

BFAWU GUIDE TO WORK RELATED STRESS

Work related stress, once thought of as an illness of the high-powered executive, confined to the four walls of the boardroom; or an illness of the weaker members of society: a fallacy then and a fallacy today.

It can strike at all types of people in all types of trade, the butcher, the baker and yes, even the candlestick maker. Nobody has an immunity to its effects. In fact work related stress is the second highest cause of occupational ill health, with estimates putting the number of people suffering from it at approximately 20% of the adult working population.

If we are to combat work related stress, then we must understand what it is and how it affects the individual. The Health & Safety Executive defines it as follows: **“Stress is the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them.”** One sentence that sums it up.

Workplace stress manifests itself in three completely different ways, but individuals can suffer any combination of them at any one time. The following lists are meant as a guide, and not as an exhaustive list of the symptoms:

- The physical effects- **Trouble with sleeping, loss of appetite, digestive problems, headaches, nausea, neck and backache, muscular tension and lethargy.**
- The behavioural effects- **Absenteeism, increased dependence on drugs, tranquillisers and alcohol, lack of motivation and commitment, more aggressive than normal and more prone to accidents.**
- The emotional effects- **Panic attacks, short span of attention, irritability, bouts of depression, mood swings, lack of confidence and self esteem at a low ebb.**

If people in your workplace are suffering from any of these symptoms then there is a fair chance that they are suffering from stress. By acting immediately you may prevent these problems developing into

life threatening symptoms such as coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, chronic depression and possible suicidal tendencies.

Of course all stress is not work related, domestic difficulties, matrimonial problems, financial pressures and bereavement can all contribute to stress levels, but working arrangements can become a contributory factor in the progression of the illness if not checked.

The HSE identify these work related factors as “STRESSORS” which include:

- The job itself- Repetitive or mundane work, too much or too little supervision, excessive workloads, long hours, low pay, inadequate training, time constraints, casual/temporary contracts etc.
- The working environment- Buildings that are poorly maintained, overcrowded or untidy can cause stress, excessive noise and humidity, badly designed workstations, poor toilet facilities, canteen and rest rooms etc.
- The organisation- Workforce with little or too much responsibility, lack of promotional incentives, poor communication, no involvement in decision making, confrontational styles of management, bullying, harassment and all forms of discrimination.

Again this is not an exhaustive list, merely a guide to some of the more obvious causes. You should follow five basic steps when carrying out a risk assessment on stress:

1. Collate information about the jobs you are assessing.
2. Evaluate the risks to health.
3. Devise an action plan of preventative or control measures.
4. Record the risk assessment.
5. Review the assessment at regular intervals.

Clearly, adequate risk assessing should identify many of the problem areas and with some fairly simple control measures many could be eradicated e.g.

- The job- Rotation and variety of the tasks, utilisation of the workers skills, sensible working hours, reasonable targets, improved terms and conditions and adequate training.
- The environment- Improved housekeeping, acoustic screening, better ventilation and natural light, improved hazard control and improved recreational facilities.
- The organisation- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities, improved communications, employee involvement in the decision-making process, clear company objectives and strong policies on bullying and harassment.

Whilst there are no specific pieces of legislation on stress, despite pressure from the TUC for an Approved Code of Practice, there are several laws that put general duties on the employer:

- The Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 (HASAWA), which places an obligation on the employer to provide a safe place of work.
- The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999, which compel the employer to carry out risk assessments that are suitable and sufficient to identify the hazards.
- The Working Time Regulation 1998, which regulate maximum working hours, sets limits for night work, defines rest periods and ensures holidays.
- The Workplace (Health, Safety & Welfare) Regulations 1992, which cover workplace temperatures, ensure adequate toilet and rest facilities, good housekeeping, lighting and ventilation.

There are other pieces of legislation that relate to specific environmental issues such as noise and dust, and others that deal with particular jobs such as VDU operators and other workplace equipment. Details of these pieces of legislation can be obtained from your regional office.

Failure to comply with can lead to prosecution.

With increased vigilance, adequate risk assessing, proper control measures and sensible reporting, we can play a significant role in reducing the incidences of stress amongst our membership.