

Stop stress at work

A guide for workers

Draft for discussion

***ACTU OHS Unit
October 2000***

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This guide contains information about the causes of stress at work, and ideas and strategies to help prevent it.

It is designed to help workers and their workplace representatives deal with the day to day working conditions which are causing stress.

As with all health and safety hazards, the causes of stress at work should be eliminated or reduced wherever possible.

This draft has been released for public consultation. Please forward comments to the ACTU OHS Unit by fax on (03) 9663 8220 or by e-mail to ohs@actu.asn.au. The closing date for comment is 31 January 2001.

'the answer to stress at work is in the workplace'

Foreword

Stress at work is a significant occupational health and safety problem in Australia. However, the ACTU believes that it is not receiving enough attention from governments and employers, who have the responsibility to make sure people are not injured or made ill by their work.

The ACTU and unions have been campaigning for greater recognition of the occupational health and safety problems caused by stress. Our 1997 national survey on stress at work found that people are suffering a range of ill-health effects, and over one in four had taken time off work due to stress.

The 1995 Australian Workplace and Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS) found that 26% of employees across Australian workplaces reported suffering from stress at work. It was the second most reported illness/injury after sprains and strains. Research suggests a link between stress at work and sprains and strains, particularly a higher risk of risk of back and upper body injuries.

While some jobs, such as air traffic controllers, hospital staff, police, social workers and teachers for example, can be inherently stressful, there are few working environments which are immune from stress. The need to prevent stress at work must be recognised and addressed in all industries and professions.

Improvements in working conditions and health and safety are more likely when where workers and unions are fully involved in identifying problems and developing solutions. This applies to the prevention of stress, as it does to any other occupational health and safety issue.

Despite union efforts to get them to do more, we believe that neither employers nor government are taking these issues seriously enough.

The risk is that because governments and employers are not fully acknowledging the extent of stress at work, Australia will have a growing epidemic of stress-related illness before any effective strategies are developed.

This is why unions are again taking the lead in health and safety, with the release of this guide.

Sharan Burrow
ACTU President
October 2000

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1. WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a combination of physical and psychological reactions to events which challenge or threaten us. In 'normal' circumstances, the stress response is a powerful, protective mechanism, which allows us to deal with sudden changes, dangers or immediate demands.

Health and safety problems arise when we are exposed to constant pressures over a period of time, from which we cannot escape. We will feel stressed and experience physical and emotional responses which can be harmful when we:

- have to cope with responsibilities or demands connected with our jobs, but find difficulty, strain or worry in doing so
- cannot meet excessive demands and pressures in our jobs
- are not provided with support or sufficient resources by employers to match the requirements of our jobs, or our capabilities and needs

- *A sense of being overwhelmed to perform to management expectations with less human resources (male, 30-40, administration officer)*
- *Workload is increasing day by day and workers get told at the last minute. (male, 20-30, labourer)*
- *Excessive demands to do a 'complete' job but you're stretched left/right, past capacity (female, 20-30, customer service representative)*

– From the ACTU 1997 survey on stress at work

There is no such thing as 'good stress'. It is often claimed that stress can motivate us, and improve job performance. While it is desirable to have jobs and workplaces which are stimulating or challenging, stress at work results in health and safety effects which are not good for anyone. (See the next section.)

Use of terms such as 'good stress' and 'bad stress' can lead to blaming the victim for feeling stressed by causes beyond their control.

Burnout

Allowing stressful working conditions to continue can result in 'burnout' for some individuals. Burnout is a progressive state of physical and mental exhaustion brought about by unrelieved stress at work.

Symptoms of burnout include:

- physical and mental exhaustion
- negative feelings, and deteriorating self image
- feelings of helplessness and hopelessness

Burnout typically results in long periods of ill health for sufferers, severely reducing their capacity to participate in daily life.

Post-traumatic stress

In some jobs, people can be exposed to situations such as natural disasters, fires, road accidents, murders and assaults. Where people are exposed to such traumatic situations, or where they are constantly exposed to the suffering of others, they may experience post-traumatic stress.

Post-traumatic stress is a very severe reaction to traumatic events. Sufferers require professional counselling and care.

The measures described in this guide are not intended to deal with post-traumatic stress.

2. HOW STRESS AFFECTS HEALTH AND SAFETY

Human beings react to the external world via complex physical, biochemical and psychological systems, which interact and affect each other. What happens to the body affects how we feel and think. Our mental state can directly affect the functioning of our body.

