

# UE STEWARD



## FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

UNITED ELECTRICAL, RADIO AND MACHINE WORKERS OF AMERICA • SEPTEMBER 2012



**H**ow often have we heard co-workers complain that coming to work makes them sick? How many times has a steward had to intervene on behalf of a worker who blew up at a boss or walked off the job? How often do people continue to work at full speed, despite suffering from pain or injuries because they are afraid of losing their job? These are symptoms of workplace stress.

What is stress? Stress is a medical term that describes how the human body reacts when it fears it is under attack. Stress can be caused by mental or physical conditions, or, a combination of both. When the human body fears it is under attack it automatically responds. The pulse rate increases, blood flow to the brain and to major muscle groups increases, and adrenaline and other stimulants are released into the blood stream. All these relate to the human instinct for “fight or flight” when attacked. The extra blood flow and stimulants get the body ready for physical activity.

Imagine driving a car. You swerve to avoid an accident. You notice your pulse is up and you’re more alert. This was your body’s response to a dangerous situation. Very soon your body returns to normal. The problem with workplace stress is that workers can’t flee. When stress becomes continuous,

the body is damaged by the constant physical changes it puts itself through.

Management gurus have even developed programs for “management by stress.” They understand that if a worker is placed under stress their body will react physically, enabling them to work harder and faster. Of course, management doesn’t care that this takes a physical and mental toll on workers. They don’t even care that this can cause a higher rate of injuries, they are interested in a short term increase in production.

### Symptoms Of Stress

Studies by the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH) show the following symptoms are early warning signs of workplace stress:

- Headaches
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulty in concentrating
- Short temper
- Upset stomach
- Job dissatisfaction
- Low morale
- Muscle aches and pains
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Depression
- Domestic violence
- Anxiety

### The Damage Stress Can Cause

There are obvious injuries that come

from physical stress. The most talked about is Repetitive Strain Injuries that show up as various forms of tendinitis (wrists, shoulders, etc.) There are also hidden injuries that people can suffer. Although many employers oppose the idea of workplace stress, more than half of the 50 states have recognized workplace stress as a legitimate cause of injury, making workers eligible to collect workers compensation. NIOSH reports cite the following long term health problems that can be caused or aggravated by workplace stress:

- Hypertension (high bloodpressure)
- Heart disease
- Strokes
- Infectious diseases
- Spastic colon
- Immune system dysfunction
- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Musculoskeletal diseases
- Serious depression
- Suicidal behavior
- Domestic violence
- Alcoholism
- Substance abuse

### The Employer’s Approach

Like most things, the approach a union takes to stress and the approach

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“Some employers assume that stressful working conditions are a necessary evil—that companies must turn up the pressure on workers and set aside health concerns to remain productive and profitable in today’s economy.

But research findings challenge this belief. Studies show that stressful working conditions are actually associated with increased absenteeism, tardiness, and intentions by workers to quit their jobs—all of which have a negative effect on the bottom line.”

—from “Stress at Work” a report by National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety, a division of the Center for Disease Control. More info can be found at [www.cdc.gov/NIOSH/topics/stress](http://www.cdc.gov/NIOSH/topics/stress)

# Stress in the Workplace

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employers take are different.

When dealing with stress, **employers** (and the scientists that work for them) tend to put emphasis on two items.

*One*—an individual’s personal physical and mental make-up, that is, their own ability to deal with stressful situations and,

*Two*—the “sociocultural and interpersonal” causes of stress. “Sociocultural” means the big things in society that can cause stress, like racism, political changes, and economic downturns. “Interpersonal” means events in each person’s life that can cause stress, like divorces, deaths in the family, children, and lack of money.

The employer view tends to say that everybody is different and can handle different amounts of stress. Which is true, but then they draw the conclusion that workplace stress doesn’t really exist because it’s just an individual’s response and some people are “weaker” than others. They then go on to talk about the “outside” factors that cause stress.

Their solution is to provide individual counseling on how to stop smoking, kick the drug or alcohol problem, financial planning, marriage counseling etc. The other solution is to provide exercise opportunities, walking courses, gyms etc. All this is designed to let workers blow off steam and relieve their personal stress without tackling the root causes.

