

ALL STRESSED UP



Notes to accompany the film by

**LEEDS'
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WORKSHOP**

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WHAT IS OCCUPATIONAL STRESS?

Stress at work can be defined as “environmental, social or job-related factors which exert undue strain or pressure on a person”. The symptoms of stress vary from individual to individual, and the strain a person is under can manifest itself physically, mentally or socially.

Some myths about stress at work:

Stress is a bosses' disease. FALSE.

Business executives and managers who work long hours under pressure are compensated by high levels of job satisfaction and control over the jobs they do. This makes their work significantly less stressful than lower-level clerical, professional and technical jobs, which also involve long hours and heavy workloads; but which are repetitive and offer workers little control over what they do.

Those who suffer from stress are weak or inadequate. FALSE.

Stress is one of the commonest causes of work-related illness, and it can affect anybody. It should be seen as a collective problem, which occurs because of the nature of the jobs people are asked to do, the environments they work in and the way the work is organised.

Stress is an inevitable part of going to work. FALSE.

It should be possible to identify the stress-causing aspects of any job, and hopefully to change them.

A little bit of stress is good for you. FALSE.

Many people confuse “stress” with “stimulation”. Stimulation and excitement may be good for you. Stress is harmful; it is also frequently found in association with boredom, monotony and frustration.

RECOGNISING STRESS

Do you regularly suffer from several of the disorders on this list?

Headaches
Back neck or shoulder pains
Irritability, anxiety, depression
Sleeplessness
Indigestion
Menstrual problems
Impotence
Fatigue
Accidents
Skin rashes

If so, you are probably under stress. In addition, you are likely to have a low level of immunity to common health problems such as colds, flu, stomach upsets, thrush or cystitis.

The length of time you are exposed to stress is important. For example, short-term reaction to a small amount of stress may produce indigestion; but long-term exposure could result in the development of an ulcer.

Other specific illnesses arise either because of the stress load on the body, or because of the things people do to alleviate their feelings of tension when under stress: smoking, for example; or increased consumption of tea, coffee or alcohol; or changes in eating patterns.

It seems likely, given what is now known about its effects on the immune system, that stress could also make any existing illness worse.

Certain circumstances may make stress at work particularly difficult to recognise. People may deliberately try to conceal the fact that they are suffering from stress, because they may, for various reasons, fail to take time off work when they are ill – a phenomenon which has been identified as “sickness presence”, as opposed to “sickness absence”.

There may also be some people who continue to work well without showing any of the effects that their colleagues are experiencing. But it is important to realise that, if working conditions are stressful, then their health is still being threatened and may well deteriorate.

HOW STRESS AFFECTS YOU

As is often the case with occupational ill health, the symptoms of stress are not necessarily obvious, immediate or easily identifiable. To identify stress-related ill health, you have to look at the body's physiological response, specific illnesses and changes in human behaviour.

The body's reaction

The body's only mechanism for coping with stress is the primitive "fight or flight" response, which was highly effective when we all lived in caves, but is worse than useless in most modern work situations. What happens is this:

- Nervous system activates
- Muscles tense
- Adrenaline is released
- Increased blood to muscles
- Less blood to skin, intestines and kidneys
- Breathing deepens
- Rapid heart and pulse
- Increased blood pressure
- Increased need for energy; fats and sugars released into bloodstream

This physiological response is useful if it is called upon rarely and only for a short time; the changes listed above do prepare the body for either physical aggression or for running away. But if these responses are repeated or prolonged, especially if they become a regular or chronic reaction to working life, they will be harmful.

For example, releasing the hormone adrenalin enables the body to react quickly. But too much adrenalin produces feelings of tiredness. There is also evidence that chronic stress, and consequently high levels of certain hormones are linked to decreased immunity and to cancer.

The reproductive system, in both men and women, is also sensitive to the physiological changes produced by chronic stress.

Coronary heart disease has been recognised for some time as potentially stress-related. Its risk factors include high cholesterol levels, persistent high blood pressure and fatty deposits in the arteries; all characteristics of the body's reaction to stress.

THE EFFECTS OF STRESS

Physical effects:

Short-term symptoms include:

Headaches and migraines; tremors; nervous tics; muscle tension; neck, shoulder or back pain; sore throat; dry mouth; feeling a lump in the throat; double vision and difficulty focussing the eyes; palpitations, pain and tightness in the chest; indigestion, wind, abdominal pain, nausea; frequent desire to pass urine; diarrhoea; tingling feelings in arms or legs; menstrual disorders; impotence; loss of sexual drive; skin dryness and rashes.