What happens in the body

When faced with external demands or threats – or *stressors* – the human body automatically undergoes a series of physical and biochemical responses. This is sometimes called the 'flight or fight' response. It is a survival mechanism which we share with other animals, as a means of preparing to confront or run away from threats.

Adrenalin and other hormones, cholesterol and fatty acids are released into the bloodstream, the heart beats faster, and the nervous system 'revs up'. We may perspire more, the muscles tense involuntarily, and we breathe faster and more shallowly.

The stress response prepares the body for some type of physical activity - such as running, which if undertaken allow the body to quickly return to a 'non-stressed' state. The stress response is not meant to be prolonged.

Chronic or prolonged stress, which results in the physical and biochemical changes described above being sustained over long periods, affects our health. Chronic stress results in a build-up of cholesterol and fats in the arteries, which is a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

This kind of chronic stress is typical in workplaces where there are overwhelming demands, little control over the situation, and no relief in sight.

How stress affects mental health

According to the World Federation for Mental Health, the 'darker side of the global economy' has resulted in a crisis in mental health. Depression and heart disease are set to become the major public and occupational health issues. Both are linked to stress at work.

When we find ourselves in stressful situations, and can neither fight nor run away, a common reaction is to suppress our feelings and 'soldier on'. However, internalising stress in this way can produce the physical and biochemical effects described above, as well as psychological effects.

The psychological effects of prolonged stress are very real. We may lose concentration, confidence and motivation, or feel frustrated, helpless or angry. These effects can lead to a deterioration in mental health. In extreme cases, stress at work can lead to suicide, particularly when related to bullying.

Significant increases in depression, anxiety and emotional exhaustion were found in workers in a large hospital which was undergoing extensive restructuring and downsizing.

– Medical Care, 1999; 37,6

How stress makes us feel

When we are exposed to chronic, prolonged stress at work, we may experience any of a range of physical and psychological symptoms, such as:

- frequent headaches
- back aches and other muscular aches and pains
- cramps in the neck, shoulders or arms
- continual tiredness, even exhaustion
- poor memory, trouble concentrating
- feeling frustrated and irritable or angry
- feeling weepy or tearful
- loss of energy and motivation
- feeling anxious, helpless or afraid
- apathy and hopelessness
- changes in appetite and weight
- sleep difficulties
- generally feeling worn out or run down

How stress makes us sick

Chronic stress can cause or worsen a range of ill-health problems, which can severely affect quality of life. These include:

- asthma
- psoriasis
- peptic ulcers
- digestive disorders and irritable bowel syndrome
- sexual problems
- depression
- alcohol and drug use

Over the long term, prolonged exposure to stress has been linked to serious illnesses including:

- diabetes
- heart disease
- increased risk of breast cancer in women
- suppression of the immune system cells involved in fighting cancer

The harm stress at work causes to the immune system is significant. A 1998 study by Sheldon Cohen, a psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States, showed that people exposed to chronic stress are three to five times more likely to catch a cold (viral infection) than others. The same study

found that those who faced a single, major stressful event in a year were not especially vulnerable. It is chronic stress that is more harmful.

Stress is a safety hazard

Stress at work doesn't only hurt our health, it also makes us more at risk of injury. Many studies have found links between stressful work and injuries.

Where stress levels are high, injuries are also high. There are two inter-related reasons:

- working conditions that cause stress can also cause injury
- when we are overworked, under pressure, unsupported or even bullied at work, we are more vulnerable to injuries

Stressed out workers get hurt more often, especially when:

- working in dangerous situations, eg on construction sites
- handling/using plant and equipment
- lifting, moving or carrying heavy objects or people
- maintaining static and/or awkward postures
- carrying out boring and/or repetitive tasks, such as process work and using computers
- having to concentrate or maintain constant vigilance

An International Labour Organisation (ILO) study found that 'of all the factors related to the causes of accidents, only one emerged as a common denominator: a high level of stress at the time the accident occurred'.

Research also shows that when workers are afraid of losing their jobs, they have more accidents, strain injuries, and sick leave.

Stress affects relations with fellow workers

Stress can often show itself as anger, so it is no surprise that the risk of conflict between workers may be higher in stressed workplaces. Rather than pulling together, workers may start to feel isolated, resentful, and powerless.

Often we are deliberately put in competition with each other by management. Management techniques such as electronic surveillance and performance monitoring, are designed to, and all too often do, pit workers against each other.

