

# Stress

## – an increasingly common work environment problem

*Statistics from the Work Environment Authority show stress-induced work injuries to be on the increase. Work-related illnesses have almost quadrupled since 1997, due mainly to organisational and social factors. 60 per cent of these work-related illnesses were caused by stress and heavy workloads.*



A survey conducted by the Work Environment Authority in collaboration with Statistics Sweden (SCB) shows stress-related and mental disorders to have doubled since 1997.

### Some definitions

The demands of working life do not necessarily have to mean mental strain and health hazards. The risk of ill-health arise when demands become excessive and when the employees have no direct influence over their work situation, lack support from others around them or have no opportunities off recuperation. A risk of ill-health can also occur when the employee's knowledge and experience are unequal to the task involved. The content and organisation of work have a bearing on the mental stresses which employees can be subjected to. Mental strains capable of leading to ill-health or accidents can be avoided and alleviated by adapting demands and expectations to individual capabilities. This must already be taken into account when planning, for example, the use of technology, equipment and facilities and the organisation of work.

“Load”, in both the mental and the physical senses, refers to the factors of the work environment affecting the individual, such as volume of work, job content, unclear work input expectations and so on.

“Mental strain” refers to the mental impact of the workload on the individual. This kind of strain can lead to ill-health and illness.

Stress is the physiological reaction occurring in the body when someone is subjected to demands and expectations. When the demands and expectations do not tally with the individual person's capabilities, ill-health can result.

Ill-health, according to objective medical criteria, is an illness or a physical or mental functional impairment not constituting an illness. The latter can be instanced with various forms of stress reaction and musculoskeletal disorder.

## **Consequences of stress**

The body's reactions to different demands made on us as human beings are natural ones. Their manifestations vary from one person to another. Having demands made on us is not intrinsically harmful to our health or wellbeing.

Everyone, sooner or later, comes under stress at work and in other aspects of their life. If the strains are relatively shortlived, with opportunities of recuperation, they need do us no harm. Sometimes stress can improve our performance and help us to meet new challenges and enjoy doing so.

When demands become too much for us – that is, when control, support and recuperation are lacking and we do not possess the experience or knowledge for coping with the situation – the body's mobilisation can affect us in various ways. The effects can be physical, mental, behavioural and cognitive. The effects of stress not only impact on the individual worker but can have repercussions on the group and within the organisation, e.g.

- incidents and mistakes,
- personal frictions and conflicts,
- the seeking and branding of scapegoats,
- work injuries and sickness absence,
- personnel turnover and loss of competence,
- other output disruptions.

## **Psychosocial factors of the work environment**

Examples will now be given of factors at work which can cause stresses capable of leading to ill-health.

### **Large volume of work – high working pace**

Having a lot to do for a limited period of time need not be a cause of ill-health, but prolonged working under pressure of time can be health-impairing, even if the work is absorbing. Essentially, the volume and difficulty of work must be adapted to people's varying capabilities. This can mean such general aspects as age, gender and cultural background, but also more individual factors such as temporary or permanent differences in work capacity.

If a large work volume, a high working pace or work under pressure of time is combined with little opportunity of influencing one's own work situation, this can lead to ill-health and be a contributory cause of disease. Prolonged overtime with little opportunity for recuperation can also have health implications. If work is done during overtime, the time for doing it must be adapted to each individual worker's capabilities.

The allocation of work between the employees is the manager's responsibility. As a supportive measure, employees can be helped with determining priorities. It helps if work is organised in such a way that employees have a chance of co-ordinating working life and private life, and if they can directly influence and control the time limits between the two. Competition between working life and private life can create stress and lead to ill-health. Efforts are often being made in working life to achieve flexibility, e.g. with regard to the arrangement of working hours. This flexibility can turn into a hazard if work becomes limitless, out of control both temporally and spatially.

It is important that the employee should be able to ask for help in coping with peak workloads and tight schedules. This help can, for example, take the form of relief or prioritisation.

### **One-sided, repetitive and monotonous work**

One-sided, repetitive and monotonous work leaves little scope for challenges or for personal and professional development. This leads to understimulation, which can help to cause ill-health. One way of making work less monotonous is by diversifying job content on the basis of an inventory of the existing tasks. This at the same time can be an opportunity for learning and upskilling.

Having too little to do and not being needed at work is another form of understimulation which can be mentally strenuous.

### **Unclear work input expectations – unclear roles**

This means tasks and areas of responsibility not being clearly defined or else conflicting demands being made on the person concerned and being impossible to live up to.