Long-term consequences include:

Asthma; diabetes; heartburn; haemorrhoids; prostate trouble; high blood pressure; heart disease, including arteriosclerosis, angina and coronary thrombosis; ulcers and other gastro-intestinal problems; fertility problems; early menopause.

Emotional effects:

Short-term symptoms include:

Rapid and excessive swings in mood; losing sense of humour; boredom; withdrawal, daydreaming; low self-esteem; worrying too much about things that do not matter; inability to feel sympathy with other people; tiredness and inability to concentrate; excessive concern about physical health; increased irritability and anxiety.

Long-term consequences include:

Poor mental health; chronic anxiety; depression; insomnia; neurosis.

Effects on behaviour

Short-term symptoms include:

Indecision; unreasonable complaints; increased absenteeism; delayed recovery from illness; accident-proneness; careless driving; poor work; cheating and evasion; overeating or loss of appetite; rapid tiredness; smoking, drinking, drug dependency; sleeplessness; impulsive, irrational behaviour.

Long-term consequences include:

Breakdown of relationships at work at home and generally; social isolation.

CAUSES OF STRESS AT WORK

The job itself

The major causes of occupational stress lie in job design and the way work is organised. It helps if workers have some control over how jobs are done, and receive training and information. Low control produces high stress.

Problems can arise from:

- Overload - too much to do in too little time
- feeling ill-equipped or under-trained for tasks
- Underload - too little to do
- tasks are repetitive and boring
- no opportunity to use skills or experience
- Shift-work, too much overtime
- Mechanical pacing
- Monotonous, deskilled but attention-demanding work
- Dealing with angry, violent or distressed people
- Carrying responsibility for other people's lives

The organisation

Workers tend to experience stress in an organisation where information and power are not shared, staff are not consulted, and changes are imposed in ways that are disruptive or threatening.

Problems include:

- Bad management, due to inefficiency or lack of training
- Workers being under-promoted or over-promoted
- Excessive supervision
- Lack of flexibility to organise tasks
- Lack of job security, fear or redundancy
- Changes to job without advance information or consultation
- Not enough participation in decision-making
- Competitive atmosphere
- Lack of recognition; workers under-valued, under-paid

The physical environment

Workers exposed to physical hazards, such as noise, dust or toxic fumes, may develop occupational illnesses. An unsafe, uncomfortable or unhealthy working environment can also cause or aggravate stress.

Problems can also arise from:

- Lack of privacy
- Too much noise
- No control over levels of heating or lighting
- Unsuitable or unreliable equipment or furniture
- Sitting all day with little opportunity to move around
- Computer-based work may involve downtime, screen glare, static electricity, radiation hazards, mechanical pacing, slow machine response time. It may cause eyestrain, fertility/pregnancy problems, repetitive strain injury

Relationships with colleagues

- Discrimination against those seen as “different” - women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities
- Conflicts with colleagues or management

Women and stress

Women are over-represented in high-stress occupations; and they often work in ill-paid, insecure jobs with little control and low job satisfaction. In addition, they often carry a disproportionate burden of responsibility for childcare and housework. Effectively this results in many women having to manage two jobs.

Other problems include:

- Part-time workers – predominantly women – are paid less, taken less seriously, and have fewer benefits
- Sexual harassment – affecting one in six working women – creates an intimidating atmosphere and may force a woman to resign
- Working overtime or shifts can be difficult for women with children, and this may affect their pay or chances of promotion.

TACKLING THE CAUSES OF STRESS

There are two different approaches to dealing with work-related stress; one concentrates on helping individuals cope with their symptoms, the other looks at ways of reducing or eliminating the causes.

Most management initiatives focus on the first approach. Unions, though, recommend concentrating on the root causes, to stop problems recurring.

Individual solutions can be important too:

“Sometimes stress is so overwhelming and has been present for so long that an individual is suffering from nervous exhaustion, depression or a debilitating chronic illness. In this case she is unlikely to have the energy to organise against it. She needs to find ways to relax and get well. By taking 15 minutes a day to run around the block or do a breathing exercise, or by seeing a herbalist about your problems, you feel better about yourself and in this way you are empowered to go on to the next stage – to fight back at work and home if necessary.”