Stress impacts on personal and social life

Our lives beyond work can be greatly influenced by stress. The more stress we are exposed to at work, the greater the effect on personal and social life. These are not luxuries. We all have the right to be able to enjoy our life outside work.

Stress at work can have a snowball effect, producing irritability and anger in personal relationships and affecting participation in social, community and cultural events.

Stress at work can make it hard to balance work and family. Almost 12% of respondents to the 1997 ACTU national survey reported difficulties organising childcare. Single parents face additional burdens such as inadequate income, exhaustion, and difficulties with shiftwork rosters.

Stress at work takes a heavy toll on families in anger, impatience, sadness and exhaustion. We may lose interest in, or feel too tired for, personal activities and relationships. A reduced interest in sex can be an additional source of strain in relationships.

In an effort to downplay their responsibility to reduce stress at work, employers often exaggerate the effects of personal life/stresses on work, and ignore the significant effects which work can have on personal life. The truth is more complex. Stress at work can create a vicious circle.

3. Less choice means more stress

People think that stress mostly affects those in positions of responsibility, such as managers and senior executives. It is true that these positions can be stressful, but the people who suffer most from stress are those with the least control over the way their work is done.

Lack of control over our work, and the stress it creates, can make us sick.

Having little control has been strongly related to increased risks of lower back pain, increased sickness absence from work, and cardiovascular disease. Inability to express frustration or anger, or to change or get away from stressful situations is a strong predictor of developing heart problems.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as a state of physical, mental and social well-being, not just the absence of injury or disease. Well-being includes self esteem, job satisfaction, and a sense of control over our lives. It also means being able to participate in the community, pursue personal and collective dreams, and enjoy the full benefits of society.

In 1998, the WHO released a report called 'The Solid Facts - The Social Determinants of Health', which names stress at work and stress in life generally as two of the ten key determinants of poor health.

The report concludes that stress at work increases the risk of disease. The increased risk does not depend on individual psychological characteristics, but is more related to the environments we work in.

The well known 'Whitehall Study', which has tracked the health of over 10,000 British civil servants for 15 years, has confirmed that our health is related to our position in society. The study found that health follows a 'social gradient'. Senior executives suffer less health effects than middle management, who in turn suffer less than workers in clerical positions. There was an increase in ill health with every step down the pay/social structure.

The study measured the effects of work characteristics including decision latitude (control), job demands and level of social support at work, and found that unequal work leads to unequal health outcomes. This is independent of other risk factors.

Work characteristic	Associated with:
low decision latitude [little control]	poor mental health alcohol dependence poor health functioning increased sickness absence
high job demands	poor mental health poor health functioning
low social support at work	poor mental health poor health functioning
combination of high effort and low rewards	poor mental health alcohol dependence poor health functioning increased length of sickness absence

UK Health and Safety Executive, Work related factors and ill health - The Whitehall 2 Study

If a manager and a worker both smoke 20 cigarettes a day, the worker is more likely to develop smoking-related illness than the manager.

– Helen Epstein, NY Review of Books, 16/7/98

It's not your fault!

Most people react to the same kinds of stress in similar or identical ways. To be affected by stress at work is not a sign of personal weakness. Around the world, studies are showing that stress is due to factors in the workplace.

It is also common for management to blame workers for being stressed or to talk about workers needing to have better 'coping' skills. We are told that we are stressed because we don't know how to relax, and/or that we don't live healthy lifestyles.

If anything at all is done about stress, it is to offer 'stress management' courses for pressured and overloaded workers.

Little or nothing is done to remove the real causes of stress at work, or to put the responsibility for safe and healthy workplaces where it belongs – with employers and management.

Poor management is no excuse for stress at work.

4. RESTRUCTURING OF THE WORKPLACE IS A STRESS HAZARD

Increased stress is the result of major changes in the workplace over the last twenty years. Deregulation, privatisation, restructuring and downsizing have increased the pace and pressure of work for many Australians.

The growth in casual and temporary work and 'contracting out' have led to increased job insecurity, which creates a climate where people are feeling constantly under threat at work.

The push for ever higher productivity and cost cutting most often results in inadequate staffing and resources, high workloads, and a culture of long hours. These are among the most stressful working conditions in Australia today.

It's no surprise that many employers and governments, who are pushing even further deregulation of the economy and of industrial relations, do not want to talk about or fully acknowledge stress at work.