Here’s a partial list of situations NIOSH has identified as causing stress in the workplace:

- Hiring policies
- Plant closings (or threats to close)
- Layoffs
- Workplace relocations
- Automation
- Retraining
- Work pace that is set too fast
- Mandatory overtime with no regard for family situations
- Heavy workloads
- Racist or sexist supervisors
- Supervisors that harass or yell at employees
- Infrequent rest breaks
- Long hours
- Shift work (causes sleep disorders, sleep deprivation)
- Hectic and routine tasks that make no sense
- Menial jobs that don’t use workers’ skills
- Being ordered to produce poor work
- Having no sense of input or control over work
- Poor communication from supervisors
- Lack of family friendly policies
- Lack of support from supervisors
- Unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions such as noise, crowding, air pollution, dealing with hostile clients or customers
- Ergonomic problems (bad chairs, computer glare for 8 hours a day)
- Repetitive motions (grinding, buffing, screwing, typing)

## The Union Approach

The **union** approach is based on a broader picture, starting from the premise that work is one of the most important aspects of a worker’s life. It’s not just 8 or 10 hours a day. Work is food and shelter for the family, it can mean the ability to take a vacation or not. A change in work hours means scrambling to find baby sitting, getting someone to pick up kids from school, etc. Work affects everything, and thus stress at work affects a worker’s health and family.

As might be expected, most studies show that having a well-functioning union is one of the best ways to fight stress in the workplace. A union gives workers a vehicle to deal with most of the examples listed above and to tackle the **real causes of stress**.

Stressful conditions can be fought using the health and

safety, or the recognition clauses of the contract. Many contracts contain language stating, “It is the obligation of the employer to provide a safe and healthy workplace.” The recognition clause can be used because it defines the union as the “sole and exclusive bargaining representative for wages, hours and other conditions of employment.” Thus the union steward can grieve situations that can cause harm to workers.

OSHA, or the threat of going to OSHA, can be used to tackle specific workplace health and safety problems.

**Making the workplace family friendly.** Employers like to point out that they have no control over the stress that is caused by “interpersonal” situations. However, NIOSH studies point out that family stress can be relieved by a workplace with “family friendly” policies. Family stress is often caused by the conflict of going to work or dealing with the family problems and being disciplined for missing work.

A family friendly workplace policy would allow workers to be absent due to a sick child, to care for a sick or dying family member, attending school conferences, or taking a family member to the doctor. Not having to worry about being fired or disciplined decreases or eliminates the stress.

Because most employers are not family friendly, many states have passed their own “Family Medical Leave Acts” which supplement the federal law. These state laws often provide time for taking children to school conferences or the doctor. UE Locals should check to see if their state has a FMLA law. If not, this should be put on the union’s political action agenda.

**Workplace Control.** Dealing with the list of items that cause stress in the workplace comes down to the issue of workplace control. The more the employer sets the pace and environment in a workplace, the more stress the employees face. A strong union with a strong steward system that takes sole control away from the employer is the most basic way to deal with stress. Many scientific reports on stress come out in favor of “teams” and “worker input.” We know most of these are phoney and are used by employers to get workers to speedup. What’s really needed is input and workplace control by the union.

*Example:* Getting rid of floor supervisors is one good and quick way to relieve stress. Some employers have instituted what they call “self-directed workforces.” Supervisors are eliminated but group leaders are created and expected to act like supervisors (including discipline) without supervisor’s pay. This can cause tension among the union members who don’t want a union sister or brother disciplining them.

In some UE workplaces supervisors have been eliminated under different circumstances. In these places group leaders function differently. They distribute the work and help others with problems. They refuse to have anything to do with discipline. It’s up to the employer to deal with disciplinary issues. In such cases members report that work goes smoother, quality is better, absenteeism is lower, productivity is up and stress is down. Why don’t more employers adopt this practice? **CONTROL.** Management hates to give up control, even if it benefits them.

## Stress at Work

- Health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress.
- Three-fourths of employees believe the worker has more on-the-job stress than a generation ago.
- According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers who must take time off work because of stress, anxiety, or a related disorder will be off the job for about 20 days.

—from “Stress at Work.” More info can be found at [www.cdc.gov/NIOSH/topics/stress](http://www.cdc.gov/NIOSH/topics/stress)

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