace stress. It is largely based on ideas developed by members who attended CUPE’s 8th National Health and Safety Conference, and participated in the workshop *Enough Workplace Stress: Organizing for Change*.

The guideline is designed for use by CUPE members across Canada to help address and solve workplace stress problems as health and safety hazards. It has two main sections:

- Background information on workplace stress: what the problem is, what the causes are, who is affected, and what the hazards are.
- Actions, solutions and strategies to eliminate workplace stress and the health and safety hazards associated with stress.

This guideline – *Enough Workplace Stress: Organizing for Change* – is a tool for action. It contains concepts, solutions and strategies that can effect meaningful change in CUPE workplaces across the country. Equipped with this guideline, members can identify and eliminate workplace stress hazards.

Part 1

1.1 Introduction to stress

We hear a lot about stress. People talk about being stressed out, how this or that situation is stressful. Stress affects us at home, work, and even on holidays.

We also hear too often that we should learn to “deal” or “cope” with stress at work. This implies that workplace stress is normal and that we need to “manage” or “handle” stress and just get on with the job. This view of stress is wrong.



Workplace stress is a serious health and safety hazard that can have devastating effects. Stress can lead to psychosocial illnesses, such as anxiety and depression. Stress can also contribute directly to physical illness; for example, tense muscles can worsen ergonomic injuries. Stress makes workers more susceptible to hazards, injury and disease.

While it is true that there are sources of stress other than the workplace, this does not mean that workplace stress is not a hazard or that it is the product of a worker’s imagination. CUPE members know that the changing nature of work has increased workplace stress hazards. Reorganization, layoffs, job insecurity, accelerated paces of work, along with many physical work hazards (e.g., hot or cold conditions, poor ergonomic design, poor ventilation, noise, etc.) can all contribute to stress. These causes of stress are all firmly rooted in the workplace. Also, stress that is experienced outside of work – for example within the family – often has a workplace component to it, or is in some way caused by workplace factors.

This guideline is focused on workplace stress – stress that is caused by and comes from the workplace. The word “stress” is used with the phrase “workplace stress” almost interchangeably, but it is used mostly as a more general term.

Stress is closely related to control. Many CUPE workplaces have changed, resulting in less control for members to direct their work. Less or low control over job tasks is associated with high stress levels.

This guideline outlines the scope of the stress problem as it affects CUPE members, assessing the issue, the causes, who is affected, and the hazards. It points members towards actions that can be taken, specifically outlining how to identify stress hazards, where solutions lie, and what strategies can deliver real change.

1.2 What is stress?

How can I care for my residents properly when I have 42 assigned to me at once? Stress – that’s what I call stress.

Bonnie Snyder, CUPE member, 8th National Health and Safety Conference

We know when we feel stress or stressed. It might seem the concept doesn’t need to be defined. It is also true that stress can affect people differently.

But part of the hurdle of addressing stress as a health and safety issue is to define the hazard:

Stress is a combination of physical and psychological reactions to events that challenge or threaten us. In normal circumstances, the stress response is a powerful protective mechanism that allows us to deal with sudden changes, dangers or immediate demands. In abnormal (i.e., highly stressful and/or prolonged stress) circumstances, stress overwhelms our protective mechanisms, leading to serious negative health outcomes.

This definition makes a key point that stress is often a result of combined factors – both physical and psychological. Similarly, the European Commission’s official definition of work-related stress is:

A pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and noxious aspects of work content, work organization

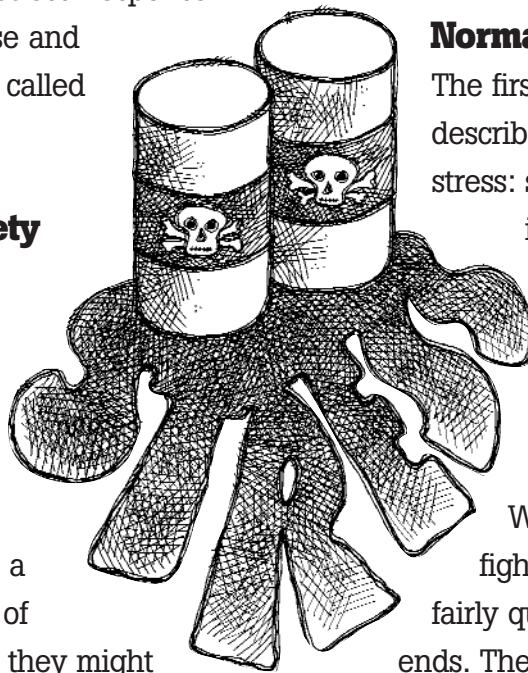
and work environment. Stress is caused by a poor match between us and our work, by conflicts between our roles at work and outside it and by not having a reasonable degree of control over our own work.

According to this definition, stress occurs when there is a poor match between workplace demands and a worker's degree of control. We feel stress as a result of demands that are placed upon the mind and the body. Our reaction is called the Generalized Stress Response. Factors that cause this response and make us experience stress are called stressors.

Stress: a health and safety hazard

Stress is a health and safety hazard – plain and simple. Employers might like to believe that stress does not exist. They might argue that stress is “in your imagination,” a “personal problem” or a result of workers’ “lifestyle choices.” Or they might regard stress as just part of the job. Those employers who do acknowledge stress on the job might argue that it should not be considered a health and safety hazard because stress is not visible, like more obvious hazards, such as exposure to chemicals, sharps, or confined space hazards.

But CUPE members know this is wrong. Like violence and overwork, stress is a significant health and safety hazard directly related to how work is organized. Workplace stress comes from how work is done. The effects of workplace stress on CUPE members are visible: illnesses and injuries negatively affecting members’ health and lives. Because workplace stress affects workers’ health, it must be seen as a workplace hazard and as a health and safety issue.



Normal and toxic stress

The first definition used earlier describes normal circumstances for stress: stress is dealt with and then it passes. Our instinctive reaction to stress is to combat or flee the source of stress – known as the fight or flight reaction.

With normal stress we can fight or flee. The response occurs fairly quickly and then the stress ends. The three phases of normal stress are:

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

An example of normal stress is short-term anxiety because you have lost something important (e.g., keys), or feeling temporarily stressed because your bus is stuck in traffic and you are late for work. When the item is found, or the bus gets you to work on time, your stress drops away and is eliminated. There are many day-to-day occurrences like these that cause normal stress.

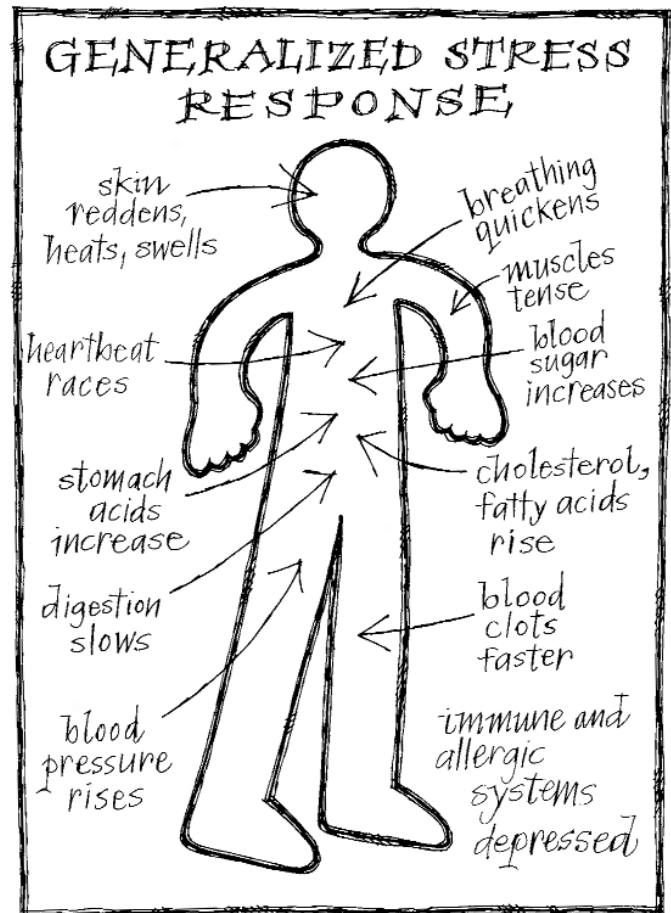
Toxic stress is another matter. As the name suggests, toxic stress is like a poison. This form causes the most damage, as the human body is not equipped to deal with toxic stress. Unlike normal stress that comes and goes, toxic stress stays with you, building up the harmful effects. The three phases of toxic stress are:

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

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

Physical reactions to stress

Both normal and toxic stress affect the body physically, but toxic stress effects are more severe.



The Generalized Stress Response is the phrase used to describe a variety of physical reactions to stress, such as:

- An increased metabolism, for example, faster heartbeat and quicker breathing.
- Increased blood pressure.
- Increased cholesterol and fatty acids in the bloodstream.

- Decreased protein synthesis, impaired digestion and immune and allergic response systems.
- Faster blood clotting.
- Increased production of stomach acids.
- Increased production of blood sugar for energy.
- Localized inflammation (for example, swelling and pain in joints, muscles, and skin).
- Widened airways directing more oxygen into the muscles.
- Tensed up muscles.
- Increased sweating to cool muscles.

Stress can also cause workers to experience sensations such as a dry mouth and difficulty swallowing, shortness of breath, a racing heart, butterflies or knots in the stomach, and tension, aching, shaking, or pain in the muscles.

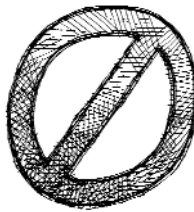
These physical reactions are immediate, instinctive responses to stressors. Over time, as these reactions occur too often – as normal stress progresses to toxic stress – it can translate into more severe physical and/or psychological effects, such as:

- Sleep disruption and disorders.
- Fatigue, apathy and lack of energy.
- Chronic aches and pains in the chest, shoulders, back, neck and elsewhere in the body.
- Depression and a general decrease in enjoyment of life.

