



OCCUPATIONAL STRESS FACTSHEET

Occupational stress is a major hazard for many workers. Increased workloads, downsizing, overtime, hostile work environments, and shiftwork are just a few of the many causes of stressful working conditions. This factsheet addresses some of the causes of workplace stress and solutions for change.

What is occupational stress?

The human body has a natural chemical response to a threat or demand, commonly known as the “flight or fight” reaction, which includes the release of adrenalin. Once the threat or demand is over the body can return to its natural state. A **STRESSOR** is an event or set of conditions that causes a stress response. **STRESS** is the body’s physiological response to the stressor, and **STRAIN** is the body’s longer-term reaction to chronic stress.

Occupational stress can affect your health when the stressors of the workplace exceed the employee’s ability to have some control over their situation or to cope in other ways. For example:

- ⇒ Workers are overburdened with workloads that remain high regardless of their efforts: the workload is the **STRESSOR**
- ⇒ Employees feel anxious and their heart rate speeds up because they can not control their workloads: that is **STRESS**
- ⇒ Increased blood pressure, insomnia, or chronic headaches: that is **STRAIN**

What are the sources of stress?

PEF members have experienced dramatic changes in the workplace. There has been a constant barrage of anti-government, anti-state worker rhetoric from inside and from outside of state service. Delayed state budgets, budget deficits, and prolonged contract negotiations have become the norm. This has led to stressful working conditions for PEF members faced with:

- ⇒ Downsizing/Privatization
- ⇒ Hiring freezes
- ⇒ Contingent work (e.g. part-time or temporary)
- ⇒ Shift work/Rotating schedules
- ⇒ Quality Programs/Worker Participation schemes

These changes foster an environment which gives rise to a number of sources of stress, including:

- ⇒ Little autonomy or control over one’s job
- ⇒ Non-existent career ladders
- ⇒ Inadequate resources to do the job
- ⇒ High demands, workload, time pressures
- ⇒ Lack of job security
- ⇒ Understaffing
- ⇒ Mandatory overtime
- ⇒ Violence/Harassment

How does stress affect you?

Acute, or short-term, stress causes an immediate reaction in the body. If the threat or demand passes quickly, the body generally returns to normal. However, with prolonged stress, many health problems can develop. Some of the early symptoms of stress-related problems include:

Physical Symptoms:

- ⇒ Headaches
- ⇒ Stomach problems
- ⇒ Eating disorders
- ⇒ Sleep disturbances
- ⇒ Fatigue
- ⇒ Muscle aches & pains
- ⇒ Chronic mild illnesses

Psychological & Behavioral:

- ⇒ Anxiety
- ⇒ Irritability
- ⇒ Low morale
- ⇒ Depression
- ⇒ Alcohol & drug use
- ⇒ Feeling powerless
- ⇒ Isolation from co-workers

If exposure to stressors continues for a longer period of time, chronic health problems can develop, such as:

Physical Conditions:

- High Blood Pressure
- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Spastic colon
- Immune system dysfunction
- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Musculoskeletal disorders

Psychological & Behavioral Problems:

- Serious depression
- Suicidal behavior
- Domestic violence
- Alcohol abuse
- Substance abuse
- Burnout

Strategies for solutions

Getting affected members to work together with union representatives is crucial in addressing occupational stress. Documenting the problem is an important first step. This could include worker surveys, hazard mapping, analyzing existing employer data such as injury & illness logs or workers' compensation data, or tracking staffing patterns.

Where management cooperation is viable, the union and affected members can engage in a joint process to identify occupational stressors and develop interventions that will reduce stress. This can be done through health and safety and labor/management committees and training and education programs. Strategies may include involving workers in job and workplace design, having input on shift schedules, and/or developing a workplace violence prevention policy or program.

Where management is not cooperative, the union can conduct its own campaign holding peer group meetings, filing mass grievances, or waging a public awareness campaign.

Recommended reading and websites

For more information on Occupational Stress, we recommend the following articles and booklets. Please feel free to contact PEF Health & Safety for copies.

- ⇒ The Changing Organization of Work and the Safety and Health of Working People. *NIOSH Publication # 2002-116*
- ⇒ Stop Stress at Work, a training workbook for working people. *Institute for Labor & the Community*
- ⇒ Plain Language About Shiftwork. *NIOSH Publication No. 97-145*
- ⇒ A Labor Perspective of Workplace Violence Prevention. *Jonathan Rosen, MS, CIH, American Journal of Preventative Medicine, volume 20, Number 2, 2001*
- ⇒ The Changing Organization of Work and the Safety and Health of Working People: A Commentary. *Paul Landsbergis, PhD, MPH, JOEM Volume 45, Number 1, January 2003*

Websites:

- ⇒ NIOSH (National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health): Stress at Work
<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress>
- ⇒ Take Back Your Time Day
<http://www.timeday.org>
- ⇒ Hazards Magazine:
Do-it-yourself Research:
<http://www.hazards.org/diyresearch>

- Overwork:
<http://www.hazards.org/getalife>

Upon request, PEF Occupational Safety & Health will provide other factsheets, standards, regulations, and other resources. Contact us at healthandsafety@pef.org or 518-785-1900, ext. 254 or 1-800-342-4306, ext. 254.

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