At the 1998 ACTU Conference on Stress at Work, Professor Malcolm Rimmer outlined the four profound changes occurring in workplace in the 1990s:

- changes in work time
- changes in job security
- changes in task demands
- changes in union presence and management sophistication

These changes mean:

- full time workers are working longer hours, while there is also a growth in part time, casual, and other non-standard hours
- enterprise bargaining benefits the well organised (unionised) workplaces, but conditions and protections for other workers are reduced
- forced redundancies and increasing staff turnover are common

Professor Rimmer also points to a trend accompanying these changes, which is to increase responsibility down the line, whilst at the same time stripping or severely reducing staff and resources provided to cope with it.

This growing mismatch between the demands placed upon employees, and their capacity to meet them, is giving rise to increasing stress at work.

5. WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?

Employers

Under state and territory health and safety laws, employers have a legal duty to provide a healthy and safe workplace and safe systems of work. This includes providing a working environment where the risk of stress is eliminated or minimised.

The details of health and safety laws vary between the states and territories, but there are certain basic requirements which employers must fulfil. They include:

- consultation with workers and elected representatives on working conditions and health and safety at work
- appropriate and timely action to eliminate or 'control' health and safety hazards
- provision of appropriate information, training, instruction and supervision
- monitoring of working conditions and the health of workers
- provision of appropriate welfare facilities for all workers
- maintaining information and records about working conditions and any dangerous occurrences at work

Employers have an equal obligation whether workers are full time, part time and/or casual, and have an obligation not only to direct employees, but also to employees of labour hire companies, and to contractors and their employees.

Employers should be aware of the risks of placing impossible demands on employees, and must ensure that employees receive appropriate support, training and resources.

Employers largely control where we work, when we work and how we work. While they have the power to determine those things, they also have the duty to ensure that the places where we work are healthy and safe. When it isn't safe, or when people are made sick, it's the employer's fault. It is that simple.

Because there's no promotion opportunities, allow people to do the task they are good at and can cope with. Instead, because of understaffing, they are enforcing 'multi-skilling' which is only 'multi-tasking' and some feel under stress to out perform their capabilities. (male, 40-50, customer service operator)

Management

The role of management as a source of stress at work, whether through uncaring, incompetent, authoritarian management practices, or through intimidation and bullying, has been identified in *all* surveys on stress at work.

Better management practices, and more communication and consultation at work, are the foundation for implementing solutions to stress at work.

I think the management need to be reminded of their accountability. They have become arrogant, inaccessible and dishonest. (female, 30-40, community nurse)

A management practice where a manager asks 'would I be happy/satisfied if this was done to me?' and means it! Management should adopt the ethic of 'is it right, is it true, will it do harm?' (male, 40-50, public servant)

Most management continues to have a poor track record when it comes to genuinely involving workers in decision-making at work. This is despite mountains of evidence that the participation of workers in workplace decisions results in less health and safety problems, and a better working environment.

Less secretive management - very important. Management should involve employees in changes re decision-making. (female, 30-40, customer service representative)

Unfortunately, employers often claim they are consulting when really they are just 'telling' workers about decisions they have already made. Watch out if:

- a few token staff are 'consulted' or designated as 'team leaders', but there are no formal mechanisms for everyone to have some input or to give ongoing feedback
- workers are given more 'responsibility', but little discretion or control over the work

It's quite simple:

1. *increase staffing to adequate levels*
2. *share workload and employment equitably*
3. *break the vicious cycle of escalating demands for both quantity and quality of output while cutting funding!*
4. *refute the assumption that we have no family commitments and need for recreation. (male, 40-50, academic)*

Governments

Governments have a clear responsibility to ensure that people are not killed, maimed or made sick by their work. Governments must be *actively* involved in preventing occupational injury and disease.

Governments must

- set appropriate health and safety standards
- enact legislation and regulations and ensure they are enforced
- conduct research into new and existing health and safety problems, to both discover the nature and extent of the problems, and find solutions to them
- ensure that the whole community is aware and educated about health and safety issues and their solutions, and of their rights and responsibilities with regard to health and safety at work

We need more research, information and education about the causes of and solutions to stress at work.

It is not good enough for governments to rely on the duty of care alone. We need codes of practice or approved codes of conduct. These should acknowledge the recognised causes of stress at work, and include concrete measures for employers to use to prevent stress.

Governments need to ensure that workplace health and safety inspectors are better trained to recognise signs and symptoms of stress, so that they can support and assist stressed workers.

Where employers are responsible for stress injuries, they should be prosecuted as for any other work-related injury.