- Changes in sexual activity.
- Conflict with family, friends, and co-workers.
- Weight gain or weight loss.
- Greater susceptibility to injury.
- Immune system depression, greater vulnerability to illness and disease.
- Other stress-related health problems, such as, ulcers, heart disease, headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, and menstrual disorders.

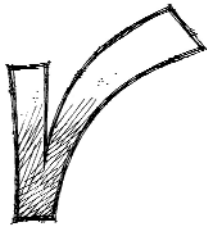
Any combination of these effects can be very harmful to a worker's health and well-being.

Stress myths and clichés



Here is a quick look at some of the misinformation about stress. Don't be misled by employers and consultants who use phrases and make claims such as these:

- Stress is not a workplace health and safety hazard.
- A little bit of stress is healthy.
- Stress is good for you; it makes you more productive at your job.
- Stress comes from your home life, not the job.
- All we need to do is learn to cope with our stress.
- To deal with stress, all workers need to do is take a stress management course.
- Stress can be solved with exercise, breathing deeply and learning to relax more.
- Workplace wellness programs are the answer to stress.



Here are the realities –
key points to remember
about stress:

- Stress is a health and safety hazard.
- Stress can have serious health effects.
- On-the-job stressors cause workplace stress.
- Stress is largely caused by poor workplace organization.
- Your joint health and safety committee should deal with stress hazards.
- Workers need control over their jobs to eliminate stress.

Be wary of employers who claim stress is normal and unavoidable. Also be sceptical of employers who claim stress problems can be solved with stress management schemes, wellness programs, team-building exercises, and anything else that sounds warm and fuzzy. These are band-aid solutions that do nothing to eliminate stress hazards. Stress management techniques *only* deal with the symptoms of workplace stress. They do not get rid of stressors. These programs *do not* prevent injuries or diseases. They are *not* a solution to workplace stress.

Relaxation techniques, counselling and coping mechanisms offer only temporary relief from stress. Workplace stress hazards must be dealt with at their source through primary prevention – not after the fact. Preventing exposure to the causes of stress is the only way to eliminate the hazard.

1.3 What causes stress?

Can you imagine the stress when you hear your five-year-old ask, "Mommy, do you have to go to work again?"

Manon Breton, CUPE member, 8th National Health and Safety Conference

Stressors cause stress. But what are these stressors and how do we pinpoint them? Here are a few causes of stress identified by CUPE members:

- Lack of training and direction.
- Too many demands at one time.
- Deadline pressures.
- Uncertainty.
- Office politics and hostile management.
- Stale air, either too hot or too cold.
- Lack of windows and natural lighting.
- Violence, threats and bullying.
- Too many bosses.
- Surveillance cameras.
- Working alone.
- Low morale among workers.
- Risk of injury and disease.

Work organization, lack of control and excessive demands

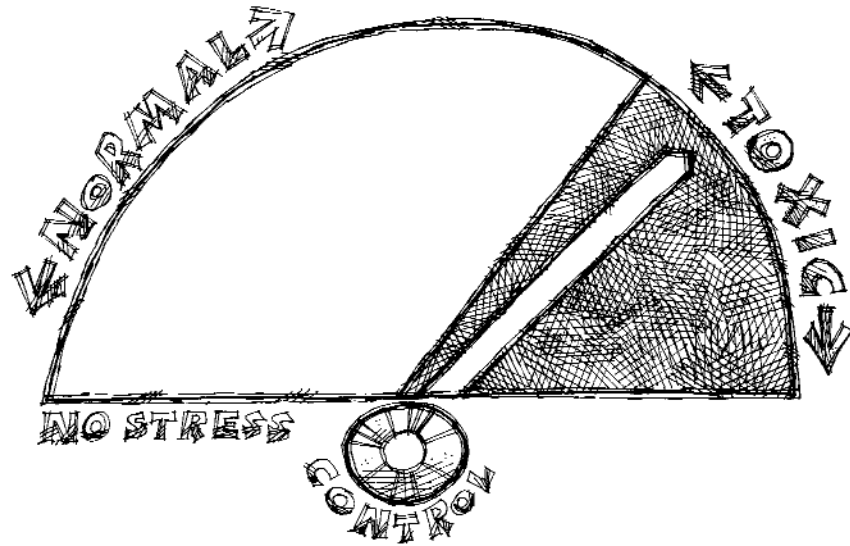
Work organization factors cause stress or make stress worse. How jobs are designed, carried out, and the degree to which workers participate in the decision-making process at their workplace can result in stress.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in the United States defines work organization as the “work process and the organizational practices that influence job design.” Work organization also includes broader considerations, such as the economic, social, political and legal environment. These are important elements as they can affect new work organizational practices. For example, if the country is going through tough economic times, this can lead to layoffs, cutbacks and downsizing.

The following are among the many work organization factors that can cause stress, some of which build on what CUPE members have identified:

- Lack of control and conflicting work demands.
- Lack of participation in decision-making and lack of autonomy (i.e., independence and ability to self-direct) at work.
- Lack of training and direction, and changes in work organization.
- Lack of recognition of work done and lack of respect from supervisors.
- Repetitive, boring and meaningless work.
- Unclear and conflicting work responsibilities.
- Low pay, lack of career development opportunities and job instability.
- Too much or too little work, overwork or under-use of skills.
- Poor communication, new technologies and time pressures.
- Privatization, outsourcing, downsizing, mergers, staff cutbacks, restructuring, and other large-scale work reorganization schemes.
- Repressive management styles and techniques, such as Total Quality Management, constant improvement, teamworking, and quality circles.





Control is a central work organization factor linked to stress. Lack of control at work can make workers sick. A lot of workplace stress research has focused on control and demand factors and how these lead to stress.

Complicated models have been put forward to predict workers' stress levels, using terms like demand/control/support model, decision-making latitude and job strain hypothesis. But the idea is fairly straightforward.

Lack of control is a cause of stress. It comes from not having the ability to decide how a job is done. Examples include not being able to decide the pace of work, or what tasks get done in what order. If a worker cannot control these elements, if they do not have the leeway of action to make decisions about their job tasks, then they will have higher stress levels.

Control is different from power. Control concerns factors within the job – how the job and its tasks are carried out. Power is broader than control and concerns decisions such as when

work is scheduled, whether a worker will have or retain a job, which workers will get advancement within an organization, and other larger scale decisions. Uncertainty over these broader power factors can also cause stress.

The control/demand model adds another factor. If workers have excessive demands placed upon them, they will suffer stress. For example, if workers are given unreasonable deadlines, are bullied by their employer to work overtime, and are forced to work through breaks, then they are facing excessive work demands that can cause stress.

When lack of control is combined with high demands, a worker will almost certainly suffer high stress levels. These factors can create toxic workplace stress, causing increased heart disease and possibly death, depression, exhaustion, low self-esteem, and increased upper extremity musculoskeletal disorders. Job uncertainty can compound lack of control and high demands, making stress an even greater hazard.

Work organization schemes, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and quality circles might be introduced to workplaces and sold as a way for workers to gain more control over their work. After years of these practices being imposed on CUPE members and other workers, the opposite effect has emerged – workers have less control. A recent NIOSH study of work reorganization found that:

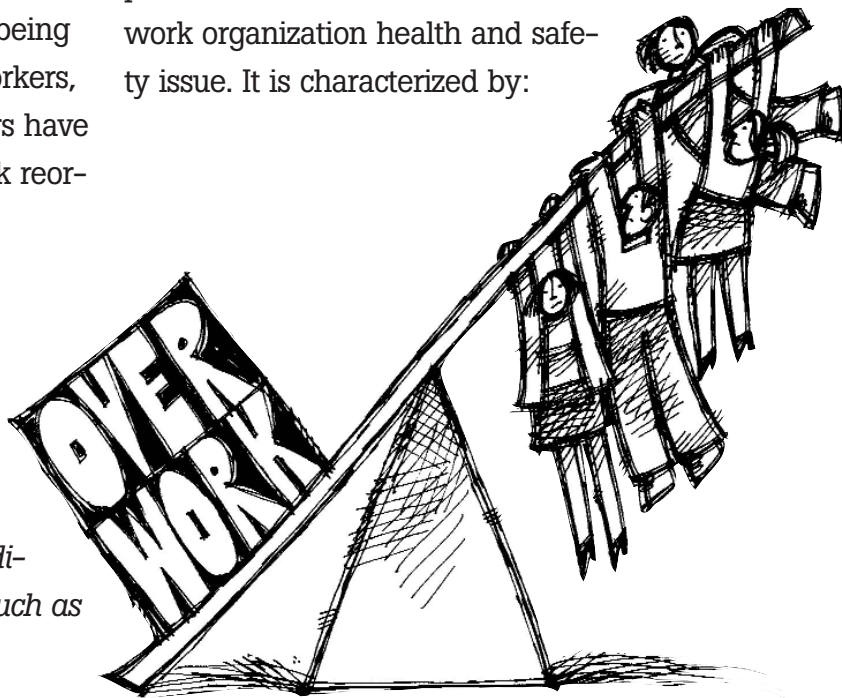
Various work participation or involvement strategies may often be more ceremonial than substantive, having little meaningful influence on worker empowerment – or perhaps even eroding workers' means to influence job conditions through more traditional labour-management mechanisms such as collective bargaining.

This means that rather than helping to combat stress, work reorganization strategies – such as TQM – can take away our *real* control and lead to more stress.

In 2001, the Communications Workers Union (CWU) in the United Kingdom surveyed 2,729 of its members about stress. CWU members were asked to rank causes of stress in order of importance. These workers ranked bad management, excessive workloads, staff shortages, and other poor work organization factors as the leading causes of stress. Work organization factors are the single biggest predictors of stress at work.

Overwork and work shift schedules

Stress is among the many negative health effects caused by overwork and accelerated paces of work. Overwork – like stress – is a work organization health and safety issue. It is characterized by:



- Long and difficult hours.
- Unreasonable work demands.
- Multi-tasking.
- Pressure to work overtime (paid and unpaid).
- Fewer rest breaks, days off, holidays and vacation.
- Faster, more pressured work pace.
- Performance monitoring.
- Unrealistic management expectations.
- Additional, often inappropriate, tasks piled on top of "core" duties (e.g., doing more than one job).
- No replacement during sick leave, holidays and vacations.

