Work Stress:
burnt out, fed up and fighting back

Version 2.0

Whether you work in the private or public sector, at a desk or on an assembly line, most will concede work is increasingly stressful. The last decade was particularly difficult — job loss, lean production and increased overtime ran rampant in Canadian workplaces. The challenges of work in the new economy continue, with few escaping its wrath. The International Labour Organization (ILO) now considers work-related stress as the number one health and safety hazard facing workers worldwide. In a survey completed by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada in 2002, 43 per cent of respondents reported being "frequently stressed," with work cited as the primary cause.

Many workers and their representatives — burnt out and fed up with escalating workplace stress — are now fighting back, in the legislature, in the workplace and at the bargaining table.

What is work stress?

There is no single agreed upon definition of workplace stress. How we choose to define stress is important though because it will direct how we tackle the problem. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety describes stress this way: "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."

What are the health impacts?

In response to stress, the brain prepares the body for defensive action, arousing the nervous system. Hormones are released to sharpen the senses, quicken the pulse, deepen respiration and tense the muscles. This is the acute or General Stress Response, also called the "fight or flight" response. It is pre-programmed biologically.

The health effects of this response are directly related to whether the stress experienced remains acute or becomes chronic. The most common symptoms associated with acute stress are emotional distress — some combination of anger or irritability, anxiety and depression, muscular discomfort including tension

headaches, back and jaw pain and muscle, tendon and ligament strain. Stress at this stage can also lead to high blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, migraine headaches, insomnia, breathlessness and chest pain. Further, stomach and bowel problems are well known manifestations of exposure to short-term stress.

In contrast, chronic stress can permanently destroy the mind and body. It's the stress associated with unrelenting demands for seemingly interminable periods of time that eventually takes its toll. It is now estimated that stress contributes to 80 per cent of all illnesses, from the common cold to cancer. But the most common health impacts experienced today as a result of work-related stress are mental illness, musculoskeletal injury and cardiovascular disease.

Evidence linking work related stress and mental illness, specifically depression and anxiety, is growing. In Britain, a Health and Safety Executive (HSE) analysis of illness rates reveals that almost two per cent of the working population now suffers depression and anxiety as a result of work stress.

The association between work stress and musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) is well established. A review by Bongers, et. al, in 1993, was one of the first to confirm a possible relationship between psychological factors and MSDs. In 1997, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) identified work stress as a "significant and independent" risk factor for MSDs. The National Research Council (NRC) found a positive association between monotonous work, intensified workload, time pressure, heavy job demands and lack of job control and incidence of these disorders.

Several workplace conditions have also been implicated as risk factors for cardiovascular disease (CVD). Psychosocial stress, and in particular, job strain, is now deemed a factor in the development of hypertension and CVD. There is also growing evidence of the effects of job effort and reward imbalance and work requiring alertness and concentration on heart health. A study of more than 800 Finnish workers followed over 25 years, those with either high job strain or an imbalance between work effort and reward had a more than twofold higher risk of death from cardiovascular disease than their peers. In its most extreme form, stress can kill — just ask workers in Japan and China, where *death by overwork*

(karoshi or guolaosi) due to stroke or heart disease — is a growing and compensable occupational illness.

What are the causes?

Working conditions that lead to stress are numerous and often interrelated. This said there is now consensus that the following work stressors have the most pronounced impact on worker health.

Fear of job loss

In a desperate attempt to boost profits, companies are globalizing, or shifting production and services to other parts of the world, at a rapid pace. Meantime, governments have cut significantly funding for public services and the jobs they create. Downsizing not only affects those who lose jobs but also those who are left behind. Increased workload and tighter work schedules are often accompanied by guilt about coworker job loss and fear about being next in the unemployment lines. Recent studies reveal higher absenteeism, poor work performance and physical and mental illness as a result of company reorganization and downsizing.

Workload

In addition to globalization, the misuse of technology is also driving dramatic increases in workload. In a survey conducted by EKOS Research Associates in 2001, involving more than 1000 Canadian workers, 36 per cent of respondents said their workload was heavy, with onerous workloads most pronounced in the public sector. Nine out of 20 workers stated they could only "sometimes" or "rarely" perform their regular duties during normal working hours.