Employees

To the extent that they can, employees should not put at risk the health and safety of themselves or others. Employees must also cooperate with policies developed to protect health and safety in the workplace. However, too often employees are not able to refuse to undertake work which is a risk to their health and safety, due to fear of discrimination, harassment or job loss.

6. IS THIS YOUR WORKPLACE?

Stress at work is caused by exposure to a combination of workplace conditions or demands which are placed on workers - sometimes called *stressors*. Studies and surveys from around the world, including the ACTU national survey, have consistently identified common causes of stress. These include:

Difficult relations between workers and management. - range from simple lack of communication and consultation to harassment, intimidation and bullying of workers by management.

Work overload - related to working too hard and too fast, unreasonable demands, impossible targets, inadequate time and resources to satisfactorily complete jobs, and feelings of being overwhelmed, swamped and exhausted.

Job insecurity - fear of redundancy, no permanence of position, being put on short-term or casualisation contracts, lack of career opportunities and little or no recognition or reward for a job well done, particularly in jobs where the pay is low.

Too much change to the structure of the workplace and the way work is organised, often combined with feelings that the services provided to customers and public are declining.

Inadequate staff and resources - and/or equipment that is continually breaking down because it is poorly maintained or overdue for replacement. When staff leave they are seldom replaced, and those left behind are expected to pick up the workload.

Unresolved health and safety issues - such as exposure to chemicals; noise, overcrowding; poor facilities; extremes of temperature; manual handling hazards; or working alone can all contribute to stress at work.

Excessive performance monitoring and surveillance at work, either directly by management and/or electronically is an unnecessary source of stress.

Poor work organisation - lack of clear job descriptions, conflicting demands, too much or too little work, lots of responsibility - but little authority or decision-making, boring and/or repetitive work, and lack of job satisfaction.

Insufficient training - loss of experienced staff, increased use of casuals, new technology, and rapid change place many workers in positions where they are doing work which they do not feel adequately trained to handle.

Dangerous hours - expectations to work longer hours, more overtime, work through breaks, take work home and shift rosters that are unpredictable or make it difficult to balance work and family, are causing stress and fatigue.

Difficulties dealing with clients/general public - in occupations which involve contact with the public, abuse and threats of violence from clients and

customers upset by declining standards of service and/or reductions in benefits provided by governments.

*The more of these conditions we have in our workplaces, the higher the risk of stress. The survey at **Appendix One** can help to identify the causes and symptoms of stress at work.*

'Stress is the natural outcome of lack of confidence in the future of our jobs and what new jobs we may have to do to retain employment.' (female, 50+, library officer)

If they didn't keep such a close check on us - we wouldn't feel like we were being pressured all the time to perform - I find it easier to work to my ability without having someone watching over my shoulder waiting for me to make a mistake (female, 20-30, clerk)

7. ORGANISING TO STOP STRESS AT WORK

While it is government and management who are responsible for addressing health and safety problems at work, history shows that without pressure from workers and unions, little or nothing will be done.

Improvements to working conditions and health and safety have been led by ordinary people speaking up in their workplaces and in the wider community.

We need to:

- make stress prevention a central issue for workers, employers and occupational health and safety authorities
- organise to improve working conditions, including job design, workloads and hours of work
- stop workplace bullying and harassment
- ensure that legislation, regulations and awards improve health and safety and reduce stress at work
- use collective agreements to deal with the causes of stress identified in workplaces

Getting started

→ *Talk with your fellow workers*

Often, the first step towards solving the stress problems is to talk about them. Are other people at work experiencing any of the symptoms associated with stress? Do people feel that the workplace is a stressful, unpleasant environment?

Gather and distribute information using posters, stickers, leaflets or other means. Sometimes just leaving information in places where people can see and read it can spark discussion of the issues.

→ *Document the issues*

- keep a diary of events, including any approaches made to the employer
- get others to do the same, or maybe one person keeps a record for the whole work area
- individuals may like to keep personal health and safety diaries
- check the first aid and sick leave records to see if there are high levels of absenteeism or injuries, and see if these have changed over time

There are other tools which can be used:

- survey workers, using a survey like the one at **Appendix One**
- map the workplace, so workers can mark in where and what they think are the causes and solutions of stress – see **Appendix Two**

The surveys and maps can be used to assist discussions between fellow workers, to raise the issues with management or employers and to help in identifying solutions.

