

What can
we do
about stress?

Self-care and mutual support

People need to work together to get at the roots of job stress. But it's also essential that you learn how to reduce the impact of stress in your own life. Self-care and mutual support are the keys.

Say goodbye to self-blame

Workplace stress is like pollution. It contaminates the atmosphere and makes people feel bad. The smog of stress makes it hard to pinpoint the real cause of all the tension, anger, and unhappiness. You may blame yourself and start doubting your ability to do the job. You may end up fighting with co-workers. **It's very important to avoid falling into these guilt-and-anger traps.**

Popular attitudes towards stress often encourage a blaming attitude. People talk about the need to have good coping skills in this hectic, downsized world. Employers give stress management courses that "teach" their overwhelmed employees how to handle the job better. The secret to living with stress, they say, is to practise relaxation techniques and develop a healthier lifestyle. If you don't reduce your stress symptoms, or if you fall back into old habits, it must be your own damn fault.

In a stress-filled workplace, people may be accused of being lazy or incompetent. There may be heavy pressure from managers and co-workers not to take time off for stress-related health problems. If you succeed in taking a break, you may worry about being stigmatized and resented when you return.

These attitudes reflect society's individualistic view of the world: the belief that each of us is personally responsible for our successes and



Did you hear the one about the "disorganized" employer?

When a worker complains about being stressed, some managers are quick to blame – the worker. Common criticisms are:

- "You're just disorganized ..."
- "You've got problems at home ..."
- "You're spending too much time on union business ..."
- "You need better coping skills ..."

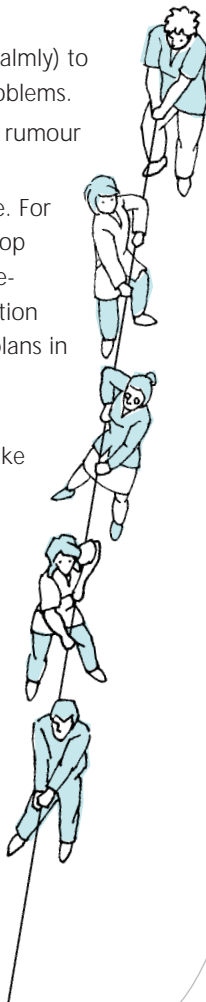
The common denominator? It's *your* fault.

Pull together, don't fall apart

Conflict among workers is often caused by stressful working conditions, but gets fuelled by misunderstandings, fear, and pettiness. People become really angry at each other without bothering to learn the facts or talk over their concerns.

It takes courage and goodwill to rise above anger – plus communication skills. Start here:

- Talk directly (and calmly) to co-workers about problems.
- Check out what is rumour and what is fact.
- Get the big picture. For example, ask your shop steward or local representative for information about restructuring plans in your organization.
- Support your co-workers' efforts to take care of themselves.
- Show respect to *everyone* – and encourage others to do the same.



failures. Yet your response to a stressful job is not a private matter that can be controlled by sheer will power – it is your body's automatic reaction to unhealthy circumstances. Coping skills and relaxation techniques will not make stressors go away. Your situation will improve only when conditions in your workplace improve.

Work with co-workers, not against them

You may also blame co-workers or get mad at them for stressful conditions. Blaming a colleague is just another form of self-blame. It finds fault with individuals rather than with structural problems such as overtime pressure, unclear job duties, restructuring, and nonexistent support.

Although you and your co-workers are in the same boat, you may have very different personal reactions. Take time to talk together. Ask about each other's job situation and about stress at work and at home. Be positive about the efforts people are making to look after themselves.

You have a common interest in diffusing worker-to-worker anger if only because you need each other to demand a healthier workplace. The anti-stress strategies in this book depend on solidarity.

Self-care

“Your body is your life. If you don't take care of it, no one else will.”

HEU MEMBER AT THE 1998 NURSING TEAM CONFERENCE

Self-care means making a conscious decision to take care of yourself, especially in situations that may be harmful. For health care workers, self-care can be extraordinarily hard to do. You are dedicated to giving the best possible service to patients, even in onerous circumstances. As a worker, you have learned to put your own needs second. If you are a woman, you may have learned to put your own needs last. It's a challenge to make 'me, my body, and my health' a priority.

When you are overwhelmed by workplace stress, it's difficult to figure out what to do. Sometimes the best way to care for yourself is to take time off. A

break from work can help you regain the clarity and energy needed to tackle new things.