Overwork affects our quality of work. When workers can't get the job done the way they want it done, they will experience stress. In overwork conditions, the protective mechanism of the stress response breaks down due to fatigue, overexertion and other factors. The stress that results is not given enough time for release and instead builds up, leading to toxic stress. Stress and overwork go together. These two health and safety hazards are both consequences of poor work organization.

Long hours, shift work, and night work are stressors related to overwork. These stressors can disrupt workers' family and social life, increase fatigue, create sleep deficits, affect concentration, increase exposure to chemical hazards, and make workers more susceptible to workplace injuries and illnesses. All of these factors can also contribute to higher stress levels.

Part-time, casual, reduced-hours, temporary and split shift work can also cause stress. Part-time and reduced-hours workers suffer stress from not having enough hours to support themselves and irregular work shifts. Short notice for fulfilling work commitments can create stress for casual and temporary workers. Split shift workers experience job stress due to constantly juggling work, family and social commitments, often times putting family and social lives second to work demands.

Physical working conditions

Physical work conditions can also be stressors, such as:

- Noise and vibration.
- Poor and inadequate lighting.
- Temperature extremes – too hot or too cold, or too much variation in temperature.
- Overcrowding, poor spacing and work area layout.
- Exposure to toxic substances.
- Ill-fitting and poorly designed work tools, furniture and workspaces.
- Poorly maintained work environment.
- Poor indoor air quality.
- Bad building design.
- Working with hazardous equipment.
- Lack of outside amenities and bad site planning – such as no parking, no access to public transit, no proximity to green space and recreational facilities.

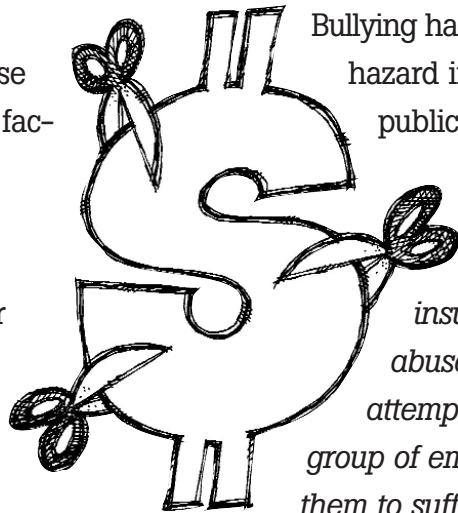
Any of the above can cause or compound stress. Many of these stressors are also linked to work organization. For example, studies have correlated high, ongoing noise disturbance and low speech privacy at work resulting from poor work organization, with elevated stress and reduced job satisfaction. Other physical factors, such as the absence of windows and natural light in a workplace, have likewise been linked to higher stress levels for workers.

Job insecurity, cutbacks and reorganization

CUPE workplaces have changed in recent years. Cutbacks, privatization, reorgs, and downsizing have contributed to a heightened sense of job insecurity. All of these factors are causes of workplace stress.

In two decades, public sector jobs dropped from one-fifth of all employment in Canada, to less than one-sixth by 1996. The most severe cutbacks occurred between 1992-1996 when 121,000 jobs across the country were lost. During those same years, 694,000 jobs were created in the private sector and 266,000 more people opted for self-employment. These numbers represent huge cutbacks and downsizing in the public sector, along with a massive shift towards privatization.

At the same time, public needs and expectations have not decreased. If anything, they have become greater. The Canadian public requires and expects a very high standard of service for the work performed by CUPE members in sectors such as health care, social services, municipal services, education and elsewhere. Cuts in staffing levels have imposed higher demands on CUPE members and can be a significant cause of stress.



Bullying, harassment and violence

These three hazards can cause stress and are again linked to work organization.

Bullying has become a more widely-recognized hazard in Canadian workplaces. The British public sector trade union UNISON defines bullying as:

Offensive, intimidating, malicious, insulting or humiliating behaviour, abuse of power or authority which attempts to undermine an individual or group of employees and which may cause them to suffer stress.

Bullying can create a dangerous, debilitating and negative workplace climate that elevates workers' stress levels. As a result, workers may suffer headaches, back pain, stomach ailments, insomnia, depression, fatigue, anxiety and even suicidal thoughts.

Harassment – verbal abuse; threats; slurs; insults; discrimination on the basis of age, race, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation or ability; and its other forms – causes stress.

Progressive amendments to Quebec's *Act Respecting Labour Standards and other Legislative Provisions* in 2002 have added language on psychological harassment. It defines psychological harassment as:

Any vexatious behaviour in the form of repeated and hostile or unwanted conduct, verbal comments, actions, or gestures, that affects an employee's dignity or psychological or physical integrity and that results in a harmful work environment for the employee.

The amendment to the province's legislation further states: "every employee has a right to a work environment free from psychological harassment." Employers are obligated to prevent psychological harassment. It also says that this provision is implicit in every collective agreement in Quebec.

Harassment reduces job satisfaction, can increase turnover at workplaces, and, like bullying, creates a workplace climate hazardous to workers' health and safety. Harassment is also linked to physical symptoms, such as stomach ailments, headaches, nausea, over and under eating, sexual problems, and deteriorated interpersonal relations.

Violence is still a significant hazard in CUPE workplaces. The presence and/or threat of violence at work can contribute to elevated stress levels. Violent incidents at work make a deep impression, leaving workers on edge and stressed for long periods.

1.4 Who is affected by stress?

Stress has been near the top of the health and safety priorities list for several years for CUPE. The public sector in Canada has been damaged by cutbacks, privatization schemes, and other initiatives. The result: high levels of stress for public sector workers.

A 2001 Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) study found workplace stress had doubled. Twenty-seven per cent of workers in 2001 compared to 13 per cent of workers ten years earlier reported high job stress. The study further reported a decrease in job satisfaction over the same time period, from 62 per cent of workers reporting high job satisfaction to a drop of 45 per cent. As stress levels increased in Canadian workplaces, job satisfaction declined – the two seem to go hand-in-hand.

Women experience more stress than men, according to the CPRN study. Sixty-two per cent of female non-professional workers and 59 per cent of female professional workers reported high-perceived stress levels, compared to 54 per cent of male non-professional workers and 43 per cent of male professional workers. Female workers also reported higher levels of role overload. Canadian non-professional female workers experienced a 15 per cent increase in high job stress, an eight per cent increase in high role overload and a 13 per cent drop in high job satisfaction from 1991 to 2001.

These numbers do not indicate a weakness on women's part. Their stress levels are higher because women, more than men, generally have greater family responsibilities. Women still handle more childcare, child-raising, elder care and other family duties than men. Canadian women in the paid labour force often do double duty – working inside and outside the home and working away from the home, which can worsen their stress hazards.

1.5 What are the stress outcomes?

I'm exhausted, on edge, distraught, can't concentrate. I have no time for family, hobbies, and volunteer activities. Headaches, tension, arthritis. Do you want to hear more?

Name withheld, CUPE member, 8th National Health and Safety Conference

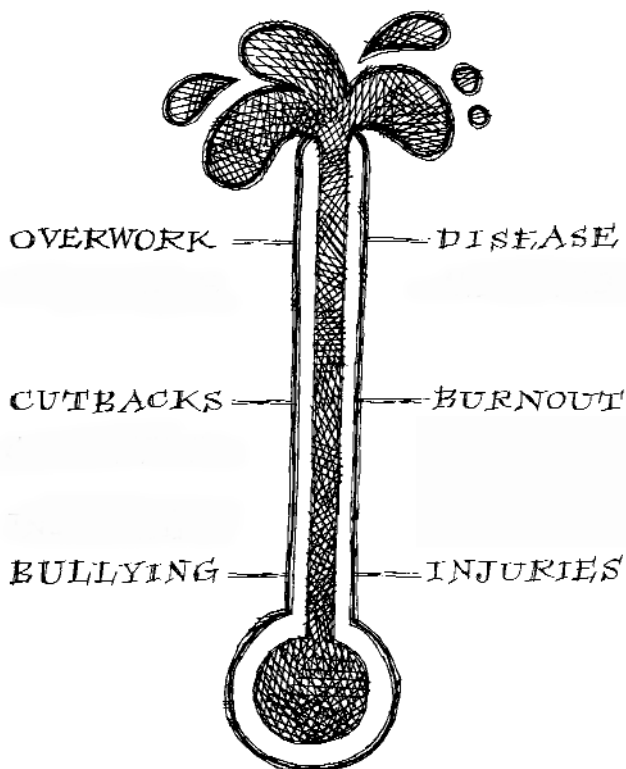
Stress can cause many negative health outcomes. CUPE members listed these effects of workplace stress:

- Headaches and tension.
- Chest and stomach pains.
- Joint and muscle pains; arthritis.
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs.
- Lower interest in sex.
- Feeling angry and aggressive more often.
- Weight gain and weight loss.
- Feeling anti-social and idle.

Psychological disease and social and behavioural changes

Stress is a known cause of many psychological diseases and disorders, as well as many social and behavioural changes, such as:

- Depression, feelings of apathy and low self-worth, crying spells.
- Anxiety, increased tension, fearfulness.
- Changes in eating habits.
- Sleep disorders, insomnia, fatigue and exhaustion.



- Irritability, mood changes, constant negativity, over-reaction and irrational behaviour.
- Inability to concentrate and see tasks through to their conclusion.
- Burnout.
- Sexual dysfunction.
- Increased use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco.
- Paranoia and social isolation and withdrawal.
- Suicidal thoughts.

Many of these outcomes can severely affect workers' lives. Descent into acute depression, for example, can cause workers to be off the job for years and end careers prematurely.

Likewise, the psychological effects of stress can devastate workers' family and social lives.

Specific worker studies have connected stress and psychological diseases. For example, high job demands among male power-plant workers have been associated with depressive disorders. Depression has also been linked with specific workplace stressors such as lack of job satisfaction, workplace role conflict and ambiguity (not knowing what your job is).