Keeping records helps to:

- identify the causes and possible solutions
- ensure that details and events are not forgotten or misrepresented later
- assemble witness statements and other evidence to support the case
- ensure the employer will not be able to argue that he/she was not aware of stress in the workplace

Talking, recording, and doing surveys are all excellent ways of supporting each other.

→ **Organise meetings**

It is worthwhile to hold meetings of the workers to discuss the causes and possible solutions to stress in your workplace.

Start with your health and safety representative and your shop steward if you have them in your workplace. If there are no workplace representatives or committee, this is a good time to elect them.

There is no need to hold the initial meeting in the workplace.

At the meeting, people should have the chance to 'get things off their chest', and to express their feelings, but without causing conflict between workers. After talking about the problems, a good starting point might be, 'what would make this a better place to work?'

Use the survey results or workplace 'map' to help discussion.

Make a list of the possible solutions to stress in your workplace. They will probably mirror the causes already identified. Prioritise these in order of importance and/or where it might best be possible to get immediate improvements.

→ **Develop solutions**

Develop concrete proposals which you all believe will help to eliminate or reduce stress in your workplace, not just vague ideas. It's hard to argue against well thought out, fair and reasonable demands.

Don't be timid – problems are never solved without taking the first steps.

Concrete proposals provide a starting point for discussion between workers, workplace representatives and management, however negotiations may result in outcomes different from your original proposals.

Always include a timeline for action, and for progress reports back to workers. This can be done at union meetings or at special health and safety meetings.

Use the health and safety law

Australian state and territory laws vary in the legal support they give to workplace health and safety committees and/or elected employee health and safety representatives. Check with your state Trades and Labour Council for the legal position of health and safety representatives and/or committees in your state.

Generally, health and safety laws give rights and protections to health and safety representatives and/or committee members. Use these rights and workplace processes to participate in developing policies and solutions.

If the problems cannot be solved at the workplace, a union organiser or health and safety officer may be able to help. Contact the union for advice. If you are not in a union but want advice, contact the ACTU Helpline on 1300 362 223.

If the employer is unwilling to listen or to make improvements, it may be necessary to use other methods, for example:

→ *Provisional Improvement Notices*

In most states and in Commonwealth workplaces, elected health and safety representatives have the legal right to issue a Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN) to order an employer to fix a health and safety problem.

PINs can be used for stress as for any health and safety issue. Through issuing a PIN, the health and safety representative gives the employer time to fix the problems.

→ *Cease work orders*

If work is an immediate risk to health and safety, Commonwealth and some state laws allow health and safety representatives to order that the work stop immediately.

→ *Government health and safety inspector*

You may have the right to request assistance from a government health and safety inspector. This can include a request for a workplace inspection.

Again, the law varies between states and territories, so check with your union or Trades and Labour Council.

Using other tools

→ *Award clauses*

Health and safety is no longer an 'allowable award matter' under the 1996 Workplace Relations Act. However, hours of work and rest breaks at work are allowable and should be enforceable by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) through conciliation and arbitration.

The various forms of leave – annual, long service, sick leave, personal carers and family leave – are also allowable and minimum award requirements. These are all important to prevent stress at work.

Staffing levels and particularly workloads may be 'incidental' to allowable award matters, or considered necessary for the 'proper administration of the award'.

→ **Collective agreements**

Collective agreements should always aim to improve health and safety at work. It is important that working conditions are not in any way eroded and care must be taken that hours of work, staffing levels, workloads and how work is organised do not increase the risk of stress at work.

It is important to note that collective agreements are not limited to allowable award matters. They can be used to secure enforceable employer commitments on health and safety issues that are not adequately covered by legislation, but are still 'industrial' matters in the workplace.

For example, rest breaks for employees on keyboard work as a term of an agreement can be enforceable by the Commission if the employer is not allowing the breaks and this has created a dispute over application of the agreement.

Better shift arrangements, work breaks, staffing levels, parental leave and child care provisions, and training and education (including OHS training) can all help to reduce stress at work.

See **Appendix Three** for further advice and a list of collective agreements containing model clauses.

Individual agreements or Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs), which are really institutionalised individual contracts, have been used by employers to get maximum flexibility and lower costs. They have been a major contributor to the growth of stress at work over the last decade.