Conditions like this can often stem from unclear objectives or an unclear allocation of tasks. Clear control and clarity in the allocations of tasks are important for the prevention of ill-health. Constructive feedback, information, introduction etc. are equally important.

### **Constant changes – insecure tenure**

Change is a natural part of the development of working life, as necessary as it is desirable, but it can mean considerable strain on the employees, especially when changes come thick and fast.

The way in which changes are introduced does much to decide whether or not they impact on workers' health. It is important that the employees should be informed at the earliest possible stage of the purpose of the change and how it will be implemented. It is also important that information should be supplied continuously throughout the process of change and that it should be clear, concise and objective. Sometimes it may be worth while announcing that for the moment there are no announcements to be made, just to put people's minds at rest.

In connection with operational changes, managers, supervisory staff, union officials and safety delegates may find themselves under mental stress due to the different, often contradictory demands made on them by employers and employees. Special attention should therefore be paid to their work situation, so that they will have the support and the capacity which may be needed. The employees' specific knowledge and experience of working conditions are of value in the process of change and development, and it is important that they should take part in the process of change.

### **Risks of threats and violence**

Being subjected to physical violence and injury is always a traumatic experience and can have serious mental consequences. A threat can be an equally dramatic experience. It is important to chart work environment conditions carefully, assess risks and take necessary measures such as installation of alarms, introduction of safety routines, double manning, information and training. It is seldom, however, that all risks of threats and violence can be foreseen and forestalled. Contingency preparedness for traumatic events is needed in order to alleviate and prevent suffering among those affected.

### **Shift work – irregular working hours**

Night work clashes with people's natural circadian rhythm, thus imposing strain on the body. In addition, it is more tiring and thus entails a great risk of accidents. Unduly long working sessions should be avoided, and for triple shift the morning-afternoon-night sequence is preferable to the other way round. Recuperation between two shifts usually requires 11 hours' rest. After a period of several night shifts it is essential for a longer rest interval to be interposed. Lack of sleep compounds the negative effects of stress, and is in itself a stress factor capable of causing ill-health.

### **Conflicts – victimisation – harassment**

Stress at work encourages primitive (regressive) behaviour such as rumour-mongering and triggers defence mechanisms which can lead to a hunt for scapegoats. Victimisation and conflicts rooted in the work situation, owing to excessive workload, unclear work input expectations, few if any reactions to the work done etc., should be regarded as a consequence of deficiencies in the work environment but are at the same time

a risk source to fellow-employees. It is important that conflicts should be brought out into the open, investigated and their causes identified.

### **Complex tasks**

Rapid changes and new working conditions are sometimes felt to be strenuous, but situations of this kind can still be stimulating and challenging, despite the added difficulty of the tasks involved. This can be the case if there are good opportunities for influencing a situation and if the tasks are found meaningful and enjoyable.

Technical progress in the workplace often means new and complex duties. It can also lead to the volume of information increasing and becoming a strain in itself. It is fundamental for workers to be given the knowledge and skills they need in order to cope with changes of working procedure, e.g. introduction of technical support. It is also important that they should be allowed to take part in the process of change and, if necessary, be given guidance at work.

### **Working with people**

Jobs classed as working with people are those in which the most important "tool" is one's own person. This is the case, for example, with medical personnel, social workers and caring service employees. Their duties are often absorbing but can be strenuous, and if combined with a high working pace they can entail a risk of ill-health in the form of stress symptoms. Stress can be alleviated by supplying competence and enabling employees, e.g. through tuition and supervision, to work professionally.

### **Social contacts**

People in the workplace are also part of the work environment. This, of course, is especially true of jobs where contacts with other people are a vital part of the work. But it also applies to our relations with colleagues and superiors. The way in which we associate with and treat one another in the workplace makes an important difference to how we feel at work.

Clarification of norms, creation of good caring arrangements and a proper introduction for newly hired workers are some of the measures that can be taken to reduce interpersonal stresses.

### **Mental strain due to social and psychological**

Factors of the work environment can be at the bottom of both explicit and implicit conflicts in the workplace. Such conflicts can imply a stress risk and, if the worst comes to the worst, may help to trigger scapegoating. This makes it important to deal with the abuses at work which can be at the bottom of conflicts of different kinds.