Heart disease and other physiological outcomes

Exposure to job stress increases the risk of heart disease and other physiological problems. The physiological reactions to stress described earlier with the Generalized Stress Response can be early triggers of more severe heart problems to come.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in Canada. It includes coronary heart disease, hypertensive disease, heart and circulatory system disorders, and other conditions. Stress in the workplace has been directly linked to many of these diseases. High stress can make the heart beat faster, which can lead to excessive oxygen intake in the heart muscle. This can increase the possibility of heart attack. Stress can also upset the heart's cardiac rhythm. An excessively raised heartbeat can lead to life-threatening ventricular fibrillation. Numerous worker studies correlate stress and higher rates of heart disease.

Stress can also make workers vulnerable to other diseases, including:

- High blood pressure.
- Headaches and migraines.
- Impaired digestion – due to a decrease in intestinal movement.
- Menstrual disorders – there is some evidence of an association with stress.
- Ulcers – from lowered blood flow.
- Irritable bowel syndrome – there is some evidence of a link with stress.
- Diabetes – from excessive levels of fats and glucose released into the bloodstream.
- Various illnesses – from lowered immune function due to stress.

Personal and family-life conflict

Like any workplace hazard, the effects of stress can spill over from work and have an impact on workers' lives with their family and friends.

With stress – especially with toxic stress – workers continue to suffer outside their working hours. Family and personal relationships suffer. The deterioration reveals itself in marital problems, family breakdowns, domestic violence, increased use of drugs and alcohol, isolation and withdrawal from personal relationships, reduced interest in sex, and other psychological outcomes. Stress can contribute to exhaustion and fatigue, causing workers to lose interest in or feel too tired for personal or family hobbies and recreational activities. This can intensify the negative effects of stress, creating a vicious circle.

Striking a balance between work and life/family can be an impossible task. Juggling childcare arrangements, sick family members, elder care, and extended family responsibilities are difficult on their own. When stress is added to these responsibilities, workers' ability to meet all of their commitments becomes harder. Something has to give. Workers' and their families' well-being are typically what suffer most.

Workers divided

Stress can create conflict in the workplace that shows up as anger, frustration, envy and mistrust. These can be destructive forces in a CUPE

workplace, especially if directed at other CUPE members – someone to blame other than the employer. Co-workers, stewards, staff representatives, and other union workers might become targets. Conflict can isolate workers from one another. Some may even blame themselves for their stress, compounding the problem.



These circumstances divide workers and harm union solidarity. It is vital to understand that workplace stressors – such as how work is organized by your employer – cause the stress, not co-workers or the union. Don't let employer techniques such as performance monitoring and surveillance devices create competition and resentment. In a divided workplace, the employer gains and workers lose. There is strength in numbers. When confronted by stress hazards, members need to remember that solutions and strategies for change depend on worker solidarity.

Work-related musculoskeletal disorders

Stress can contribute to work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMDs), also known as Repetitive Strain Injuries (RSI) and Musculoskeletal Injuries (MSI). WRMD is a catchall phrase for various injuries (e.g., carpal tunnel syndrome, epicondylitis). These injuries usually involve repeated trauma to muscles, tendons, and peripheral nerves.

WRMDs have a work organization component. Ergonomic injuries do not only result from manual working techniques, for example, how a worker holds a mop when mopping, or how a worker lifts materials. The effects of stress due to poor workplace organization can also contribute to an ergonomic injury.

Specific stress risk factors that have been linked to WRMDs include:

- Job dissatisfaction.
- Intensified workload.
- Monotonous and repetitive work.
- Low job control.
- Role uncertainty.
- Inadequate work-rest cycles.
- Limited social support from supervisors.

Workers are more vulnerable to WRMDs when suffering specific physiological reactions to stress. For example, stressors activate the central nervous system, which in turn increases muscle tone. This can lead to tendon biomechanical loading, which adds to the risk of

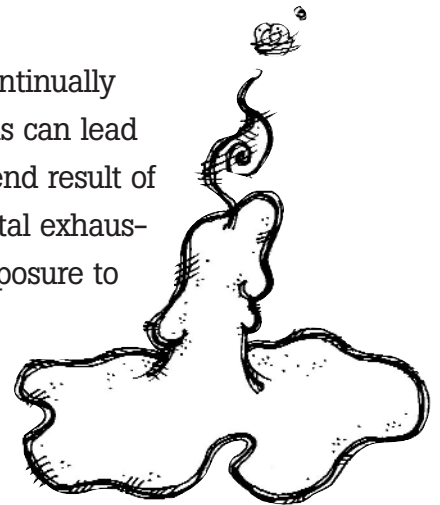
WRMDs. Stressors stimulate the autonomic nervous system, triggering the release of adrenalin and noradrenalin. Muscles and tendons then tighten, reducing the flow of nutrients to the tendons. These tendons will not self-heal if there are microlesions (small injuries) to the tendon fibres caused by ergonomic strain. The result: chronic muscle fatigue and muscle pain. An activated central nervous system (brought on by stress) can also cause corticosteroids to be released. This has been linked to tunnel syndromes. The central nervous system also releases cytokines that can cause tendon inflammation, contributing to or causing WRMDs.

Burnout

Working under continually stressful conditions can lead to burnout – the end result of physical and mental exhaustion caused by exposure to toxic stressors.

Some symptoms of burnout are:

- Emotional exhaustion, feeling emotionally overextended and nearly depleted of emotional resources.
- Negative feelings, irritability, and a deteriorated sense of self-image.
- A decline in feelings of competence and a decrease in work performance, feeling helpless and hopeless.



Specific workplace stressors that cause burnout include role conflict at work, lack of control over one's job, and lack of social support on the job. Sufferers of burnout can be ill and away from work for long periods. They often withdraw from day-to-day life. Unlike depression, which can have many causes, burnout is directly linked to stressors at work. And it usually affects people without prior psychological illness. Stress often results in increased absenteeism and extended leave to recover from burnout and other negative health outcomes.

Synergistic effects of stress and other diseases

The effects of stress can work synergistically, combining with other illnesses and diseases to make worse those illnesses and diseases.

An American study showed that workers who suffered toxic stress levels at work were three to five times more likely to catch a cold. Their stress levels made them more vulnerable to viral infection. In Finland, researchers studied the synergistic effects of stress and heart disease among manufacturing sector workers. The study found that workers suffering high stress levels had twice the risk of death from heart disease than workers in the same jobs that had low stress levels. A study of telecommunications workers looking at ergonomic injuries found higher rates of upper extremity musculoskeletal disorders among those with high stress levels

caused by job pressures and low decision-making control at work. If workers suffer the effects of stress, they are at greater risk of other illnesses and injuries.

Critical incident stress

This condition – sometimes known as post-traumatic stress – can occur when workers are exposed to a single, severely stressful circumstance, such as a natural disaster, road accident, murder or assault.

Critical incident stress is a serious condition that requires professional treatment and care. It is a serious health and safety hazard that must be prevented. In workplaces where there is the chance of critical incident stress affecting workers, programs to respond to workers' needs must be in place. All steps should be taken to prevent critical incident stress.

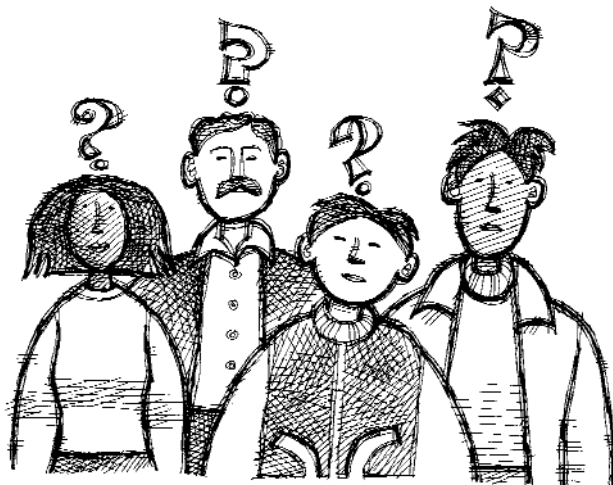
Critical incident stress is beyond the scope of this guideline, which focuses on normal and toxic stress. CUPE's Health and Safety Branch has a separate critical incident stress fact sheet available.

Part 2

2.1 Is stress a health and safety hazard for you?

Stress is sometimes not regarded as an obvious health and safety hazard. The key is to identify the causes and symptoms, discussed in Part 1 of this guideline, and be prepared to act.

On the surface, stress may not seem as direct a threat as asbestos, infectious diseases, or needlestick injuries. With those hazards, the threat is more clearly identifiable and the negative health outcomes are well documented and direct. Stress is not as cut and dry. It is related to work organization issues and their outcomes. For example, job insecurity is a cause of stress, which in turn can lead to WRMDs, burnout, or anxiety. These outcomes might be attributed to some cause other than job insecurity. Burnout or anxiety is often dismissed as being caused by an individual's lifestyle or their "inability to cope." That incorrectly shifts blame to the worker instead of their workplace – a classic employer manoeuvre.



2.2 Identify the problem

We need more communication to break the isolation caused by stress.

Jose Duarte, CUPE member, 8th National Health and Safety Conference

Many of us know that stress is what's causing our health, job satisfaction, morale, family and personal relationships to deteriorate. CUPE members know it too. It's not the membership that needs to be convinced that stress has become a significant health and safety hazard: it's the employer.

Surveys and questionnaires

Surveys usually involve handing out a written questionnaire. It's a great tool for gauging the extent of a health and safety issue. A sample stress questionnaire is provided at the end of this guideline. It can be used in full or in part. If it is too long, just use the questions that are relevant to your local or workplace.

Often the employer claims that there is no evidence for a problem like stress. When members can show the results from a questionnaire, they take a major step towards addressing stress by gaining recognition for the hazard.

It's a good idea to have either the union, through its health and safety committee, or the joint (union/management) health and safety committee involved. Prior to distributing the survey, hold some type of membership information session. Ensure that members know the questionnaire is confidential and explain its purpose: to assess the stress problem in their workplace as a first step towards making necessary improvements to eliminate the hazard.

Any survey or questionnaire must be clear, concise and basic. It may be necessary for the local to have the questionnaire translated, taking into account dominant first languages among members in their workplace.