Self-care has three basic steps:

- tuning in to your body,
- recognizing what is good for your body, and what is bad, and
- doing things that will make you feel better.

Even a small amount of self-care can strengthen your immune system and make you feel better. The more time you spend really 'in' your own body, the more you'll be able to listen to its wisdom (also called gut feelings). When you know what your body needs, it's easier to say no to harmful things. You'll learn to set limits, to ask for what you need, and to demand changes.

Mutual support: An essential part of healthy work

Human caring and support are just plain good for your health. And lack of support is a well-documented stressor.

'Support' refers to interpersonal relationships that give you positive energy and a sense of belonging. We've already seen that people who live in a supportive community have stronger immune systems than people who don't. Support at work is also essential. It satisfies the human need for contact and companionship, and can actually decrease job strain. Researchers say that co-worker and supervisor support may be twice as important as family support in reducing the impact of a stressful job.

Co-worker and union support Support from co-workers comes in different forms. **Anything that breaks isolation and shows mutual respect is helpful.** You can simply thank one another for the good work you are doing. You can acknowledge the pressures each person is under. You can listen sympathetically when a co-worker has a problem. When problems multiply, you can call a meeting to discuss what to do together.

The union can also be an important source of support, from activists to shop stewards, local executive, servicing representatives, and provincial



Self-care has many rewards ...

Feeling relaxed and comfortable at work should be possible – at least some of the time! Stretches, good posture, relaxation techniques, exercise, healthy diet, dancing, walking, and other activities that are fun and joyful – all these will help you feel better. For example:

- Breathing consciously and deeply can relax and energize you. Take a few moments to breath consciously when you feel stress building up.
- Stretches can relieve pain, fatigue, and tension.
- Correct methods of sitting, lifting, and keyboarding can prevent injury.
- Running, walking fast, or working out can release endorphins (your brain's own muscle relaxant and pain killer).
- Meditation and other relaxation techniques can calm and balance your nervous system.

The working wounded

Coming to work when you're sick is a risk factor for injury. You may do this when management tightens up the sickness absence policy and/or doesn't backfill. You drag yourself into work, fearing the consequences of staying home. In this weakened state, you are at *increased risk* of injury or repeat injury, even long-term disability.

Caught in this stressful cycle, you can become one of the 'working wounded.'

Take time, take care

Sometimes people feel self-conscious, guilty, and even 'stupid' about doing stretches, deep breathing, and other kinds of self-care at work. Negative emotions may also arise if you try to rearrange your work area to improve the ergonomics.

Don't let these feelings stop you.

Talk to co-workers about the importance of taking your bodies seriously. And encourage one another to take time to take care – it really helps!

office. By getting more involved in the union, you will find – and give – the support needed to change stressful working conditions.

Supervisor support A job is less stressful when supervisors have a supportive attitude and take action to back up their staff. Supervisor support means: 1) listening to workers; 2) giving credit for people's skills and problem-solving abilities; and 3) responding in a timely and direct manner to concerns. One group of HEU members described tangible supervisor support in these terms:

- including you in the team (at meetings, etc.)
- dealing with problems when you raise them
- helping you to get the job done
- acknowledging (and helping) when there is work overload

Caring for stressed workers

Unions have two main aims when negotiating about stress:

- preventing stress-related health problems from occurring in the first place, and
- ensuring that members suffering from stress are cared for and represented.

Any person who suffers from workplace stress deserves to be helped. For this reason, you have a right to use support groups, counsellors, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), and other workplace and community-based services.

Many employers know that stress is a huge issue for their staff. They are often willing to invest in counselling programs, stress and anger management courses, and EAPs. Unfortunately, these one-to-one approaches are not designed to prevent or eliminate *the causes* of workplace stress.

The International Labour Office (ILO) studied various programs and

concluded that most counselling and relaxation programs were ineffective in improving the work environment.

The ILO's research also showed that **when unions developed and/or participated in counselling programs, there was more success in changing the stress-producing situation.** Counsellors in these programs were trained to look at the sick workplace, not just the stressed-out worker. Part of our challenge is to insist that workplace programs have genuine union involvement.

Counselling and courses have limited benefits, but do offer some relief. A decent program can help you to feel stronger, which means you will be better equipped to fight for healthy working conditions.



