

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 feel stressed.

For example, you might feel normal stress if you lose something important and get anxious for a short time. Stress in work is also normal. Sometimes there is a deadline or a big project that is 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. This 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 how you think in a negative way. It can cause:

- 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
- Difficulty managing stressors, which can lead to conflicts
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing on tasks
- Changes in appetite and weight
- Higher injury and illness risk

This list is not complete. The way toxic stress affects a person depends on their body, their previous experiences, their cultural background and much more. When there is not enough time to rest and relax, the person may eventually become overwhelmed by events and consider medical leave.

What causes work-related stress?

Work stress can be caused by the type of work, the tools and space being used, and 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

The work-related factors that affect 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 identity or expression, or sexual orientation. Intergenerational trauma, like from colonization or racism, can cause mistrust of the health care or security systems we typically count on for help. Any action proposed must be respectful and inclusive.

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 work-related stress affects one person, then the solutions could be individual, like accommodation or compensation. If it 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 at cupe.ca.

You should also check in with your local executive. They have access to resources and assistance that can help deal with these types of problems. These complex problems can be 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 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

CUPE acknowledges work-related stress as a significant health and safety issue and is committed to eliminating it. Efforts to reduce stress should be treated with the same level of dedication and diligence as other health and safety concerns.

For more information about critical incidents, psychosocial hazards, work-related violence and harassment, how work-related stress can be managed and more, visit cupe.ca.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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