

# WORK-RELATED STRESS



Stress itself is not bad. It is a normal response to a situation that creates an urge to do something to respond to it. Stress can be a health and safety hazard if it is not managed well. Stress affects the way you think and the way you move.

**Normal stress** has a beginning and an end. It happens like this:

1. You face a threat or demand (stressor), and you start to feel stress.
2. Stress starts to go away when you deal with the threat or demand.
3. The situation is over when you can relax and no longer feeling stressed.

For example, you might feel normal stress if you lose something important and get anxious for a short time, or if you drink too much coffee, your body will eventually urge you to go to the bathroom. Stress in work is also normal. Sometimes there is a deadline or a big project that are important to you.

The thing to remember is that normal stress ends. In a work context, that means that there aren't more demands or threats than can reasonably be handled.

**Toxic stress** is what happens when you cannot relax because the stressors do not stop coming. That will interfere with your ability to rest and repair. There are medical problems that can appear in cases of toxic stress.

Toxic stress affects your body, your emotions, and the way you think in a negative way. It can include:

- Heart disease and stroke,
- Headaches, muscle, and joint pain,
- Sleep problems and feeling tired all the time,



- Mental health problems like mood swings, burnout, depression, substance-related problems, or anxiety,
- Hard time managing stressors, which can lead to conflicts,
- Tough time concentrating and focussing on tasks,
- Changes in appetite and weight, and
- Higher injury and illness risk.

This list is not complete. The way that toxic stress can affect a person depends on their body, their previous experiences, their cultural background and so much more. When there is not enough time to rest and relax, eventually the person will be overwhelmed by events and considering medical leave.

## **What causes work-related stress?**

Work stress can be caused by the type of work, the tools and space being used, and from how work is organized.

Some examples include:

- Not having control
- Conflicting demands
- Not being involved in decision-making
- Lack of training, direction, and clear responsibilities
- Overwork and bad shift schedules
- Job insecurity
- Violence and harassment
- Experiencing critical incidents
- Physical conditions like noise, vibrations, heat, overcrowding or poor air quality.

All these things and more cause or worsen stress at work. The work-related factors that affect the stress levels are called psychosocial hazards.



## **Intersectionality**

Members of equity-deserving groups may have additional stressors to deal with, like violence or discrimination based on race, culture, origin, ability, gender, or sexual orientation. Generational trauma, like from colonization or racism, can cause mistrust of the health care or security systems we typically count on for help. These are key factors to deliberately consider.

## **What can unions do about work-related stress?**

The first step is understanding how bad the problem is. Toxic stress can aggravate medical conditions or worsen injuries and illnesses.

If this affects one person, then the solutions could be individual, like accommodation or compensation. If this is a broader problem, then the occupational health and safety system should be examined by the joint health and safety committee or representative.

Solutions can be as varied as the people at work. These may include filing for compensation, negotiating an accommodations plan, developing a stress-prevention policy and program, running a survey – with or without the employer – discussing the matter in labour-management meetings, and raising awareness within the membership.

If you are looking for ways to deal with the work-related factors that add to stress, you can find more information on psychosocial hazards on the CUPE National Website, under Health and Safety.

You should check in with your CUPE Local Executive. They have access to resources and assistance that can help deal with these types of problems. These can be complex problems made easier to address with support.

## **Stress hazards and the law**

Employers are responsible for providing healthy and safe work. In some regions, CUPE members can access compensation for stress-related injuries and illnesses. However, Canada lacks clear explicit legislation and regulations around stress. Unions must advocate for legislation explicitly recognizing stress as a health and safety hazard.



## **Advocating for Change by Filing for Compensation**

Canadian compensation systems provide support for work-related injuries and illnesses. There is more research and medical evidence to support the work-related impacts of stress on workers' health and well-being.

This is why it is essential for CUPE members to file claims in cases of toxic stress. Filing claims for stress-related injuries and illnesses can challenge current practices. Remember, stress claims can also be included as a part of other claims, such as ergonomic injuries.

## **CUPE's commitment**

If you want more information about critical incidents, psychosocial hazards, work-related violence and harassment, how work-related stress can be managed, and more, you can find it by looking for information occupational health and safety on **[www.cupe.ca](http://www.cupe.ca)**.

**Efforts to reduce stress should be treated with the same level of dedication and diligence as other health and safety concerns. CUPE acknowledges work-related stress as a significant health and safety issue and is committed to eliminating it. For more detailed guidance, contact your national representative or visit [cupe.ca](http://cupe.ca).**