A stretch a day ...

At a long-term care facility in Nelson, B.C., the entire staff do a 10-minute stretching session together every day. Workers are given time off for these mandatory exercises, which are lead by a different person each day. The joint health and safety committee proposed the sessions, and the manager agreed.

How do workers feel about these group stretches? "I can't get by without it," says one worker.

Changing the work, changing the workplace

The only way to really reduce toxic stress is to change the work and change the workplace.

The keys are a healthy job design and a democratic organizational culture. These are not idealistic or touchy-feely notions. They are highly practical approaches that reduce workplace stress and bring concrete benefits to workers, patients, and employers.

Stress busters: Healthy job design, democratic workplace

Most employers operate as though there were only one way to design a job or run a workplace: in a hierarchical, centralized manner. Today, this old-style organizational culture is being challenged on pragmatic grounds.

Recent studies show that job sites with participatory management practices have lower accident rates than traditional sites. In other words, when workers have greater involvement in decision-making, they have lower rates of sicktime and injury. Although these studies don't talk explicitly about stress, it is well established that control (i.e., decision-making latitude) is a key factor in whether a job is stressful.

HEU members often talk about wanting more control at work, more say in how things get done. In effect, you are asking for a **healthy job design**: one that would reduce stress by giving you the right tools to do a demanding job well. A related idea is **workplace democracy**, which means all employees have some decision-making powers about their work

Don't be fooled by fake empowerment

Administrators have a poor track record when it comes to genuinely involving workers in decision making or restructuring plans. Watch out if:

- There is lots of talk about "consultation," "empowerment," "worker involvement," "Total Quality Management," "quality teams," "focus groups," but you have no real *power* to make decisions.
- Outside consultants are hired to do a redesign, and front-line workers and unions are barely (or rarely) involved.
- Job redesign schemes are created by upper management, and you and your team are left to implement *their* agenda.
- Your brain is picked about the small details of your job, but you aren't involved in defining the real-life demands and consequences of the work.
- A few token staff people are consulted or designated as "design team" members, but there are no formal mechanisms for all workers to have input or give ongoing feedback.
- You are offered a retreat, a one-time meeting, or a seminar to ease you into new working conditions, but there is no formal opportunity to influence what happens to your job.

Workplace democracy: Good for workers, good for health care

A 1990–92 study of Ontario work sites looked at the relationship between lower WCB claims and organizational culture. It found a correlation between lower claims and management practices that encouraged workers to 1) use their own initiative and 2) participate in decision-making. Lower WCB claims were also associated with lower grievance rates, high-functioning Joint Occupational Health and Safety committees, and better labour relations.

Moreover, these healthier work sites had low staff turnover and more experienced workers with considerable seniority.

The research suggests that good labour relations and participatory management practices can cultivate a stable, experienced, and motivated work team. And these workers will be relatively free of toxic stress, a prime cause of lost time.



and job design. Workplace democracy can also mean that workers participate in decisions about the organization itself.

Most employers have a long way to go in improving their organizational culture. HEU members have had mixed experiences with enhanced consultation and with various management schemes to ‘empower’ employees. Nevertheless, it is to everyone’s advantage to reduce workplace stress – and job design/organizational culture are big pieces of the puzzle.

Blueprint for a healthy job design

In a job with a healthy design, you would have:

- a clear job description and duties, including how you should respond to demands
- a degree of control in carrying out tasks (how, when, what order, etc.)
- a reasonable workload and fair pace of work
- a clean, comfortable environment with ergonomically designed work areas
- a variety of tasks performed in a variety of locations
- mutual support from supervisors and co-workers
- work processes and social relations that do not expose you to physical or psychological hazards
- job-sharing, flextime, and other options to help with family obligations
- time for caring contact with patients and/or clients (where applicable)

Blueprint for a democratic workplace

In a workplace run on democratic principles, you would have these kinds of rights and responsibilities:

- some decision-making power about how your job is done – and how it may be redesigned

- the capacity to see how your tasks fit into other people's tasks to make a complete work process
- formal ways to work with management on problems, including time lines for action
- maximum use of your skills, and opportunities for training and future growth
- employer support to attend ESL, adult basic education, literacy, and other courses that help you to participate fully in the workplace
- acknowledgment that your job is meaningful within the larger goals of the organization

Who benefits?

