

# CHAPTER 11

## Work-related stress

Unite (along with the TUC and other unions) recognises that stress in the workplace is today one of the largest cause of work related sickness/absenteeism. It is a growing problem and will have major social and economic consequences. The problem needs to be tackled urgently by employers and trade unions.

The reaction to unacceptable pressures and demands not only can cause misery, anxiety, depression and physical ill health to an individual but it can also affect the whole workplace with low morale, lack of innovation and poor safety performance.

The problem that needs to be addressed is not only one of how to best achieve rehabilitation for sufferers but also how to recognise the stressors in the workplace and relate them to the organisation's safety policy and culture, and therefore prevent stress related illness in individuals from the start.

Work place stressors have been categorised by the HSE as the following;

- The demands of the job;
- Lack of control;
- Work-life balance and support at work;
- Work relationships;
- Change;
- Conflicting roles.

One or any combination of the stressors can cause stress-related illness to an individual, and cause problems for the workplace structure and organisation.

By looking at each of these stressors and addressing them in the employer's safety management system – including workplace inspections, surveys and risk assessment – more can be done to solve the problem collectively, at the same time recognising that individuals may also need specific help.

To put this in place the emphasis must be on training for the management directly involved, consultation to be carried out with Unite safety reps and guaranteed confidentiality of information provided by workers on stress.

An effective stress policy can be a useful mechanism to reduce and prevent occupational stress. It is essential that such policies are developed and monitored jointly by management and Unite safety reps.

The objectives of the policy should be to prevent stress by identifying the causes and eliminating them, to deal with problems as they arise, to promote openness and guarantee a 'blame free' culture, and provide rehabilitation of employees suffering from stress for example through confidential independent counselling.

Employers with good workplace safety records are already incorporating stress into their hazard identification process and voluntarily putting measures in place but unfortunately this is not the general trend. Unite believes that unless existing legal obligations are strengthened and enforced the problem of stress at work will not be taken seriously, and measures will not be put in place to deal with this growing problem. As with many other health and safety issues some employers will only comply if they have to do so by law.

If stress is successfully tackled in the workplace, the organisation can enjoy a healthier workforce, lower absence due to sickness, improved performance and service, lower accident rates and better internal and external relationships.