

Workplace Stress – General Fact Sheet



CAN “WORKPLACE STRESS” BE DEFINED?

We hear a lot about stress, but what is it? As stated by the Canadian Mental Health Association:

“Stress is a reaction to a situation – it isn’t about the actual situation. We usually feel stressed when we think that the demands of the situation are greater than our resources to deal with that situation. For example, someone who feels comfortable speaking in public may not worry about giving a presentation, while someone who isn’t confident in their skills may feel a lot of stress about an upcoming presentation. Common sources of stress may include major life events, like moving or changing jobs. Long-term worries, like a long-term illness or parenting, can also feel stressful. Even daily hassles like dealing with traffic can be a source of stress.”

Workplace stress then is the harmful physical and emotional responses that can happen when there is a conflict between job demands on the employee and the amount of control an employee has over meeting these demands. In general, the combination of high demands in a job and a low amount of control over the situation can lead to stress.

Stress in the workplace can have many origins or come from one single event. It can impact on both employees and employers alike. It is generally believed that some stress is okay (sometimes referred to as “challenge” or “positive stress”) but when stress occurs in amounts that you cannot handle, both mental and physical changes may occur.

I HAVE HEARD STRESS CAN BE BOTH GOOD AND BAD. IS THIS TRUE?

Stress is the body’s response to real or perceived threats. Today most of our problems cannot be solved with a fight or flight response. We have to work through our problems and find constructive solutions.

Stress is about reactions people have to the situations they face. These reactions are not the same from person to person. Some stress is expected and can be a positive force in our lives. In fact, it is often what provides us with the energy and motivation to meet our daily challenges both at home and at the workplace. This type of stress response is what helps you “rise” to a challenge and meet your goals such as deadlines, sales or production targets, or finding new clients. Some people would not consider this challenge a type of stress because, having met the challenge, we are satisfied and happy.

Feelings of negative stress usually increase when people believe the demands of a situation are greater than their ability to deal with it. Stress may prevent them from being productive. In some cases, people avoid dealing with a problem entirely, which may make the situation worse and increase stress to them and others around them.

When under a lot of stress, some may find it hard to concentrate, make decisions, and feel confident. Many people experience physical sensations like sweating, a racing heart, or tense muscles.

Stress can also have long term impact on physical health. Headaches and fatigue are common symptoms of being under stress. People are also more likely to get sick or experience a decline in their health.

WHAT CAUSES STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE?

There is no one cause of stress in the workplace. Every worker is an individual with their professional and personal lives bringing different factors that may influence their reactions to conditions in the workplace. However, there are factors within workplaces that have been shown to influence feelings of stress in the workplace. Some examples include:

Categories of Job Stressors	Examples of Sources of Stress
Task Design	• workload (overload and underload) • pace / variety / meaningfulness of work • adequate time to complete a task • autonomy (e.g., the ability to make your own decisions about our own job or about specific tasks) • shiftwork / hours of work • skills / abilities do not match job demands • lack of training and/or preparation (technical and social) • lack of appreciation • isolation at the workplace (emotional or working alone)
Role in the organization	• role conflict (conflicting job demands, too many roles, multiple supervisors/managers) • uncertain job expectations/role ambiguity (lack of clarity about responsibilities, expectations, etc.) • level of responsibility
Career development	• under/over-promotion • job security/insecurity (fear of redundancy either from economy, or a lack of tasks or work to do) • lack of career development opportunities, growth, or advancement • overall job satisfaction

Relationships at work (Interpersonal)	• supervisors (conflicts or lack of support) • coworkers (conflicts or lack of support) • threat of violence, harassment, etc. (threats to personal safety) • lack of trust • lack of systems in workplace available to report and deal with unacceptable behaviour • prejudice or discrimination
Organizational structure/ climate/ management style	• participation (or non-participation) in decision-making • communication patterns (poor communication / information flow) • little recognition for good job performance • lack of systems in workplace available to respond to concerns • not engaging employees when undergoing organizational change • lack of perceived fairness (who gets what when, and the processes through which decisions are made). Feelings of unfairness magnify the effects of perceived stress on health • lack of support (such as family-friendly policies, employee assistance programs, etc.)
Work-Life Balance	• role/responsibility conflicts • family exposed to work-related hazards
Workplace Conditions/ Concerns	• exposure to unpleasant conditions (e.g., crowding, smells, etc.) • exposure to hazards (e.g., ergonomics, chemical, noise, air quality, temperature, etc.)

CAN STRESS NEGATIVELY AFFECT OUR HEALTH AND SAFETY?

Yes, stress can have an impact on your overall health. Our bodies are designed, pre-programmed if you wish, with a set of automatic responses to deal with stress. The problem is that our bodies deal with all types of stress in the same way. Experiencing stress for long periods of time (such as lower level but constant stressors at work) will activate this system, but it doesn't get the chance to "turn off".