Everyone. It isn't just workers who thrive when a workplace is committed to healthy job design and democratic principles. The benefits are wide-reaching and extremely significant. In a nutshell:

- workers have fewer injuries, illnesses, and disabilities
- job satisfaction increases
- patient care improves
- health authorities, employers, and government save money due to reduced injuries, sicktime, rehabilitation costs, turnover, etc.
- the economy and society as a whole is strengthened

Improved health for patients There is a direct connection between how much control you have over your job and the quality of patient care.

An important U.S. survey found that hospitals with a reputation for good nursing practice were also good places for patients. To be exact, the hospitals had a 5 percent lower mortality rate. These "magnet hospitals" have an organizational culture that emphasizes collaboration and joint problem-solving among staff. "The research suggests the better control that people close to patients have, the better the [patient] outcomes," says Linda Aitken, author of the study.



What goes up *can* come down

Job strain can lead to hypertension, but the damage is reversible. According to a U.S. researcher, Dr. Peter Schnall, people whose jobs become less demanding or who are given more scope for decision-making see a decrease in their blood pressure.

Caring counts

"The risk is that as all staff in hospitals and community units get squeezed tighter to achieve maximum output of processes at minimum labour costs, human relations may be increasingly ignored ... [Yet] without caring, real health outputs fall" despite faster and more 'efficient' systems of work.

THE LANCET



A real drag

Work-family conflict is not just a drag for individuals, it's a drag on the economy and health care system. A 1999 Health Canada report on work-life conflict found that employees with high levels of conflict miss an average of 13.2 work days per year (compared with 5.9 days for other workers) and visit their physician an average of 4.62 times per year (compared with 3.17 times).

The price of this conflict between work and family? The excess work absences cost Canadian employers at least \$2.7 billion annually in lost output. And the excess doctor visits cost the public health care system at least \$425.8 million.

Research proves that patients who receive caring attention can heal faster, live longer, and enjoy a better quality of life. This phenomenon is called **caring effects**. Studies reveal that when workers have the time to talk to patients and offer emotional support, even briefly, patient outcomes can improve. One survey of people with chronic arthritis showed that, with caring contact, their pain diminished and their mobility improved.

The monetary costs of this human connection are relatively low, the health benefits high. The opposite is also true. "New management techniques emphasize efficiency through outputs – waiting times, number of interventions done, time taken, etc.," say researchers Hart and Dieppe. "The result is an increasingly unhappy workforce who are having to sacrifice what most motivates them as health care workers: flexibility, sensitivity and caring."

Employers are rewarded, too Research proves that workplace stress leads to lower productivity, increased sicktime and stress leaves, and higher workers' compensation claims. In Canada, more than \$11 billion is spent on direct payroll-financed disability claims every year. A considerable amount is stress related.

The problem is escalating, according to a recent Statistics Canada report. In 1998, employees lost approximately 72 million work days for personal reasons, up from 66 million in 1997. The report's author believes on-the-job stress is the prime culprit behind the increase.

Besides the direct financial costs of workplace injuries/sicktime, there are **massive indirect costs relating to employee recruitment and replacement, and legal/dispute resolution fees.** The Workers' Compensation Board of B.C. estimates these costs to be three times the direct costs.

Employers are also hindered when stressed-out workers suffer from low motivation or have difficulty learning new skills. If job satisfaction is low, turnover is likely to be high – a negative dynamic that will certainly hurt productivity and increase costs.

Employers ignore these direct and indirect costs at their peril. Healthy jobs and democratic workplaces are good for the future of health care.

Organizing to reduce and prevent workplace stress

Every crusade to improve working conditions was launched by ordinary people who stood up, spoke out, and organized. Workplace stress is one of the crucial issues of our times. It will be up to us to focus attention on the problem in a way that creates tangible, long-term change. We can tackle workplace stress by:

- making stress prevention a central issue among workers, employers, and Health Authorities
- organizing to improve specific working conditions, job designs, and ergonomics
- fighting for changes to collective agreements, Workers' Compensation Board regulations, and legislation

Stress prevention policies: An idea whose time has come

To make a real difference, workplace stress must be dealt with at the organizational level. One way to ensure this broad approach is through stress prevention and stress reduction strategies.

Some European workers have negotiated anti-stress policies with employers, and we can learn from their experience.