To avoid any hassles later regarding the legitimacy of the process and results, the joint health and safety committee and/or the employer should approve the questionnaire.

Once the survey is ready, it should be distributed throughout the workplace. The union representatives on the joint health and safety committee should be responsible for collecting completed questionnaires.

There needs to be a plan and process in place for tabulating the questionnaires that are agreed to by those involved (e.g., union, union health and safety committee representatives, etc.). Once the results are calculated, they should be presented and discussed at a union meeting, highlighting those issues that are central to stress in your workplace. Use the relevant sections of this guideline to help explain the stress hazards in your workplace. The questionnaire results should then be presented at a joint health and safety committee meeting, preferably in a session or sessions dedicated only to dealing with stress hazards.

The results of the questionnaire need to be acted upon. It is not enough to just take the pulse of the membership. The questionnaire must form the basis for action by the joint health and safety committee to find solutions to workplace stress hazards.

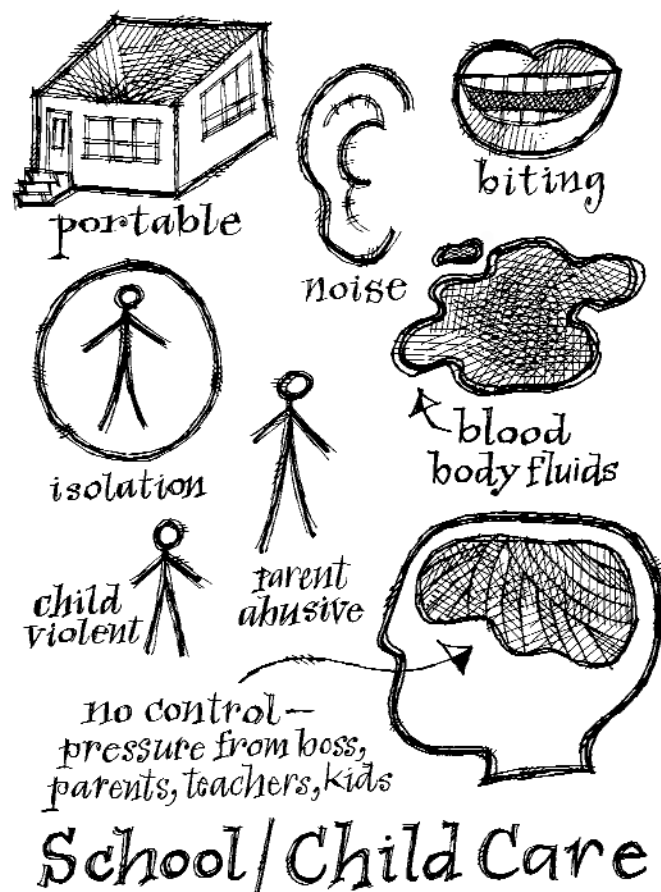
If the employer or management representatives on the joint committee do not want to co-operate with conducting a survey, the union should survey the membership on its own. Similar procedures to those already described should be followed. However, the level of co-operation within the workplace may not be the same, especially when it comes time to discuss the matter at the joint health and safety committee level. Perseverance will be required. The joint committee should be the staging ground to present the union's survey results; the first lever for change on stress. The committee is a forum for concretely addressing health and safety hazards and union members must use it to push for change.

Mapping

Mapping techniques can also be used in your workplace, both to identify the stress hazards and the health effects. CUPE has used mapping extensively in workshops, schools and research projects.

Mapping is based on the idea that "a picture is worth a thousand words." It uses basic visual and participatory action research principles. By representing hazards and their effects visually, they can be more easily recognized and more clearly expressed than by written explanations.

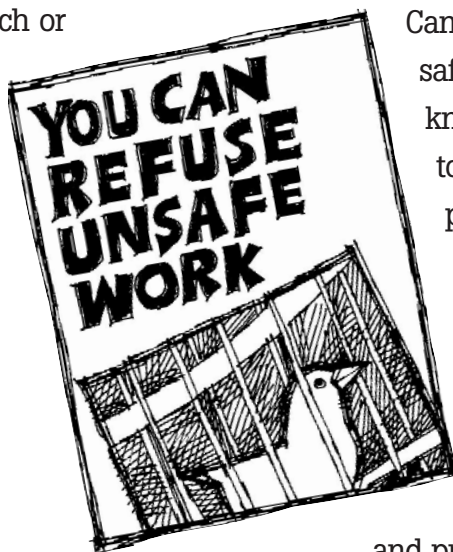
HAZARD MAPPING



Mapping is a participant-driven form of collecting information that recognizes workers as a source of valuable information and producers of knowledge. Health and safety improvements are more likely in workplaces where workers, with their union, are involved in identifying problems and developing solutions.

Three types of mapping are typically used to assess a health and safety hazard: body mapping, hazard mapping and your world mapping. Body mapping shows the physical and psychological effects of stress hazards. Hazard mapping looks at the layout of a workplace, charting where hazards exist. Your world mapping paints a wider picture by looking at how workplace hazards affect workers beyond the workplace, for example, how stress hazards affect family life. These three forms of mapping provide a complete picture of health and safety hazards.

CUPE has developed extensive mapping materials. These materials are available to any interested CUPE local by contacting the National Health and Safety Branch or visiting the cupe.ca web site.



2.3 Taking action

If we've got stress in the workplace, we should fill out the accident/incident reports, like we do with any other problem.

Cyril Wilson, CUPE member, 8th National Health and Safety Conference

This section covers specific actions for addressing stress in your workplace. Together with the solutions and strategies section that follows, it is a plan for dealing with workplace stress.

Right to refuse

Employers have a legal responsibility to provide a safe and healthy workplace under both Canadian federal and provincial health and safety legislation. This principle is commonly known as the general duty clause. It applies to stress. The employer is responsible for providing a working environment where stressors – like any other hazards – are eliminated, controlled or minimized.

CUPE members in most workplaces have the right or the obligation to refuse unsafe work, as stated in the federal and provincial health and safety legislation. Usually, the right to refuse involves the worker recognizing a hazardous or unsafe working condition that might affect her/his health or the health of someone else. The worker then clearly notifies the employer or supervisor that she/he is refusing unsafe work in accordance with the health and safety legislation.

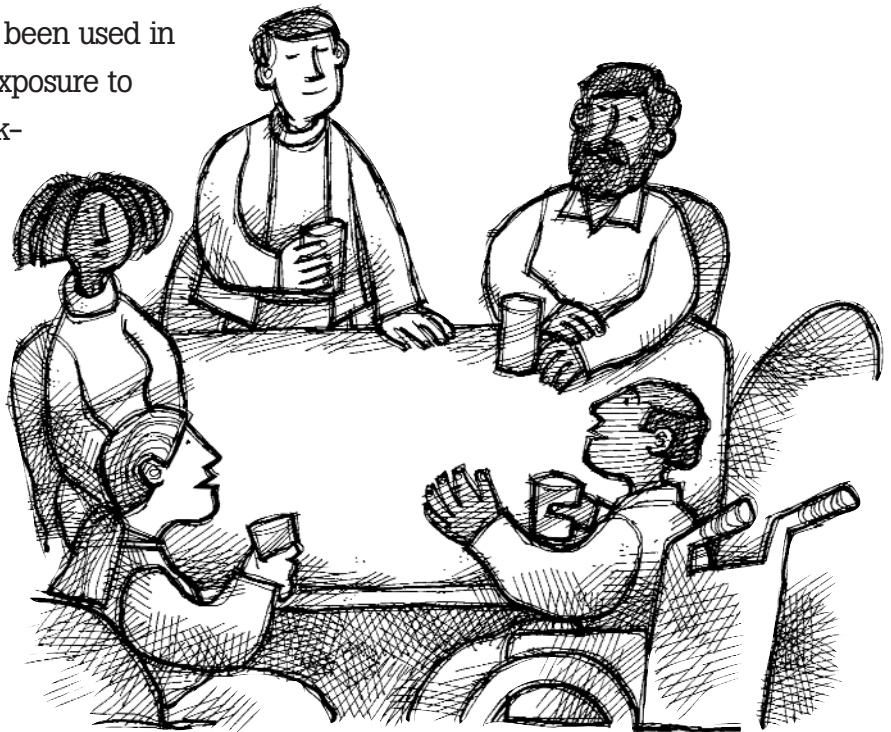
The employer and/or the joint health and safety committee must then investigate the work refusal. If the matter is not resolved, a government occupational health and safety officer must intervene to facilitate a resolution.

Traditionally, the right to refuse has been used in other areas, such as with possible exposure to toxic chemicals or cases where workers are required to work in confined spaces without proper engineering controls. CUPE's position is that the right to refuse is a legitimate way to address a health and safety hazard. The same procedure for refusing unsafe work should be used with stress. But the grounds for refusing unsafe work should be directly stated as being due to stress hazards, specifying some direct sign of stress (e.g., time pressures, rushing unsafely through tasks to complete work, violence, harassment and bullying, etc.).

Stress is a health and safety hazard that can create unsafe working conditions. A work refusal is therefore a valid and direct way to combat the problem. Refusing unsafe work on the grounds that stress is a hazard forces the employer and the joint health and safety committee to deal with stress.

Take your breaks

It's always a good idea to take your breaks. Slowing down and stopping your work on your break will help to relieve stress. It will also help you avoid the cumulative effects of toxic stress.



TAKE YOUR BREAK

If your collective agreement states that you are entitled to coffee and lunch breaks, make sure you are taking these breaks. Similarly, if your collective agreement states that you have specific hours of work, then stick to those hours of work.

Provisions that define breaks and the length of work days ensure that workers get a proper rest from work and that they are paid for all of the time they spend working.

The body and mind need to rest. A fifteen-minute break can really help. Taking a break reminds members that they have some control over their job. Asserting control is central to eliminating workplace stress.

Taking a break also signals to employers and supervisors that CUPE members know their rights at work and that they are able to exercise control where they have it. This is a vital point. If a supervisor sees a worker working through her/his break on a regular basis to complete tasks, that supervisor will assume that the worker does not need the break and will likely assign at least the equivalent of fifteen minutes more work. Taking breaks is a sign of solidarity among workers, as workers in the same job should be working the same hours, at the same pace.