Lack of work control

Workers with no actual or perceived control over how work is planned or completed are more likely to experience work stress and work-related stress disorders. Many studies have found a direct relationship between heavy job demands, low job control and increased incidence of mental and physical strain.

Hours of work

In the past 20 years, the proportion of Canadians working more than 40 hours a week has increased steadily. In 1998, 25 per cent of the workforce worked 50 or more hours per week. Today, longer hours are the norm in a number of occupations. Workers not only pay the price physically, but emotionally.

Information Bulletins for
health, safety and
environmental representatives

Resource Lines

Management style

Poor labour-management relations, and in particular, certain management styles, have been related to increased workplace stress. Lack of guidance and support from a manager or supervisor, lack of participation by workers in decision-making and inadequate or ineffective organizational communication can strain workplace relationships, impacting worker health and productivity.

Work-family conflict

Current social and economic pressures make it increasingly difficult to balance work and family obligations. The *National Study on Balancing Work, Family and Lifestyle*, conducted by Linda Duxbury and Christopher Higgins in 2002 found the lack of time to address the demands of work and home "a major source of conflict and stress" for Canadian workers.

What can be done?

Several strategies have been identified as essential in any effort to minimize the health implications of work stress. These strategies can be grouped along the following lines.

Government intervention

Current government policies and practices play a large role in workplace stress. A comprehensive and progressive economic and trade strategy, plus investment in the public services Canadians hold dear would go a long way to relieving fear of job loss and excessive work loads.

Legislation

No legislation recognizing work stress as a health and safety hazard currently exists in Canada. But in Sweden, legislation requires working conditions be adapted to individual worker's physical and psychological circumstances. Workers also have the opportunity to participate in planning the work.

Workplace practices

Workplace practices have targeted both the individual and the organization. Nearly one-half of large companies in North America provide stress management training for their workforce. Such programs emphasize personal skills to manage stress such as relaxation exercises and time management. While inexpensive and easy to implement, the impact of stress management training is often short-lived. The main criticism of such initiatives is they focus on the worker and generally ignore the root cause of work stress — working conditions or work tasks.

The most successful means to reduce work stress is to identify the stressful aspects of work and the workplace and implement strategies to eliminate these stressors. While this approach deals with the underlying causes of work stress, there is often resistance to adopting this tact as it can involve changes to how work is planned and executed. Of course to achieve this kind of organizational change and overcome resistance to it training the entire workforce, management included, on the consequences, sources and solutions of occupational stress is an important first step.

Collective bargaining

Several unions have addressed work stress in their collective agreements. The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) has chosen to negotiate member workloads. Some agreements now include requirements for employers to distribute work equitably and consult with workers and the union regarding how work is planned and executed. Unifor has made significant inroads in addressing increases in work pace and work load at automobile manufacturers in Ontario. Many unions, including the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have also proposed shortening the standard workweek, without a corresponding reduction in net compensation and negotiated limits on overtime.

There is no question work is stressful and having a negative impact on worker health. But there is growing recognition from labour, industry and government that it may be possible to design work differently. Recent studies of "healthy" organizations suggest policies benefiting worker health can also positively impact the bottom line. Organizational characteristics associated with healthy, low stress and productive workplaces include: adequate resources, including time and training to accomplish tasks; recognition for good work performance; opportunities to use individual knowledge and skills; opportunities for workers to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs; improved communications, particularly those designed to reduce uncertainty about career development and future employment opportunities; occasions for social interaction; and work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job. With these in mind, we can work towards crafting future jobs that allow us to fully develop our human potential and thus promote mental and physical health.

NOTE: The Workers Health & Safety Centre (WHSC) offers several training programs to tackle occupational stress including *Stress in the Workplace, Psychosocial Hazards and Workplace Mental Health* and *Workplace Violence and Harassment.* To learn more, contact a WHSC training services representative near you.

The Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers also offers workplace mental health resources to help create psychological safe and healthy workplaces. Visit their web site at **https://www. ohcow.on.ca**