It is essential that you play an active role in developing such policies. Worker participation will ensure the policy acknowledges the structural causes of stress, the benefits of healthy job design, and your



The stress of restructuring: How one department fought back

In 1998, Vancouver Hospital did a major restructuring of its Health Records Department. Based on recommendations by an outside consultant, clerical positions were deleted, hours of operation decreased, work processes drastically changed, and supervisory personnel cut.

Within a few weeks the department was in big trouble. Workload increased, backlogs piled up, error rates skyrocketed, clients were angry – and workers were very stressed. Individuals tried unsuccessfully to get the new manager to respond to their concerns. Many people filed work overload reports with the health and safety committee. After five months of frustration, the entire department walked out.

Finally waking up, management

agreed to a series of facilitated meetings to look into the crisis. HEU researched and wrote an in-depth report, largely based on workers' experiences. Staff conducted their own survey, asking physicians what they thought of service quality in the restructured department. Senior administrators decided to hire external experts to review the situation, and the union insisted on having a say in who was hired. HEU also insisted that front-line workers be a key part of the review.

The external review was a strong vindication of workers' concerns. In the aftermath, a committee of Health Records staff started meeting with the new managers to hammer out an ongoing process of consultation, communication, and evaluation.



right to be involved in solutions. Don't let the employer simply hand out their own policy – it is unlikely to address these core issues.

In the 1990s, the national association of physiotherapists in Great Britain launched a “Less Stress Campaign.” They created the following guidelines for negotiating an effective stress prevention policy.

A good stress prevention policy includes ...

- A definition of work-related stress.
- A statement by management that stress is an organizational problem that they are committed to tackling.
- An agreement about key factors that cause/contribute to stress, such as excessive workload, lack of support, and lack of control over the job.
- A comprehensive list of stress symptoms, plus a willingness to add new symptoms.
- Techniques for assessing stressors, such as inspections, confidential surveys, audits, etc.
- Tools for assessing stress hazards, comparable to risk assessments for established hazards (e.g., manual lifting).
- Simple, clear procedures to use when a worker is showing stress symptoms. To encourage prompt reporting, the procedures should offer the worker ample representation and support.
- The right of every worker to receive training and ongoing information about workplace stress.
- A review of the policy at regular intervals.

The A-B-Cs of organizing

Whether you are seeking specific improvements to working conditions or developing a general stress prevention strategy, you need to follow the basic steps of organizing. Think of what you're doing as a campaign.

Campaigns are designed to educate, mobilize, persuade, and pressure people to make changes. A successful campaign has the following ingredients:

Educate, and raise awareness

- Talk with co-workers about the issue. Many people say they're stressed out, but they may not have the big picture. Give them information about what causes workplace stress and how it can be prevented.
- Pass out graphics, stickers, posters, cartoons, and diagrams about workplace stress. (Use this guide!)
- Raise the issue at your local union meeting and with your shop steward and local executive.
- Talk about the problem wherever you go, not just at work. Workplace stress is a social and economic disaster for working people, as unacceptable as high injury rates and exposure to toxic substances.

Document the problem

- Keep a daily journal of workload problems and other stressors, either as individuals or as a department.
- Identify the stress hazards in your department. "Risk assessment" means mapping and identifying the aspects of your job that make you vulnerable to stress-related injury and illness.
- Use this guide's statistics on workplace stress, lost time, and MSI. You can also gather information from groups listed in *Resources*.

Get other people involved

- Inform staff in your facility/organization by distributing survey results, pamphlets, this guide, stickers, newspaper articles, etc.



Calling all members

You don't need to be a shop steward to take on workplace stress. Except for filing a grievance, any union member can take the steps listed here. And anyone can start raising awareness that stress is a collective issue, not a personal problem.

Research *is* action

Here are four things you could do to document stress in your workplace:

- 1) Do a job strain questionnaire (see page 58).
- 2) Do a survey of the pains, strains, and chronic conditions among your co-workers: the number of headaches, jaw aches, back aches, neck aches, other muscle strains, and worse ...
- 3) Do a survey that measures how stress levels have changed over a period of time (see page 59).
- 4) Find out how many sick days and injuries occurred in your department over a fixed period of time.

Document the problem, propose concrete solutions

At a retirement facility in the Okanagan, the food services department was in turmoil. Years of lax management and incompetent supervision had produced widespread conflict. A few workers had taken on the supervisor's role and were bossing the others around. Some workers weren't speaking to each other; others had filed harassment grievances against HEU members.