### **Solitary work**

Working alone can be a severe mental strain, especially if combined with other risks, such as those of violence or harassment. Another potentially stressful factor is surveillance work with great values – both human and material – at stake. Solitary work can also mean a heightened risk of accidents. It is important that solitary workers should be enabled, through provision of necessary alarm devices, to feel secure and, for example, be able to consult the supervisory staff when necessary. For the prevention of ill-health, work sometimes has to be organised in such a way that solitary work is kept to a minimum.

**The physical environment**

The design of the physical environment can also lay the foundations of mental stress. The appearance of premises and their furnishings makes a difference to our wellbeing and can both enhance and impair our opportunities for contact and interaction with fellow-employees. A high sound level impedes our ability to communicate with each other, and disruptive sound is a stress factor in itself. Risks from dangerous substances and machinery can cause us to feel under pressure and to worry about injuries. Jobs entailing a high risk of accidents can give rise to fear and anxiety in case something happens.

## **Preventing and alleviating stress**

The natural response is to deal with the conditions giving rise to stress, e.g. reduce the load imposed by different factors at work. This can mean reducing the workload when people have too much to do, or taking security measures where there is a risk of violence. It can also mean altering manning arrangements for solitary work or clarifying operational targets and giving the individual worker a clear indication of the work input expected.

Most jobs entail demands of one kind or another. Having demands made on need not in itself imply stresses detrimental to health or wellbeing. It is when the demands become excessive and prolonged that they can be harmful to the individual.

Demands may come from the organisation and content of the tasks and from social contacts with fellow-employees, customers and clients.

Being able to influence one's working conditions, getting support from other people and possessing knowledge and experience are important for alleviating perceived stress. Opportunities of recuperation, moreover, are important for the prevention of ill-health.

### **Scope for manoeuvre and influence**

The way in which demands at work impact on health, both mental and physical, depends very much on the employees' influence and control over their work situation. High demands at work can be accepted and tolerated, so long as we are allowed to influence the way in which the tasks are to be performed. In the planning and organisation of work it is necessary for consideration to be paid to the feasibility of allowing employees the freedom of action they need.

If a person is working against the clock or is governed by technology and tied to their work, this reduces their prospects of influencing their own work situation.

Direct influence and responsibility concerning the way in which one's task is to be performed does not mean lack of a structure and clear work input expectations. Clarity concerning what the job demands and what the employee has to accomplish is important for the avoidance of ill-health. This also requires the aims of the operation to be clear and familiar.

Unclear expectations concerning the employees' work inputs can help to cause ill health and can lead to conflicts, both between employees and their superiors and between employees themselves. Unclear expectations can often be a seedbed of conflict and of actions and behaviour amounting to victimisation.

If the content of the job is unclear and poorly defined and the objectives unclear, this makes it hard for the individual to judge the results of his or her work. It can also help to make other people's expectations of and reactions to the work done unrealistic, thus laying the foundations of criticism of the employee and the job which he or she has done.

### **Support from other people**

Support from others round about is an effective safeguard against stress. One form of support, for example, can be help with putting tasks in priority order, relief, extra personnel

for peak loads, or the availability of breaks for getting one's breath back. Helping workers to define limits between work and leisure can play an important part in reducing stress. Sometimes this support is termed instrumental support, and it can also include properly adapted assistive devices, tools and other technology. Knowledge and time are needed for using assistive devices properly.

Creating a dialogue for the avoidance of misunderstandings, discussion of problems and difficulties, opportunities for experience interchange between fellow-employees and the continuous supply of information about the activity are some examples of what is usually termed informative support.

Reactions to work done are one example of what is sometimes called valuative support. Feedback from the supervisory staff is especially important. People need constructive reactions to work done and they need to know whether the employer's demands and expectations have been measured up to. It is important to be noticed though both positive and negative reactions objectively communicated. Most often this helps to reduce experiences of stress and provides opportunities for learning and developing at work.

### **Knowledge and experience**

Having sufficient knowledge and skills for one's task reduces the risk of overstrain, gives security and contributes towards good self-esteem. It is important that the employer investigate the employee's need of knowledge or skills and that these be supplemented where necessary, especially when there is a change of tasks or the employee has been away from work for some considerable time. Increased competence boosts self-esteem and reduces the risk of ill-health.

Tuition is aimed at building up the employee's professional competence and helping him or her to cope unscathed with difficult tasks. Tuition is provided in special talks with one or more employees.

Tuition can both provide emotional support and contribute towards competence development. Professional tuition can be a significant measure against stress, especially in caring professions where the employee as a person is the foremost "working aid". Tuition can also alleviate mental stress in many other connections.