→ **Stress prevention policies**

Stress prevention policies should always be developed in consultation between employers and workers and their representatives and should:

- recognise that stress arises from the organisation of work (see below)
- acknowledge that stress is a health and safety issue which is preventable and fixable
- identify the key factors which contribute to stress at work
- outline simple, clear procedures for workers to raise concerns, without fear of intimidation or discrimination
- include processes for ongoing review and evaluation

A stress prevention policy should focus on the workplace. Good work organisation can prevent stress by ensuring:

- management styles that are consultative, so that workers participate in determining the expectations of the job and the arrangement of their own work situation, including any changes or restructuring
- pay arrangements do not encourage excessive overtime and that no unpaid overtime is worked
- hours of work including shift schedules, rest breaks and overtime arrangements that ensure rest and recuperation from the physical and mental effects of work
- workloads are fair and distributed fairly with realistic targets
- avoidance of target or performance based pay systems
- provision of adequate family and sick leave to ensure workers are not using other forms of leave for these circumstances
- the work environment is safe and comfortable, and that all health and safety hazards are minimised or controlled
- adequate welfare facilities for workers and people who use the service
- technology, furniture, equipment and machinery are safe and comfortable to use

Beware of stress management programs

Stress management programs and stress counselling can have some benefits, and may be part of a package, but are not the solution by themselves. They deal with the symptoms of stress, not the causes in the workplace, and will not prevent the injury in the first place.

Coping skills and relaxation techniques can make people feel better, but will not make stressors go away. The ILO studied various programs and concluded that most counselling and relaxation programs are ineffective in improving the work environment.

Techniques for relieving stress symptoms at work, such as taking breaks to 'stretch your legs', 'give your mind a rest', 'have a coffee' and so on are fine for those with some control over how and when their work is done. For most workers, however, these are not an option.

In many workplaces, unnecessary and unacceptable levels of management control and surveillance mean that workers are unable to take appropriate and adequate rest and recuperation breaks throughout the day.

Only just over 2% of respondents to the ACTU survey nominated stress management programs or counselling as an answer to stress at work. The vast majority took the view that *'the answer to stress is in the workplace'*.

8. CARING FOR STRESSED WORKERS

It is important that we support each other at work, and do not fall into the trap of blaming ourselves or each other for feeling stressed.

Breaking the isolation, which is often deliberately encouraged or fostered by management, is critical. Our response to stress at work is not a private matter which we must overcome by ourselves.

In 1998, the Education Department of WA initiated strategies aimed at reducing the effects of occupational stress. One of these is a school based staff support program. The program uses trained volunteer staff to assist colleagues who are showing signs and symptoms of stress, or who report problems associated with cumulative stress.

People in the workplace may be taking time off due to stress at work. Others may be feeling the need for time off but, for various reasons, feel compelled to 'soldier on'. Most will be using their sick leave, annual leave or other entitlements. Very few will be claiming workers' compensation to which they are entitled.

It is important that workplace procedures are developed by management, workers and their representatives to support and assist those suffering from stress-related symptoms or illness, and should include:

Health advice and treatment - contact the union or Trades and Labour Council for advice.

Workers' compensation and/or legal advice - people should not be using sick leave or recreational leave if they are suffering from a work-related illness or injury. Many unions and Trades and Labour Councils have workers' compensation officers who can provide advice. Most can also assist with legal advice, or call the ACTU Helpline on 1300 362 223.

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Appendix One – Sample stress survey

This survey is designed for you to provide your views about the causes of stress in your workplace. There is no need to put your name on the survey.

Please return the survey to _____

Please provide the following information:

Gender: Male Female

Age: Under 20 yrs 20-29 yrs 30-39 yrs
40-49 yrs 50+ yrs

Job title and/or description: _____

Union: _____

1. Do any of the following conditions affect your workplace? (please tick)

Organisational change/restructuring	<input type="checkbox"/>	Harassment or bullying	<input type="checkbox"/>
Long hours	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unresolved health and safety issues	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased workload	<input type="checkbox"/>	Job insecurity	<input type="checkbox"/>
Insufficient training	<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor career opportunities	<input type="checkbox"/>
Child care difficulties	<input type="checkbox"/>	Excessive noise	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uncomfortable temperatures	<input type="checkbox"/>	Conflict with management	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication difficulties	<input type="checkbox"/>	Poor work organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Excessive performance monitoring	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not enough rest breaks	<input type="checkbox"/>
Difficult relations with clients/public	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Other (please specify): _____			

2. Please list, in order of priority, the FIVE most stressful conditions in your workplace (from the above list or any others you experience)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

**3. Do you suffer from any of the following as a result of stress at work?
(Never/Sometimes/Frequently)**

Headaches	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>	Anger	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>
Indigestion	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>	Increased smoking/ alcohol use	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>
Continual tiredness	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>	Muscular cramps	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loss of concentration	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sleeplessness	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>
Memory loss	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>	High blood pressure	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feeling distrustful	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ulcers	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>
Feeling depressed	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Anxiety attacks	N	<input type="checkbox"/>	S	<input type="checkbox"/>	F	<input type="checkbox"/>							

Other (please specify): _____

4. Have you taken leave from work during the past 12 months due to stress at work?

Yes No

5.. If YES to question 4, what type of leave did you take?