A complaints investigator was brought in under the collective agreement. She interviewed various parties and made recommendations. Some changes were eventually made to management and supervisory positions. But the department was still full of hostility, and stress levels were high.

Two food services workers joined the local executive and decided to take action. The union developed an anonymous questionnaire – "Work Environment/Stress Survey" – that asked workers what they thought was causing the stress and what would improve the situation (see page 59). Before distributing the survey, the local wrote to management explaining its purpose. The employer was very supportive, and eager to hear the results.

Most workers filled out the survey – and their responses were an eye opener.

- Call a meeting of your co-workers to discuss workplace stress. Ask more people to get actively involved. If possible, meet outside the job. This gives you time to explore issues in depth and figure out where to go for further action and support.
- Hold an anti-stress workshop.
- Look for allies: the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee (JOHSC); sympathetic managers; members of the regional Health Board or community health councils; workers in other HEU locals who have waged campaigns; other unions and community activists who are concerned about the issues, etc.

Get support from the union

- Get involved with the local. Ask your shop steward, JOHSC members, local executive, Labour Adjustment Committee, and workers in other departments to participate in an anti-stress campaign.
- Ask for research materials, province-wide statistics, and other anti-stress resources from provincial office.

Identify concrete demands and pressure points

- Develop specific demands, not just vague ideas. Figure out your priorities, make concrete proposals, and include a time line for action and evaluation.
- Figure out where you can get results, and apply pressure: Is the manager sympathetic? Is the JOHSC active and strong? Is the regional Health Board concerned about growing WCB claims and absenteeism? Would a general (policy) grievance be a good strategy?
- Hold management accountable: Find ways to publicize what you're doing – and what you expect management to do.

Support each other

- Do things in a group – it's easier to get results when you present a united front. For example, if you decide to file a grievance, make it a general (policy) grievance. This prevents management from targeting an

individual and/or making cosmetic changes.

- Spread organizing tasks around. Don't let one or two people carry all the weight.
- Show appreciation for each other's contribution to the anti-stress campaign.

Making your case

This guide has solid information, statistics, and arguments for making your anti-stress case to management and/or health authorities. Remember these key points:

► **Stress is preventable**

Unhealthy stress is not inevitable. Hospitals and other health care facilities will always be intense places to work. But when people have good support and some control over their work, even a highly demanding job can be a healthy job.

► **Stress is an organizational problem**

Stress management courses and relaxation techniques are of limited value in reducing workplace stress. What *will* make a difference is an organizational commitment, at all levels, to tackle the roots of stress. Work overload, excessive overtime, poor job design, and ill-conceived re-engineering are common causes of stress-related injuries and sickness.

► **Cost benefits**

It pays to reduce workplace stress. Whether through sicktime, high turnover, or WCB claims, stress costs money – lots of money. For example, the failure to backfill is costly to both workers and employers. A study of MSI in a large B.C. hospital found that people who worked during periods of high sicktime had a two-fold increase in injuries and WCB claims, compared with people working during periods of low sicktime.

► **Prevention is best**

Once a worker is injured, he or she is at high risk of being injured again. This is clearly the case with MSI, which are common among HEU



Although people felt stress levels had improved under the new manager, they were still upset about unhealthy dynamics among co-workers. To fix the problem, they wanted:

- management and supervision that were fair, active, consistent, and free of favouritism
- clear and direct communication by management regarding *who* makes decisions about job descriptions, *what* is expected of staff, and *consequences* of changes
- cooks to be given formal supervisory powers (and supervisory training)
- regular staff meetings
- in-services courses on conflict resolution and team building

The findings were shared with the manager, who committed himself to working with the local on improvements.

The survey included one inspired suggestion: an "Amnesty Day Celebration." Many workers wanted to put the past behind and make a fresh start. On Amnesty Day, everyone – management and workers alike – would write their old complaints on a piece of paper, walk outside, tear up the paper, throw it into a barrel, and then return to the facility together. This department intended to move on.



So many strategies, so little time: What's the best approach?

