

Stress at work

Stress at work can be damaging and can adversely affect the mental and physical health of workers. The GPMU believes that employers should tackle stress as an organisational issue. Like any other health and safety hazard, it should be dealt with by a systematic approach based on employers assessing risks and taking practical steps to remove or minimise them.

GPMU Policy

GPMU policy on stress has two elements

- to identify and reduce the causes of stress in the workplace, and
- to help those members whose personal circumstances present additional pressures for them in work.

For too long the focus has been solely on caring for individual 'casualties' of stress. Few employers appear to address the causes of stress. According to the International Labour Organisation, successful anti-stress programmes are those which attempt to change the work environment, where management is willing to relinquish some control over work organisation and which involve trade union and worker participation.

Tackling stress

GPMU safety reps should press their employers to meet their legal duties to identify and deal with stress at work. Employers also have a legal duty to involve safety reps, consult them and provide information on stress related issues.

A stress risk assessment should involve:

- identifying pressures at work which could cause high and long-lasting levels of stress
- deciding who might be harmed by these
- judging whether enough is being done to prevent that harm, and then
- taking steps to deal with those pressures by changing the way that work is organised, and tackling the sources of stress, rather than just dealing with the symptoms.

The GPMU believes that the solutions to stress at work should concentrate on organisational issues rather than targetting individuals who are the victims of occupational stress. GPMU policy is that employers must tackle the sources of stress. Simply removing the people who suffer from occupational stress will not be considered to be adequate.

What is stress?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines work related stress as **"the reaction people have to excessive demands or pressures, arising when people try to cope with tasks, responsibilities or other types of pressure connected with their jobs, but find difficulty, strain or worry in doing so."**

The effects

The symptoms of stress can include indecision, anxiety, depression, altered appetite, changes in weight, headache, backache, skin rashes and difficulty in sleeping. They may lead to heart disease and ulcers.

Sources of stress

Job Design

- boring work
- too much / too little work
- pace and flow of work
- too much / too little supervision
- job isolation
- lack of direction and decision making
- lack of job control
- constant sitting
- lack of adequate rest breaks
- under-utilisation of skills
- working with VDUs or other machinery

Contractual

- low pay
- shift work
- flexitime
- unsocial hours
- excessive hours of overtime
- job insecurity, including temporary and short term contracts and redundancy
- absence of monitoring procedures

Environment

- noise
- poor lighting
- poor maintenance
- poor canteen facilities
- poor child care facilities
- poor ventilation
- overcrowding
- vibration
- incorrect temperatures
- toxic fumes and chemicals

Relationships

- bad relations with supervisors and/or workmates
- bullying
- sexism / racism / ageism (including harassment and discrimination)
- customer / client complaints
- impersonal treatment at work
- lack of communication

Preventing stress

Safety Reps need to negotiate with their employer a stress prevention policy, preferably as part of the firm's health and safety policy.

An effective policy on stress should:

- recognise that stress is a health and safety issue
- recognise that stress is about the organisation of work
- be jointly developed and agreed with unions
- have commitment from the very top
- guarantee a "blame free" approach
- apply to everyone.

Its objectives should be:

- to prevent stress by identifying the causes of workplace stress and eliminating them
- to recognise and deal with stress related problems as they arise by educating employees about stress and encouraging participation and co-operative working
- to rehabilitate employees suffering stress through the provision of independent confidential counselling.

The policy should contain agreed arrangements for joint monitoring and review to assess its effectiveness.

Risk assessment

Risk assessment is the key to the implementation of a stress at work policy, as well as the health and safety policy. Employers are required by law to carry out risk assessments, and these should be carried out in a systematic way.

Workplace unions can organise a number of activities which will give them the information they need to tackle their employers about the risks and causes of occupational stress:

- a special inspection, under the Safety Representative and Safety Committee Regulations 1977, to check on all the potential physical sources of stress

- a survey of members either using a questionnaire or through organised discussions between members and their Safety Reps to determine:
- attitudes to job content and work organisation
- feelings of ill health
- increases in smoking etc
- an investigation of sickness absence figures and causes of death of people while working or who have retired from work in the last two years.

Listen to members

It is important to involve trade union members, get them to discuss problems with each other, and to make them aware that stress is a shared problem which can be tackled through the union. Discussing the issue of stress within the union will help but also persuading management to accept that there is a problem, and implementing the solutions suggested, will give workers an immediate feeling of having regained some control over their working lives.

Coping with stress

Unions should ensure that members suffering from stress are represented and cared for. Individual grievances must be dealt with effectively and special arrangements negotiated to protect their needs.

Some employers have introduced Employee Assistance Programmes or counselling services. These can be effective, and their use should be considered, but only as part of an effective stress at work prevention policy.

Employers have also tried to reduce the effects of stress by 'lifestyle' campaigns - promoting healthy eating and fitness. These campaigns can help workers relieve the immediate strains caused by stress, but they can never remove the source of the stress.

Bullying and Harassment

Safety reps may encounter stress or related problems that are the consequences of bullying or harassment in the workplace. The GPMU has a clear policy in this area, and expects employers to put in place their own policies.

Policies should include:

- a statement that bullying will not be tolerated and will be treated as a disciplinary offence
- a commitment that complaints of bullying will be taken seriously and dealt with quickly and in confidence
- a complaints procedure with a timetable for all stages of the procedure
- training for management and trade union reps
- provision of confidential counselling for both the bully and the bullied
- regular monitoring.

Safety reps should:

- Refer any bullying and harassment issues to their Branch Office, and/or to Branch Liaison officers, who will follow a procedure which:

- encourages members to record episodes of bullying in writing
- establishes whether other staff have had similar experiences
- discusses with the member the various options and resulting agreed action
- with the agreement of the member, reports the incident to management
- represents the member at all stages of the enquiry
- ensures that the case is dealt with quickly and in accordance with the agreed procedures

Where the bullied person and the bullier are both members of the GPMU it is vital to ensure that they both have separate representation. In such cases Chapels need to contact their Branches immediately.

Campaigning could include:

- a survey of the workplace on the extent of bullying
- awareness raising meetings and/or posters and leaflets
- incorporating bullying and harassment issues into training programmes.