# Stress at Work

#### What is stress?

Stress is the body's response to physical and mental demands.

Stress is not just a problem in our minds. Our bodies have an "emergency response" that occurs when we are under stress. For example, when we have to run for a bus, parts of our body gear up to deal with the emergency. This response helps us run fast enough to get the bus. Our heart rate and blood pressure increase. Sugar is released into the blood. Our breathing becomes faster. Other parts of our body slow down. Our digestion slows down. Our immune (disease-fighting) system partly shuts down.

Once we get on the bus, our bodies quickly relax. The body needs this time to rest and recover after being stressed. Workers are at risk for health problems when their bodies are always responding to stress and not easily able to return to a relaxed state.

# Early signs of stress include

- headache
- upset stomach
- sleep problems
- difficulty concentrating
- quick to get angry

# What is workplace stress?

We experience stress at work when we are not able to meet the demands of our job. You may not be able to meet the demands of your job for reasons such as

- the amount of time you have to finish a task
- the tools you have to do a job
- the workplace rules you must follow

The most stressful jobs place heavy demands on the worker but give the worker very little control over how to do the job. Stress can be made worse when you feel a lack of support from your supervisor and co-workers.

# How stress at work affects your health

Stress can affect your health when you are exposed to stressful working conditions over a long period. Your ability to cope with stress decreases with time. Stress at work often affects your life outside work. It affects your

- mental and emotional well being
- behaviour
- physical health

People respond to stress in different ways. You may feel frustrated, angry or nervous. Your behavior may change. You may increase your use of alcohol or smoke more. You may not want to see friends and family.

Stress over a long period of time can also cause or worsen health problems such as

- heart disease
- diabetes
- stomach and bowel problems
- asthma
- depression and anxiety
- back, shoulder & neck disorders

#### What causes stress at work?

Physical work environment
Noise
Poor ventilation
Poor lighting
Too hot or too cold
Poor workstation or tool design



#### Job design

Too much supervision
Shift work
Too much work
No decision-making
Not enough different kinds of tasks
Unclear job demands

#### Social & economic conditions

No job security
Discrimination (based on race, disability, age, sex)
Changes or layoffs at work
New technology
High unemployment
Increased competition

## What can your employer do?

Workplace stress is a serious health concern. Employers have a legal responsibility to provide a healthy work environment. The best way to reduce stressful work is to eliminate its causes. Employers can identify the causes of stress and find ways to improve the work environment, such as:

- clearly define jobs and responsibilities
- give workers a say in how they do their jobs
- give workers opportunities to learn new skills
- allow time for social interactions among workers
- make work schedules flexible for responsibilities outside of work
- clearly communicate about job security and change

Support from others helps reduce the negative effects of stress. There are many places to find support in the workplace — coworkers, management and union. Some ways to provide support to workers include

- provide a program to give counseling to individuals for personal and work-related problems, such as an Employee Assistance Program
- create "family-friendly" programs such as on-site child care and flexible work hours
- develop ways to resolve workplace conflict

### What can you do?

There is no simple solution to workplace stress. A good first step is to identify the causes of stress at your workplace. Some problems may be easier to solve than others.

Bring your workplace stress concerns to your joint health and safety committee, if you have one. Join with others at your workplace to reduce stress for everyone.

Try some of these ideas to help you deal with stress. Use the ones best suited for you. Remember, these ideas work best if the causes of stress at work are reduced.

- ✓ Exercise regularly
- ✓ Get enough sleep
- ✓ Eat a healthy diet
- ✓ Limit caffeine and alcohol use
- ✓ Try relaxation exercises such as yoga, deep breathing or meditation
- ✓ Talk about your feelings with someone you trust. Consider seeing a professional counselor.
- See your health care provider if you have ongoing symptoms of stress.

If you need more information, visit the following websites:

Canadian Mental Health Association www.cmha.ca

Mental Health Works www.mentalhealthworks.ca

Antidepressant Skills Workbook www.comh.ca/antidepressant-skills/adult/index.cfm

You can also contact:

MFL Occupational Health Centre, Inc.

102 - 275 Broadway

Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 4M6 Phone: 204-949-0811

Fax: 204-956-0848

Toll Free: 1-888-843-1229 (Manitoba only)

Email: mflohc@mflohc.mb.ca Website: www.mflohc.mb.ca

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