



The stress that dares not speak its name!

Its not only TU members who get stressed!

TU Stewards and Reps are dealing with increasing issues of stress related cases in the workplace

Union websites have lots of information to help in advising and representing members, but what do the unions say to advise their representatives?

Absolutely nothing!

Meanwhile out there in the real world

Growing numbers of reps and stewards stepping down because of "burn out"

Stress related cases increasing and becoming more complex.

Continued lack of appreciation from union management of impact of stress on reps

So what is the impact of stress?

- Work started October 2010
- 30 returned Questionnaires
- Two years of Seminars at Workstress.net Conference with over 50 participants
- Findings released January 2012

Identifying stress areas

- Using case studies gleaned from questionnaires participants identified many areas of stress which divided into four areas:
- Stress from our employers
- Stress from our members
- Stress from our own unions
- Stress from our own practice

Stress from Employers

Wanting to exploit any weakness in union
Circumventing proper processes and time lines
Expectations of union availability without proper facility time

Using unions to "rubber stamp" unpopular decisions when it suits

Poor management performance allowing issues to fester which they hope the union will clear up!

Stress from members

- Not coming for support until too late
- Unrealistic expectations of the rep's availability and power
- Scatter gun approach from member making issues more complicated
- Member v member conflict
- External advice from an "expert"
- Being used as their counsellor

Stress from your union

- lack of support from Union Officials for the union's reps
- Unrealistic expectations set up in union literature
- Concentration on Organising and Recruitment agenda not supporting service delivery
- Poor internal supervision of their own staff leading to poor service for you

Our own stress areas:

- Creating a work / family / life balance
- Being left in the middle of employer, union, member conflict
- Expected to be a miracle worker, Samaritan, counsellor, negotiator, font of all knowledge
- Expected to be available 24/7 by phone, email, or casual calling
- And expected to do the day job as well!

"Not waving but drowning"

- There was a sense from our research that stewards and reps often felt:
- Overwhelmed by competing demands from union, employer and members
- Sometimes out of their depth and
- Often out on their own
- As one steward put it:
"not waving but drowning"

So what can we do?

In our seminars, many issues were identified on how employers and unions could make our lives much easier.

But they often require actions well above our pay grade and beyond our immediate control!

So we asked participants to identify what could they do personally to make their union lives less stressful.

Our top tips!

- These are our top tips for surviving stress as a TU rep or steward
- Some may seem like common sense
- Some may seem obvious
- Some may not be directly applicable to your situation but could be adapted
- Hopefully some of it will be useful!

Mobile Phones!

- Get a separate mobile phone for union work and don't give out your personal number
- Have specific times when members know they can contact you.
- Switch phone off evenings and weekends or if not available at work.
- Keep voicemail message up to date with information about your availability and likely response time

Email

- Do not use your personal domestic email.
- Set up separate account with union in title
- Refer to agreements before using work email
- Do not use Facebook or Twitter for individual communications
- Use the out of office messages, be clear about your availability and response times

Set clear boundaries

- Be clear when you are available for contact within in your workplace
- Consider regular surgeries in the workplace or offsite.
- Use a service level agreement with members outlining your volunteer status and role, contact arrangements and availability, and member's responsibilities
- Ensure this is consistently used within your branch and union colleagues!
- This applies to your employer and HR teams as well! They need to know your limitations for contact!

Be realistic, do not promise what you cannot deliver

- Members will often be in crisis when they are accessing your support and advice. They may be much stressed and want immediate confirmation that all will be okay.
- Although sometimes difficult, it is better to be realistic than set up false expectations. It is also an ideal time to set the boundaries that will allow you to act appropriately whilst protecting yourself from burn out.

Try to keep detached

- This is often easier said than done. Our sense of fairness is what brought us to trade unionism.
- Your emotional commitment to fairness in employment is your motivation
- But remember that over identification and emotional responses are more likely to lead an unsuccessful conclusion.
- Be wary about representing friends! They may not stay friends for long!

Don't be afraid to ask for support

- Although you may feel it you are not alone!
- Don't be slow in asking for support.
- Talk to your branch and suggest set up of a buddy system.
- Move the support issue up the line
- Be informed, but recognise limits of your knowledge
- Remember stress and mental health issues can be complex, you are not an expert.

You can always say no!

- You will not do yourself or your members any favours if you keep saying yes to new cases.
- Recognise your limits to what you can take on.
- Discuss with your union colleagues, your family, and if appropriate your employer, and decide what is achievable.
- You can say no to your Branch Secretary, union officer and your employer!

Look after yourself!

In today's political and economic climate the pressure is growing and the stakes are high.

Representing members is the front line of the battle between Government, Employers, and Trade Unions and TU reps are at the forefront of this battle.

The job you are doing is vital but remember:

You are no use to anyone if you are off sick with stress!



Take control of what you can control

Be careful out there!