Grievances, JOHSC investigations and Labour Adjustment Committees are tools to help workers deal with workplace stress. They each have strengths and weaknesses, and can be deployed separately or together:

- ▶ **A JOHSC investigation** uses existing resources, doesn't focus on an individual worker, and can be a more cooperative and proactive approach. *The downside?* Management can refuse to make recommended changes.
- ▶ **A grievance** can cost the employer money – a threat that can work to your

members and are frequently caused by stress (see page 27). Prevention is key.

▶ **Patient care improves**

Patients do better when their care providers have the time and support to pay attention to them. This improves quality of life for patients and job satisfaction for workers.

▶ **Workers are more productive**

Research proves that toxic stress is an enemy of productivity, motivation, skill development, initiative, and loyalty. The opposite is also true. Workers with sufficient support and control are more productive, trusting, motivated, etc.

▶ **It's the law**

B.C. has new Ergonomic Requirements that oblige employers to do prevention and education on stress-related injuries (see page 50).

Shop stewards: What can you do?

Shop stewards are often called upon to help stressed-out members. What is the steward's role? The basic steps are to support the worker, investigate and document the problem, get other workers involved, and advocate solutions.

Let's look at a common scenario. A worker comes to you with a problem such as excessive workload, in-fighting, unclear job responsibilities, or a difficult manager. The person is really upset and on edge.

- **First, listen sympathetically.** Acknowledge the worker's feelings and reassure them the problem is real. Ask them to identify the exact problem(s).
- **Encourage them to do self-care.** In some cases, this could mean suggesting they take a break from work. *Note:* Some people obviously need a break, yet won't feel entitled (or safe enough) to ask for one. If this happens, tell them it's okay to take a break and they are entitled to

do so. Advise them of their rights and protection from loss of pay, such as using accumulated sick banks or Employment Insurance sick leave benefits. If applicable, put the member in touch with a physician who will support their request for extended leave.

- Go to the department and start investigating and documenting the situation. Collaborate with the worker who made the original complaint, if possible. Find out if their actual work is consistent with their written job duties. Talk to other workers and supervisors.
- Ask other members in the department to get involved. You'll get a better sense of problems – and possible solutions – by working together. You'll also present a united front.
- Make contact with other activists, and **work together** on the issue. This includes JOHSC and Labour Adjustment Committee members, and people active on other labour/management committees.
- Choose a strategy (see margin) and a remedy. Here are a few standard remedies you can propose:
 - changes in job design, physical work space, etc.
 - changes to supervisory structure
 - full replacement of absent staff
 - reimbursements to sick banks
- Keep in touch with the member who made the original complaint. Let them know what's happening (and be honest about chances of improving the situation). If someone is on stress-related leave, phone them at home. Fill them in, and ask if they will help when they return.
- Finally, look after yourself! You too have the right to get support from co-workers.

What tools can you use?

Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees (JOHSC) HEU's collective agreements require every employer to have a worker-



advantage. You can also launch a general (policy) grievance, which means no individual worker is targeted. Grievances can also achieve remedies that are outside the JOHSC's reach, such as reimbursing sick banks. *The downside?* Grievances take a long time and may lead to polarization.

► **The Labour Adjustment Committee** is supposed to address problems caused by health care restructuring and reform. This includes downsizing or re-engineering that creates excessive/unsafe workloads – a genuine situation for many HEU members. *The downside?* LACs are relatively new, and workers are still figuring out how to make them effective.

► **A direct approach** works best in some situations. You could ask for a face-to-face meeting between concerned workers and the manager or supervisor. *The downside?* The manager or supervisor may be unsympathetic, or may lack authority/resources to make necessary changes.

Two case studies

Getting together to stop the damage

In the Simon Fraser Health Region, workers and employers pioneered a region-wide Occupational Health and Safety Committee. The reason? Workers were suffering high levels of MSI and strains, which are frequently associated with stress. High injuries meant high costs, so regional managers were well motivated. The regional JOHSC applied to WCB and received funding for projects with ergonomic and educational goals, including improvements to patient handling and lifting.

"Increase, activate, and elevate"

The JOHSC has an important mandate, yet is often hampered by a low profile and insufficient resources. In 1998, health authorities and senior managers in the South Fraser Health Region became very concerned about rising injury and sicktime costs. Unlike many employers, they recognized that cost reductions would only be achieved if workers and managers worked together to strengthen JOHSCs. They saw the need for committee members who were active, well-trained, self-directed, and visible.