Report stress health and safety hazards

CUPE has developed a Health and Safety Complaint Form and a Violent Incident Report Form. These two forms are good tools for drawing attention to a health and safety hazard. The forms are colour coded, with copies that go to the employer, the joint health and safety committee, the local union, and the worker.

The Health and Safety Complaint Form can and should be used to report stress health and safety complaints. One way to ensure the form is used to report stress and other hazards in CUPE workplaces is to negotiate the forms into the health and safety committee Terms of Reference. By using the complaint form, a paper trail is created ensuring all parties that should know about a health and safety hazard do know about that hazard. Because the joint health and safety committee receives a copy, it should be fully aware of the stress hazard and act upon members' concerns. CUPE members must report stress hazards, as we do with any other workplace health and safety hazard.

Joint health and safety committees

Workplace stress cannot be tackled without direct involvement from joint occupational health and safety committees. CUPE's National Health and Safety Branch has focused a lot of attention on revitalizing health and safety committees. In recent years, committees have become too warm and fuzzy with little action on health and safety issues. CUPE's position is that members not buy into management co-operative schemes and instead realize that health and safety committees are mechanisms for change. Joint committees must be a place where solutions to health and safety issues are created and acted upon.

This position is supported by CUPE policy. The CUPE Policy Statement on Health and Safety entitled *Enough!*, adopted at the 2001 National Convention, reads:

We must take back the balance of power over our health and safety so that we have the final say over whether or not our work is safe.

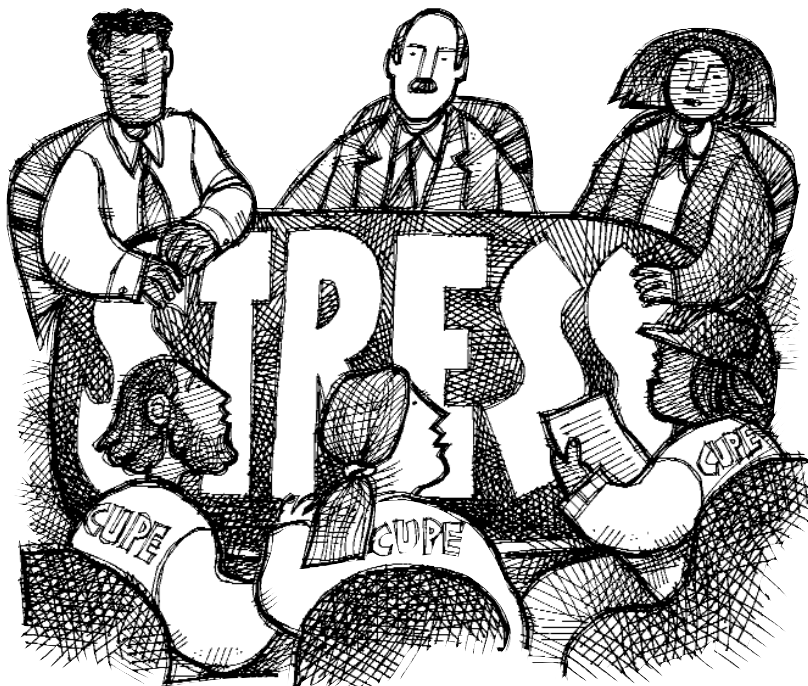
Committees must be strengthened – at the local level and at the workplace level – and become places where the employer's agenda is resisted.

Joint health and safety committees are mandatory in all but two jurisdictions in Canada (in Quebec public sector workplaces are excluded from having mandatory committees and in Alberta committees are designated). CUPE has hundreds of locals representing hundreds of

workplaces across the country. Our members sit on joint health and safety committees in these workplaces. Stress should be brought to the table at committee meetings. Stress needs to be presented as a health and safety hazard that causes numerous negative health outcomes for CUPE members.

Committees are members' prime vehicles for making changes in their workplaces on health and safety issues. They are designed to offer concrete recommendations for action. Joint committees must become the forum for solving stress problems nation-wide.

JOINT HEALTH & SAFETY COMMITTEE MEETING

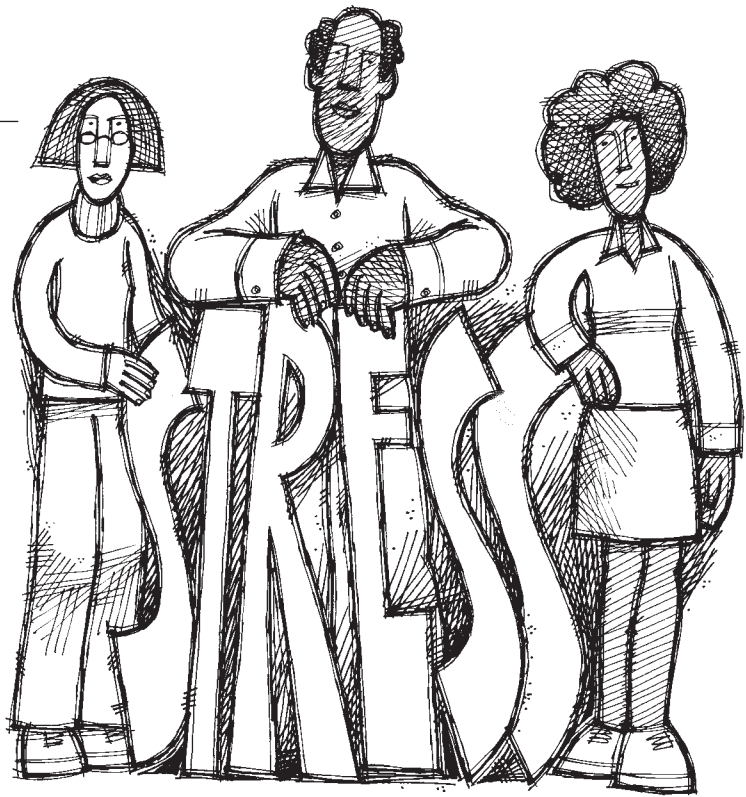


2.4 Solutions and strategies for change

We need to create, adapt and maintain jobs that suit our physical, mental and social conditions – that will help eliminate stress hazards.

Ross Ferlenda, CUPE member, 8th National Health and Safety Conference

The solutions and strategies outlined below complement the actions described in the previous section. Where the actions are immediate ways to confront stress, solutions and strategies are broader policy and structural changes that aim to prevent or eliminate stress in CUPE workplaces.



Workplace reorganization

CUPE workplaces need to be reorganized to eliminate stress hazards. Proactive prevention at the source is the most effective way of solving a health and safety problem. The following organizational changes will help prevent and eliminate stress:

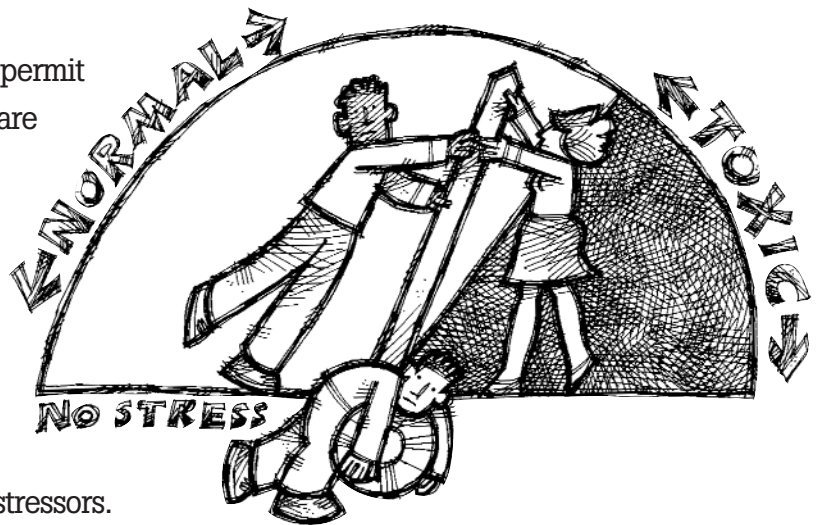
- Measures should be put in place to increase workers' real control. Examples include giving workers more autonomy, more participation in decision-making, more opportunity for self-directed work, and more opportunity to use and develop their work skills.
- Workers should have the right to refuse overtime and overtime should be capped.
- Workloads must be decreased and made more manageable for workers and sufficient staff levels must be set.
- Sufficient rest times and breaks must be provided.
- Job designs must be reviewed to lower stress hazards, for example, working alone should be eliminated, and work tasks should be assigned in an appropriate manner according to experience and competence. Any job redesign must have meaningful worker input.
- Monotonous work should be avoided or eliminated where possible and more variety of work tasks should be incorporated into workers' jobs.

- The physical features and arrangement of workspaces must be redesigned to lower stress hazards (e.g., minimize noise, introduce natural lighting, ensure proper ventilation is in place, etc.).
- Flexible work arrangements should be put in place to accommodate workers' responsibilities (e.g., between family and work).
- Communication needs to be improved to avoid workers suffering from stress in silence or isolation. Improved two-way communication will facilitate worker input on job design and other factors.
- Workplaces need to foster a supportive workplace climate to help eliminate stress, for example, by not tolerating bullying, harassment and violence in any form.
- Supervisors need to be supportive of workers, for example, by listening to workers' ideas and concerns and acknowledging workers' contributions to the workplace.
- Leave days should be provided to permit workers time for childcare, elder care and personal reasons.
- Employers should provide Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) as a way to counter the effects of stress, keeping in mind that these programs do not replace the need for employers to prevent and eliminate workplace stressors.
- Governments need to increase public sector funding to counter staff shortages, overwork, and other stressors.
- Employers should reduce sudden changes (e.g., new technologies, abrupt work shift rearrangements) in the workplace.
- Split shifts should be eliminated.
- Training to identify stress hazards should be instituted, preferably union-provided training.

Work that is reorganized following these recommendations will be less stressful. The changes and supports will help prevent stress by reorganizing work to eliminate stress hazards.