### **Opportunities of recuperation**

Recuperation can assume various guises and require various lengths of time, depending on the stresses which the employee has been exposed to. It is important for the prevention of ill-health, and work must therefore be designed so as to include room for breaks.

Night work and irregular working hours can entail a special strain. The need for recuperation should be taken into account, e.g. in timetabling.

Particular consideration must be paid to opportunities of recuperation in periods when the pace of work is accelerated or there is a great deal of overtime being worked.

Flexible working hours, with scope for the employees to decide the arrangement of their own working time, can be a way of alleviating stress and facilitating recuperation.

## Rules and responsibilities

The basic ideas underlying the Work Environment Act are the prevention of ill-health and accidents at work and the attainment of a good work environment in other respects. The ideas of the Work Environment Act are epitomised in the following excerpt from a report by the Work Environment Commission, concerning the purpose of the Act:

“One of the most important prerequisites of a better working life is abundant job content and the ability of individuals to influence their own work situation. A person who in the course of their work is constantly learning new things, is able to assume responsibility, has the opportunity of co-operating with others, commands a general view of the operation they are a part of, understands it and is in a position to influence the work taking place can feel satisfaction and can develop as a human being.”

### **Work environment management – a matter of partnership**

The employer is responsible for taking all the measures needed for the prevention of ill-health and accidents at work. The work environment must be organised by the labour market parties and the safety delegate conjointly, and the employees must participate in all work environment management.

### **Systematic work environment management**

Systematic work environment management is needed in order to achieve good working conditions and reduce the stress which can give rise to ill-health. In connection with various decisions and measures within the operation, the implications for the work environment must be taken into account.

Systematic work environment management means planning, conducting and monitoring the operation with an eye to the risks of ill-health resulting from mental stresses.

Read more about systematic work environment management:  
<http://www.av.se/dokument/inenglish/books/h367eng.pdf>

### **Investigate working conditions**

In order to be able to work proactively with work environment measures, managers and supervisory staff need a close knowledge of the working conditions which can entail mental stress, and they need to judge whether these can imply a risk of ill-health or accidents. This work environment management also requires the participation and commitment of the employees.

The Provisions on Systematic Work Environment Management require the employer to regularly investigate working conditions and assess the risks of ill-health. The frequency of these investigations will depend on the extent and nature of the operation and are determined by the employer in consultation with the employees or their representatives.

Over and above the regular investigations, the causes of ill-health, accidents and serious incidents must be investigated and, before introducing changes, the employer must carry out a risk assessment and assess the effect of the change on the risks of ill-health and accidents.

It is important that signals which can have consequences in the form of mental strain should be detected by the employer at an early stage of things. These signals may concern

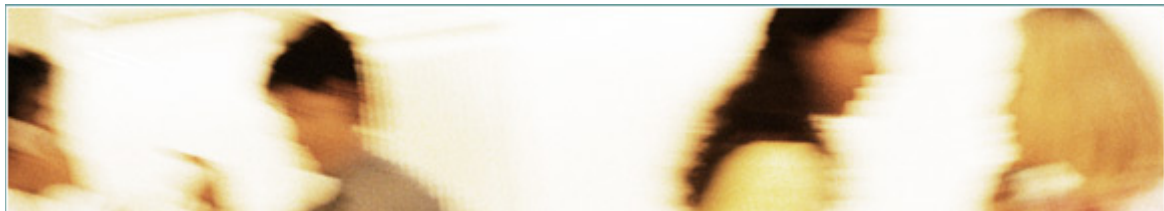
unsatisfactory working conditions, problems in the way work is organised or co-operation failures. Individual talks may be needed between managers and employees in order to capture indications of stress symptoms among the associates. Managers and supervisory staff must have at their disposal both the time and the knowledge which this requires.

The employees for their part are responsible for communicating their experiences to the employer. This in turn presupposes mutual respect and trust between managers/supervisory staff and their associates.

The investigations must form the basis of measures to improve the work environment.

## **Knowledge of the work environment**

In order to achieve good work environment management, managers and supervisory staff need to have good knowledge of the work environment, e.g. concerning the possible effects of different social and psychological conditions at work on the employees' mental health and concerning ways of detecting signs of ill-health among individuals and groups and within the operation. Knowledge of reactions to stress and crises has an important bearing on the creation of good working conditions.



---

This information is also available in Swedish: <http://www.av.se/teman/stress/>

© Swedish Work Environment Authority 2006