- Marianne Craig, 'The Office Worker's Survival Handbook'

Short-term measures to alleviate symptoms of stress:

- Relaxation and exercise
- Meditation
- Assertiveness training
- Counselling
- General health care

Long-term strategies to reduce stress in the workplace

- Organising collectively through the union to monitor stress, provide support, and improve conditions
- Job enrichment; designing work to be interesting and satisfying
- Maximising flexibility so workers have as much control as possible over their work
- Information, consultation and democratic management methods

Legal Standards

The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) does not mention occupational stress by name. However it does require the employer to provide for the health as well as safety of all

employees, as a matter of legal responsibility.

RESOURCES

Books

The ABC's of How to Be: A Survival Guide for Today's Office Worker – Gaye Mercer (Outskirts Press)

The Office Worker's Survival Handbook – Marianne Craig (BSSRS)

Stress at Work: Management and Prevention – Jeremy Stranks (Butterworth-Heinemann)

Stress, Self-Esteem, Health and Work – Simon L.Dolan (Palgrave Macmillan)

Introduction to Health and Safety and Work – Phil Hughes and Ed Ferrett (Butterworth-Heinemann)

Stress Management: A Comprehensive Guide to Wellness - Edward A. Charlesworth and Ronald G. Nathan (Souvenir Press Ltd.)

Tackling Work-related Stress: Manager's Guide – HSE (HSE Books)

Websites

Stress at Work: Tips to Reduce and Manage Job and Workplace Stress - http://www.helpguide.org/mental/work_stress_management.htm

Work related stress: together we can tackle it – <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/>

NHS Choices: Take the Stress Test – <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/workplacehealth/Pages/reducestress.aspx>

Films and Videos

Risky Business (15 minutes, DVD) - Leeds Animation Workshop

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

Equality and Human Rights Commission

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com>

0845 604 6610

Hazards Campaign

<http://www.hazardscampaign.org.uk>

0161 953 4037

Health & Safety Executive

<http://www.hse.gov.uk>

0151 951 4000

Labour Research Department

<http://www.lrd.org.uk>

020 7928 3649

London Hazards Centre

<http://www.lhc.org.uk>

020 7794 5999

MIND

<http://www.mind.org.uk>

0300 123 3393

Trades Union Congress (TUC)

<http://www.tuc.org.uk>

020 7636 4030

UNISON

<http://www.unison.org.uk>

0845 355 0845

Other films available from
leeds animation workshop

THEY CALL US MAIDS: THE DOMESTIC WORKERS' STORY women migrant workers explain their situation
THROUGH THE GLASS CEILING equal opportunities at work
NO OFFENCE harassment at work (sexist, racist and homophobic)
WORKING WITH CARE balancing work, life and caring responsibilities
DID I SAY HAIRDRESSING? I MEANT ASTROPHYSICS equal opportunities for women in science, engineering and technology
EVERYBODY'S DIFFERENT, EVERYBODY'S EQUAL for union equality reps
GRIEF IN THE FAMILY for parents and carers of bereaved children
TEENAGE GRIEF adolescents and bereavement
NOT TOO YOUNG TO GRIEVE for parents and carers of bereaved under-fives
BRIDGING THE GAP parenting teenagers
JOINED-UP FAMILIES being a parent in a stepfamily
HOME TRUTHS for children, about domestic violence
BELIEVE ME for children, about sexual abuse
BEYOND BELIEF supporting children who have been sexually abused
DADS INSIDE AND OUT fathers in prison and their children
GOOD TO BE HOME how couples are affected when one of them goes to prison
GIVE US A SMILE street harassment and violence against women
CROPS AND ROBBERS an international history of trade, food aid, and famine
TELL IT LIKE IT IS gender and bullying in secondary school
A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE racial harassment in schools
WASTE WATCHERS energy saving and global warming
OUT AT WORK equal rights at work for gay, lesbian and bisexual employees
OUT TO THE FAMILY about lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender teenagers
MINDING THE BABY couples expecting their first babies
WHO RUNS THE WORLD? about the World Bank
ALL STRESSED UP stress at work
HOME AND DRY? women and homelessness
COUNCIL MATTERS local government and how it works
PRETEND YOU'LL SURVIVE the nuclear threat in peacetime and war
RISKY BUSINESS health and safety at work
GETTING BETTER IN HOSPITAL In-patients and out-patients, for people with learning disabilities
GETTING TOGETHER relationships, for people with learning disabilities
GETTING BETTER primary health care, for people with learning disabilities
EVERYONE CAN SAVE ENERGY fuel saving, for people with learning disabilities

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