Worker control

Workers need control for their jobs to be fulfilling. Work must be a meaningful part of our lives. Many of the recommendations in the previous section will provide greater worker control. A more democratic workplace is a safer and healthier workplace.



Workers also need to fully utilize existing controls to combat stress. For example, stress health and safety hazards must always be reported and brought to joint health and safety committee meetings. Likewise, workers must insist that stress hazards be inspected and investigated by joint health and safety committees or health and safety representatives at their workplaces.

Actions such as these are good examples whereby workers can exercise their existing control to help prevent stress.

Stress policy

A policy is a good starting point for change on a health and safety issue.

The health and safety committee in your workplace should be instrumental in tabling and pushing for the adoption of a workplace stress prevention policy. A policy would start from the premise that stress is an occupational health and safety hazard, and that all steps possible should be taken to prevent the hazard. The policy should contain a definition of workplace stress.

Further specifics could be added to the policy. For example, it could have anti-bullying and anti-harassment statements that aim to get rid of workplace stress. A policy could also include a statement about the pace of work, whereby any pace of work that creates stress, and thereby poses a health and safety hazard, should be prohibited.

The exact range of a stress policy in a given workplace may vary. What should be central is the universal principle of health and safety law in this country: the employer is obligated to protect workers' health. The policy should reflect this, including a statement from management that stress is an organizational problem that it is committed to solve. The policy should also outline a reporting procedure for workers experiencing stress.



A good policy paves the way for further solutions and strategies, for example, collective bargaining language on stress, the role of the joint health and safety committee, and even changes to legislation. Any policy should be reviewed from time to time to assess its effectiveness. Policies can be updated and revised if necessary.

Stress health and safety contract language

Stress can be addressed through collective bargaining. Collective agreements should always aim to improve workers' health and safety.

Because stress is largely caused by how work is organized, collective agreements can be used to reorganize work to eliminate stress hazards.

Any collective agreement language on stress should have prevention of the hazard at its core. A definition of workplace stress should be spelled out in the collective agreement to frame stress hazards. The concept of normal versus toxic stress could be mentioned in the definition.

Language should set some limits on workers' job descriptions to avoid toxic stress working conditions. Collective bargaining should consider provisions that aim to reduce and eliminate stress, such as:

- Set minimum staffing levels.
- Establish flex-time and job sharing initiatives.
- Create more favourable shift arrangements and permit workers to swap shifts with each other to accommodate family and other responsibilities.
- Set limits to overtime.
- Create shorter or compressed work weeks.
- Allow for voluntary reduced hours at work to accommodate personal or family needs. While working reduced hours, workers keep their full-time status, seniority and full benefits.
- Establish sufficient rest breaks.
- Create childcare provisions and parental leaves to address work-family imbalances.
- Provide time and resources for members to receive union health and safety training on stress and other health and safety issues.

Language should include provisions for the joint health and safety committee to investigate stress hazards and to make recommendations for improvements.

Any local entering into collective bargaining should look at their stress situation and push to integrate stress language into their collective agreement. But be wary when you are negotiating stress language if your employer only wants to talk about wellness programs, exercise schemes, and other health promotion, band-aid solutions that do not prevent stress. Research has shown that any benefits that come from stress management programs are merely temporary and are lost if workers return to a work environment where stressors remain unchanged. Do not negotiate for wellness programs and

other such schemes as these will not prevent stress hazards.



Stress legislation and regulations

While Canada has no explicit stress legislation or regulations, the responsibility for providing a healthy and safe workplace still rests with employers. This responsibility is known as the general duty clause. But it does not go far enough to prevent stress hazards. Legislation is needed that explicitly covers stress as a health and safety hazard.

There are legislative examples from other parts of the world that address workplace stress. In Denmark, the Order on the Performance of Work is a regulation of the *Work Environment Act*. That order states that workers' mental or physical health must not be harmed due to work organization factors, such as the rhythm of work, repetitive work and isolated work.

In Sweden, the *Working Environment Act* says work content, technology and organization must be: "designed in such a way that they do not expose the workers to undesirable physical and mental damage due to excessive strain that leads them to suffer sickness and accidents." The Swedish law further states that work should aim to: "involve a compensation in the form of diversity in work, satisfaction, social participation and personal development." This basically means that – according to Swedish health and safety law – work must be meaningful and fulfilling to the worker in order to prevent physical and mental strain. The Swedish Work Authority has also started a program to recruit new health and safety inspectors with psychosocial and work organization qualifications. These inspectors are being sent out to workplaces to inspect stress, workload, and other work organization hazards.

Similar legislation could be beneficial in Canada for eliminating stress. Also, the language from the Scandinavian examples could be integrated into stress collective agreement clauses and policies in Canadian workplaces.

Of course, legislation on the books is only part of the battle. As with other health and safety hazards, enforcement of the law is fundamental to ensure workers' health and safety is protected. CUPE members can call in government health and safety inspectors to investigate and issue orders where workers refuse unsafe work due to stress hazards or where workers make complaints when stress hazards are not dealt with by employers and/or joint health and safety committees.

Workers' compensation

CUPE members can get compensation for stress-related injuries and illnesses in some parts of the country. Compensation boards in Quebec and Saskatchewan have recognized chronic (i.e., toxic) stress claims. Other jurisdictions usually only recognize critical incident stress claims that result from a single, highly stressful or traumatic event.

Compensation boards are reluctant to open what they perceive to be the floodgates on stress claims by rewarding compensation for stress-related illnesses and "accidents." But this does not mean that CUPE members should not file for compensation in cases of toxic stress. Only by pressuring compensation boards by filing stress claims, as well as arguing the stress component of other claims (e.g., ergonomic injuries) is there any hope to reverse the current practice to deny stress claims.

With the work organization conditions faced by many CUPE members, it can be argued that stress plays a role in almost any illness or “accident.” This argument should be made to help hasten the process so that compensation boards recognize their duty to fairly compensate workers due to the harmful effects of stress.

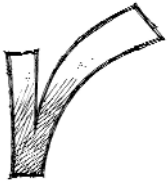
We need to remember that the focus should be on prevention first and foremost in order to avoid the need for compensation.

Union involvement

CUPE is committed to eliminating workplace stress by recognizing that stress is a health and safety issue. Ending stress in CUPE workplaces requires the same diligence and dedication as other health and safety issues demand.

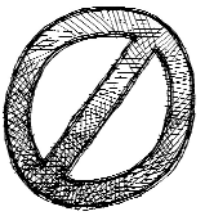
CUPE’s Health and Safety Branch has put stress – and other work organization health and safety issues, like overwork, violence and ergonomics – front and centre on the union’s health and safety agenda. The union recognizes the changing nature of work has resulted in new health and safety hazards for CUPE members. What’s more, issues like stress, overwork and violence can be significant contributing factors to other health problems, such as WRMDs, depression and psychological illnesses. Members can reach out to their union for support and assistance for dealing with workplace stress.

2.5 Summary: stress dos and don'ts



Do:

- Regard stress as a health and safety hazard.
- Evaluate the stress hazards in your workplace using the survey and/or mapping techniques described in this guideline.
- Take your breaks and full meal break allotments to give your body and mind time to recover from the rigours of work.
- Start work on time and leave work on time.
- Refuse unsafe stressful work situations.
- Report stress hazards.
- Put stress on the agenda at joint health and safety committee meetings in your workplace.
- Recommend work organization changes at joint health and safety committee meetings to eliminate stress hazards.
- Recommend workplace stress policies be put in place through joint health and safety committee meetings.
- Bargain contract language that aims to eliminate workplace stress.
- File compensation claims for stress-related injuries and illnesses.
- Participate within CUPE to share knowledge, experience and solutions to eliminate stress.



Don't:

- Suffer in silence.
- Become isolated from your union Sisters and Brothers.
- Tolerate stress hazards in any form.
- Work beyond your means.
- Work through your breaks.
- Work at an accelerated pace.
- Work unpaid overtime.
- Ignore the health and safety effects of stress.
- Leave solutions to stress up to your employer.
- Let stress issues fall off the table at joint health and safety committee meetings.

Conclusion

Workplace stress is hazardous to CUPE members' health. Stress is a workplace health and safety hazard that must be prevented and eliminated, like any other workplace hazard. After-the-fact solutions, such as wellness programs, do not eliminate workplace stressors.

Stress is caused by many different sources, several of which centre on work organization issues. Stress can cause numerous negative health outcomes, such as increased incidence of WRMDs, elevated rates of heart disease, burnout, depression, and other conditions.

CUPE members, through solidarity actions, must combat stress. To start, we must take stress issues to joint health and safety committee meetings and bargain provisions in collective agreements to defend against harmful stress effects.

More and more we are realizing that the way our work is organized can be harmful to our health and safety. Stress is the perfect example of a negative health outcome that results from poor work organization. When workers do not have control and lack decision-making freedom at work, they will suffer from stress. Workers must have input into how their jobs are performed to give meaning, value and purpose to their work and to prevent and eliminate stress hazards.

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HEALTH AND SAFETY **FACT SHEET**

Stress

What is stress?

Workplace stress is a serious health and safety hazard that can have devastating effects. Stress occurs when there is a poor match between workplace demands and a worker's degree of control. We feel stress as a result of demands that are placed upon mind and body. Like violence and overwork, stress is a significant health and safety hazard directly related to how work is organized.

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

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

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

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

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

The Generalized Stress Response is the phrase used to describe a variety of physical reactions to stress: increased metabolism, blood pressure, cholesterol and fatty acids in the bloodstream; decreased protein synthesis; faster blood clotting; increased production of stomach acids, blood sugar for energy; localized inflammation; tensed up muscles; and sweating to cool muscles.

Stress can be associated with severe physical and/or psychological effects, such as sleep disorders; fatigue; chronic aches and pains; depression; changes in sexual activity; conflict with family, friends, and co-workers; weight gain or weight loss; greater susceptibility to injury; immune system depression; and greater vulnerability to illness and disease.

What causes stress?