Sick leave
Recreation leave
Annual leave
Workers compensation
Leave without pay
Other (please specify):

6. What do you feel would be the solutions to stress at work?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix Two – Workplace hazards map

Workplace mapping is a collective effort designed to gather information from the people in the workplace to identify hazards and problems.

It helps people to realise that they 'are not alone', and involves them in efforts to improve conditions and to stop stress at work.

All that is needed is time together with some privacy, sheets of paper, and coloured markers or dots. Work as a group to:

- draw a 'map' of the workplace - add in yourselves, fellow workers, and customers or clients
- draw in the stress hazards that exist by marking where they are or by using a coloured dot

Use different colours to designate the following hazards to help with marking where they exist in your workplace. For example:

Yellow:

Workload - working too fast, too much or too hard, increased time pressures, too few staff for the work to be done

Blue:

Dangerous hours of work – spread of hours of work, breaks, shift work

Red:

Communication – lack of information from management, lack of consultation, harassment, bullying or intimidation

Green:

Work organisation and training – lack of training to do the job, lack of clearly defined duties or responsibilities, poor work organisation generally

Black:

Unresolved physical health and safety issues – noise, heat and cold, humidity, cramped conditions, poor lighting, manual handling hazards

Once the hazards have been marked in, ask each other:

- does anything surprise us?
- which hazards are a serious concern?
- are some areas worse than others?
- are some hazards more common than others?
- is there a pattern?

It may be a very good idea to leave the map out so people can talk about the issues or add things in over lunch and other breaks, or at meetings about stress.

The map can then be used to help with providing evidence to

- the health and safety committee
- the union organiser
- the employer
- the workers' compensation officer
- the government inspector

Appendix Three – Model clauses for collective agreements

In negotiating collective agreements, care must be taken that changes to work organisation do not increase the risk of stress.

Better shift arrangements, work breaks, staffing levels, parental leave and child care provisions, training and education (including OHS training) can all help to reduce stress at work.

Most importantly, through the procedures for handling disputes that are legally required in all collective agreements, the terms of the agreement are subject to conciliation and arbitration in the Industrial Relations Commission. Where necessary, parties have access to a low cost tribunal for settlement, or to determination in the Courts, as certified agreements are legally binding on the parties.

The experience of unions in dealing with the Industrial Relations Commission helps them advance and protect the collective interests of employees.

Many Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) now contain stress-related clauses. Some examples which may provide useful models to build on are:

- City of Unley EBA No. 4 1999
- Brimbank City Council EA 1999
- Baw Baw Shire Council EA No. 2 1999
- Western Water 1999
- Franklins Ltd Victoria/SDA 1999
- Queensland Health CA (No. 3) 1999
- Australian Public Service Continuous Improvement Agreement 1995-96
- Australian Institute of Criminology EA 1995
- Auscript EA 2000

These agreements are available on the internet (<http://osiris.gov.au/>) or by contacting the union or the ACTU OHS Unit.

Appendix Four – Check list for a stress-free workplace

- management style is consultative and supportive, and workers are aware of expectations
- employer policy on stress at work
- there are procedures to prevent discrimination, bullying or harassment by management or by other workers
- workloads are not excessive
- work is distributed fairly
- targets and timelines are realistic
- predictable hours of work and shift arrangements
- reasonable paid overtime
- predictable work breaks away from the work station
- appropriate training and supervision of workers
- pace of work within the control of the worker
- general work environment is clean and comfortable
- lighting is appropriate to the tasks
- noise is not a safety hazard or stressor
- thermal comfort and ventilation are appropriate
- ergonomic problems have been dealt with
- performance pay is eliminated
- short/fixed term contracts are minimised
- job security is reasonable
- restructuring and changing of workers roles is minimised
- there is mutual support from other workers and supervisors
- the needs of clients or customers can be met in 'normal' working time
- there are security arrangements where they are needed, particularly in areas dealing with the public