Common effects of stress on the body include:

- headache
- muscle tension or pain
- chest pains
- increased heart rate and blood pressure
- weakened immune system
- fatigue / insomnia
- stomach and digestive issues
- high blood sugar
- increased cholesterol and fatty acids in blood for energy production systems

Stress can also affect your mood or thinking by:

- increasing forgetfulness, anxiety, restlessness, irritability, defensiveness, mood swings, hypersensitivity, anger, etc.
- decreasing ability to think clearly or focus

Stress can contribute to incidents because people often:

- sleep poorly
- self- or over-medicate themselves
- feel depressed
- feel anxious, jittery and nervous
- become angry and reckless (often due to a sense of unfairness or injustice)

When people engage in these behaviours or are in these emotional states, they are more likely to:

- become momentarily (but dangerously) distracted
- feel withdrawn or isolated from others
- have outbursts, etc.
- neglect responsibilities
- make errors in judgment
- put their bodies under physical stress, increasing the potential for strains and sprains
- react poorly in normal activities that require hand-eye or foot-eye coordination

Untreated long term (chronic) stress has been reported to be associated with health conditions such as:

- anxiety
- insomnia
- muscle pain
- high blood pressure
- weakened immune system
- heart disease
- depression
- obesity

WHAT CAN EMPLOYERS DO TO ADDRESS STRESS IN THEIR WORKPLACE?

There are many strategies that can help control stress and reduce its impact to a person or in the workplace. Since the causes of workplace stress vary greatly, so do the strategies to reduce or prevent it.

Where stress in the workplace is caused, for example, by a physical agent, it is best to control it at its source. If the workplace is too loud, control measures to deal with the noise should be implemented where ever possible. If you are experiencing pain from repetitive strain, workstations can be re-designed to reduce repetitive and strenuous movements.

Job design is also an important factor. Good job design accommodates an employee's mental and physical abilities. In general, the following job design guidelines will help minimize or control workplace stress:

- the job should be reasonably demanding (but not based on "sheer endurance") and provide the employee with at least a minimum of variety in job tasks
- the employee should be able to learn on the job and be allowed to continue to learn as their career progresses

- the job should comprise some area of decision-making that the individual can call his or her own.
- there should be some degree of social support and recognition in the workplace
- the employee should feel that the job leads to some sort of desirable future

Employers should assess the workplace for the risk of stress. Look for:

- pressures at work which could cause high and/or long lasting levels of stress, and
- who may be harmed by these pressures.

Determine what can be done to prevent the pressures from becoming negative stressors.

Employers can address stress in many ways.

DO

- Treat all employees in a fair and respectful manner.
- Take stress seriously and be understanding to staff under too much pressure.
- Be aware of the signs and symptoms that a person may be having trouble coping with stress.
- Involve employees in decision-making and allow for their input directly or through committees, etc.
- Encourage managers to have an understanding attitude.
- Be proactive by looking for signs of stress among their staff.
- Provide workplace health and wellness programs that target the true source of the stress. The source of stress at work can be from any number of causes – safety, ergonomics, job demands, etc. Survey the employees and ask them to help identify the root cause(s).
- Incorporate stress prevention or positive mental health promotion in policies or your corporate mission statement.
- Make sure staff has the training, skills and resources they need to be successful in their positions.
- Design jobs to allow for a balanced workload. Allow employees to have control over the tasks they do as much as possible.
- Value and recognize individuals' results and skills.
- Provide support.
- Be clear about job expectations.
- Make sure job demands are reasonable by providing manageable deadlines, hours of work, and clear duties as well as work that is interesting and varied.
- Provide access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) for those who wish to attend.

DO NOT

- Do not tolerate bullying or harassment in any form.
- Do not ignore signs that employees are under pressure or feeling stressed.
- Do not forget that elements of the workplace itself can be a cause of stress. Stress management training and counselling services can be helpful to individuals, but do not forget to look for the root cause of the stress and to address these causes as quickly as possible.

IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO TO HELP MYSELF DEAL WITH THE STRESS I AM EXPERIENCING AT WORK?

There are many ways to be proactive when dealing with stress. Mental fitness, self help, taking healthy steps, stress management training, and counselling services can

be helpful to individuals, but do not forget to look for the root cause(s) of the stress and take steps to address them.

However, in some cases, the origin of the stress is something that cannot be changed immediately. Therefore, finding ways to help maintain personal good mental health is also essential.

ARE THERE ORGANIZATIONS THAT CAN HELP?

Yes, there are many. Your family doctor can often recommend a professional for you. Other examples include the Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or associations such as the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) or the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) to name just a few.

- EAP programs are confidential, short term, counselling services for employees with problems that affect their work performance. The services of EAP providers are often purchased by your company. Check with your human resources department (or equivalent) for contact information.
- CMHA's programs are meant to ensure that people whose mental health is endangered will find the help needed to cope with crisis, regain confidence, and return to community, family and job.
- The CCSA promotes informed debate on substance abuse issues, and disseminates information on the nature, and assists organizations involved in substance abuse treatment, prevention and educational programming.

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