Stress is largely caused by poor work organization factors such as: lack of control and conflicting work demands; lack of decision-making participation; lack of training and direction; unclear work responsibilities; privatization, outsourcing,

downsizing, mergers, staff cutbacks, and restructuring; overwork and poor work shift schedules. Cutbacks, privatization, reorgs, and downsizing have contributed to a heightened sense of job insecurity. All of these factors cause or compound workplace stress.

Control is a central work organization factor linked to stress. Lack of control at work, not having the ability to decide how a job is done, can make workers sick. Excessive demands also cause stress. When lack of control is combined with high demands, a worker will almost certainly suffer high stress levels. These factors can create toxic workplace stress, causing increased heart disease and possibly death, depression, exhaustion, low self-esteem, and increased upper extremity musculoskeletal disorders.

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

What are the hazards?

Stress affects the physical and psychological health of CUPE members. But it also spills out of the workplace, negatively affecting members' family lives. The cumulative effects of stress can be devastating.

Major outcomes of stress are:

- Psychological disease and social and behavioural changes (e.g., depression, anxiety, sexual dysfunction and suicidal thoughts).
- Heart disease.
- Various physiological outcomes (e.g., headaches and migraines, impaired digestion, ulcers and diabetes).
- Personal and family life conflict.
- Workers divided.
- Work-related musculoskeletal disorders.
- Burnout.
- Synergistic (combined) effects of stress and other diseases (i.e., stress can make worse other diseases and disorders).
- Critical incident stress.

Identify the problem

A first step is to recognize that stress is a health and safety hazard in your workplace. If the negative health outcomes mentioned above are affecting your members, stress is likely a significant contributor. Surveys and mapping techniques are excellent tools to identify hazards in your workplace. A survey can be done in co-operation with the employer, in which case the union approves the survey and is involved in collecting and assessing the information generated. The union should conduct its own stress survey if the employer resists the idea or denies that there is a problem. Body mapping, hazard mapping and your world mapping techniques can be used – instead of or in addition to surveys – to identify stress hazards.

Actions

Stress hazards largely centre on issues of control and work organization. Taking action on stress involves members exercising their own control at work.

The following actions can help combat stress:

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

Strategies for change

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

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

- Employers should reduce sudden changes in the workplace (e.g., new technologies, abrupt work shift arrangements).
- Training to identify stress hazards should be instituted, preferably union-provided training.

Workers need control for their jobs to be fulfilling. Work must be a meaningful part of our lives. Acted on, many of these recommendations will provide greater worker control. A more democratic workplace is a safer and healthier workplace.

A stress policy is a good starting point for change. The health and safety committee in your workplace should be instrumental in tabling and pushing for the adoption of a workplace stress prevention policy. Stress can be addressed through collective bargaining, as agreements should always aim to improve workers' health and safety. Because stress is largely caused by how work is organized, collective agreements can be used to *reorganize* work to eliminate stress hazards.

While Canada has no explicit stress legislation or regulations, the responsibility for providing a healthy and safe workplace still rests with employers. This responsibility is known as the general duty clause. But it does not go far enough to prevent stress hazards. Legislation is needed that explicitly covers stress as a health and safety hazard. CUPE members can get compensation for stress-related injuries and illnesses in some parts of

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

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

For more information contact:
National Health and Safety Branch
CUPE
21 Florence Street
OTTAWA, Ontario
K2P 0W6
Tel. (613) 237-1590
Fax (613) 233-3438
Email: health_safety@cupe.ca

Health and safety stress questionnaire

This is a sample questionnaire. Please feel free to use portions of the questionnaire that are relevant to your workplace, adjusting questions as needed.

Assessing how stress affects CUPE members' health and safety is an important first step to prevent stress health and safety problems. We are interested in your experiences with stress as a health and safety hazard while working for your employer.

Please answer the following questions by checking the appropriate box or writing your answers in the space provided.

Work organization

1. In the past two years has your workplace stress increased?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Don't know
2. In your opinion, has the quality of your work suffered because of workplace stress?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Sometimes
3. In your opinion, has your job satisfaction declined because of workplace stress?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Sometimes
4. Has your job description or list of official job changed in the past two years?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Sometimes
5. If your job description has changed, how has it changed (please check as many as apply to you)?
☐ More duties have been added
☐ New duties not previously part of my job have been added
☐ Faster rate of work
☐ Higher demands/expectations from employer/public/other departments, etc.
☐ Less training has been provided
☐ Inadequate training for new duties/new technologies
☐ Less supervision
☐ More supervision
☐ I've been given supervisory type duties
☐ More paperwork
☐ More meetings
☐ Other (please specify)
6. In the past two years, has your level of control over your job:
☐ Increased
☐ Decreased
☐ Remained about the same
☐ Don't know/Can't say
7. In the past two years have the staffing levels in your work area or workplace:
☐ Increased
☐ Decreased
☐ Remained about the same
☐ Don't know/Can't say

8. When staff is away from work because of holidays, vacation, sick leave, workers' compensation, or any other reason, are replacement staff provided?

- ☐ Yes, always
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ No, never
- ☐ Don't know

9. What do you think are the main causes of stress at your workplace? (Please check as many causes as apply to you.)

- ☐ Lack of control over your job
- ☐ Lack of recognition for the work you do
- ☐ Job insecurity
- ☐ Overwork/accelerated work pace
- ☐ Forced overtime/long hours
- ☐ Shift work
- ☐ Too much pressure to complete tasks
- ☐ Harassment
- ☐ Bullying
- ☐ Violence
- ☐ Lack of respect from supervisors
- ☐ Conflicting job demands
- ☐ Sexism
- ☐ Racism
- ☐ Age discrimination
- ☐ Workplace noise
- ☐ Poor ventilation
- ☐ Poor lighting
- ☐ Inadequate pay
- ☐ Inadequate holidays/vacation/time away from work
- ☐ Fear of accidents, illness and death on the job

10. In no specific order, what three causes of stress from the list in question #9 affect you the most?

11. In the past two years, has your workplace been affected by (please check as many as apply):

- ☐ Cutbacks
- ☐ Downsizing
- ☐ Privatization
- ☐ Contracting out
- ☐ Mergers/Amalgamations
- ☐ Other organizational changes (please specify)

12. Have the changes in your workplace listed in question #11 increased your stress?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

13. Do you always take the full allotment of time for your coffee breaks and lunch/dinner breaks?

- ☐ Yes, always
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ No, never

14. Do you ever stay late or come in early to complete work (i.e., work unpaid outside of your regular hours of work)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

15. Are you provided sufficient tools/ equipment/machinery/supplies to do your job?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

Health effects

16. Is stress a health and safety hazard/ problem in your workplace?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

17. In your opinion, has absenteeism due to stress increased at your work area or workplace?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

18. During the past two years, have you taken sick days because of stress (even if you didn't identify those days as "stress-related" on your leave forms)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

19. If you have taken time off sick due to stress in the past two years, how many working days were you away from work?

- ☐ 1-3 days
- ☐ 4-6 days
- ☐ 7-9 days
- ☐ 10-14 days
- ☐ 15+ days

20. During the past two years, have you taken time off using vacation days, holidays, or leave time due to the health effects of stress?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

21. If you have taken time off because of stress using vacation days, holidays or leave time in the past two years, how many working days were you away from work?

- ☐ 1-3 days
- ☐ 4-6 days
- ☐ 7-9 days
- ☐ 10-14 days
- ☐ 15+ days

22. In the past two years have you experienced any of the following health effects because of workplace stress? (Please check as many as apply to you.)

- ☐ Fatigue
- ☐ Depression and anxiety
- ☐ Sick more often
- ☐ Headaches
- ☐ Neck and back pains
- ☐ Trouble sleeping/insomnia
- ☐ Joint/muscle pain
- ☐ Stomach/digestive problems
- ☐ High blood pressure
- ☐ Feelings of powerlessness
- ☐ Unable to relax
- ☐ Tense more often
- ☐ Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- ☐ Impact on family and personal life
- ☐ Memory loss/trouble concentrating/confused more often
- ☐ Other (please specify)

23. In no specific order, what three health effects of stress from the list in question #22 affect you the most?

24. Have you received Workers' Compensation for a stress-related problem in the past two years?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

- ☐ Family
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
-

25. In the past two years, have you exercised the Right to Refuse unsafe work at your workplace because of stress hazards?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

26. Have you had difficulty taking your vacation/holidays/time off because of your stress levels?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Sometimes

Policy issues

27. Does your workplace have a stress policy?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

28. Does your local have contract language in your collective agreement concerning stress?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

29. In the past two years have you ever raised stress concerns with any of the following (please check as many as apply to you)?

- ☐ Co-workers
- ☐ Union representative
- ☐ Joint health and safety committee
- ☐ Supervisor
- ☐ Employer

Health and safety committees

30. Does your local have a joint (union/management) health and safety committee?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

31. Does your local have a union-only health and safety committee?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

32. Do you sit on a joint health and safety committee?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

33. Does your committee meet regularly?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

34. Have stress health and safety problems ever been raised at your joint health and safety committee meetings?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

35. Have any recommendations ever been tabled at your joint health and safety committee meetings to deal with stress?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

36. If recommendations have been made, has your employer acted on them and made changes in your workplace to solve stress problems?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

37. Do you think your joint health and safety committee should be doing more to solve stress health and safety hazards?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

38. What suggestions do you have for solving stress problems in your workplace?

[illegible]

General information

39. Are you?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

40. What is your age?

- ☐ Less than 20 years
- ☐ 20-29 years
- ☐ 30-39 years
- ☐ 40-49 years
- ☐ 50 or more years

41. How long have you been working in your current position?

- ☐ Less than one year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 2-5 years
- ☐ 5-10 years
- ☐ 10-15 years
- ☐ More than 15 years

42. What type of work do you do?

- ☐ Social service worker
- ☐ Hospital worker
- ☐ Nursing home worker
- ☐ Home for the aged (public)
- ☐ Home for the aged (private)
- ☐ Educational worker
- ☐ Transportation worker
- ☐ Municipal worker
- ☐ Library worker
- ☐ Recreation worker
- ☐ Other (please specify)

43. Do you work?

- ☐ Full time
☐ Part time
☐ Temporary/Casual/Auxiliary

[illegible]

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