Unions and employers approached WCB to fund a special project to train JOHSC members in risk assessments,

management health and safety committee. The JOHSC can be a valuable place to 1) raise the issue of workplace stress; 2) document the problem; and 3) propose solutions. These days, some employers are themselves looking to JOHSCs to tackle the epidemic of workplace injuries and lost time. As workers, you can start insisting that toxic stress be treated as part of the problem.

What are the advantages of using your JOHSC for stress prevention?

- The employer is obliged to give data on sicktime and injuries to the committee. This data can be used to make your anti-stress case.
- Representatives from management can be good people to work with – they are often more concerned and positive than others within the organization.
- The committee has a legal mandate to ensure the employer complies with WCB's Ergonomics Requirements.
- You can use the committee to negotiate a formal anti-stress policy and/or to conduct confidential surveys about job strain, workplace stress, etc.
- The committee can sponsor in-service training and education on lifting, body mechanics, back injury prevention, violence, stress-reducing exercises, and related issues.
- You are on paid time when meeting with the committee and doing HS investigations.

Workers' Compensation Act / Ergonomics (MSI) Requirements

Under HEU's collective agreements, employers are obliged to have a health and safety program, and the program is obliged to comply with WCB regulations. In 1998, B.C. introduced new Ergonomics (MSI) Requirements (sections 4.46 to 4.53) under the revised *Occupational Health and Safety Regulation*. "The purpose [of the Ergonomic Requirements] is to eliminate or, if that is not practicable, minimize the risk of musculoskeletal injury to workers."

Employers are required to **identify and assess factors that expose workers to MSI risks**. These factors include:

- physical demands of work (such as repetition, posture, and duration)
- organization of work (such as task variability and rate of work)
- layout of work areas
- characteristics of objects handled
- environmental conditions

As part of their obligation to eliminate/minimize the risk of MSI, employers are also required to:

- educate and train workers to identify MSI risks, potential health effects, and early signs and symptoms of injury
- train workers to use equipment, mechanical aids, and work procedures that control the risk of MSI
- consult with the JOHSC regarding MSI risk identification and control, worker education and training, and evaluation of compliance measures


Get involved with your JOHSC and make sure your employer is in compliance with these and other WCB regulations.

Workers' Compensation Board There is documented evidence that work-related stress leads to illness, injury, and disability. Even so, some workers' compensation boards in Canada do not recognize stress claims.

In B.C., the WCB acknowledges a few types of workplace stress conditions, including 1) post-traumatic stress syndrome; 2) emotional/mental health problems arising from a physical injury; and 3) health problems caused by harassment. However, the WCB does not compensate chronic or cumulative stress cases. The refusal is based on a 1976 policy. B.C. is not alone: New Brunswick, Manitoba, Newfoundland, and Ontario (since 1996) also forbid chronic stress claims.

HEU members need to join with other unions and progressive organizations to challenge this restrictive policy. We have some leverage:

- Workers' compensation boards in Quebec and Saskatchewan recognize



ergonomics, hazard recognition, and other core skills. The project paid the wages of committee members in one hospital while they promoted health and safety among workers for several hours each month.

A clear case of stress

One workers' compensation case concerned an unnamed Ontario worker who died of a heart attack in 1991.

The man was the coordinator of an Employee Assistance Program. His job involved long hours, an irregular schedule, and travel. He was in constant demand as a counsellor, dealing with serious personal problems such as domestic crises, psychiatric breakdowns, and alcoholism. He worked alone, was scrupulous about the confidentiality of clients, and had little formal support from his employer.

WCB concluded that "the worker's occupational mental stress made a significant contribution to the development of his coronary artery disease which, in turn, resulted in two [heart attacks.]" His widow was awarded benefits.

Ouch!

A healthy fear of lawsuits may motivate employers to reduce workplace stress.

In Britain, workplace stress is the subject of an increasing number of civil liability cases. The famous Walker case involved a social worker who suffered a nervous breakdown. His union went to bat for him, and Mr. Walker was eventually awarded £175,000 (about CDN \$350,000) in 1996. The High Court judge ruled that Mr. Walker's collapse was due to an "impossible workload," lack of control and insufficient help from senior management.

some chronic stress claims. Quebec has hundreds of cases on record (mainly for psychological impacts). Other jurisdictions also provide useful precedents.

- In the workers' compensation field, the definition of 'accident' is flexible. An accident isn't necessarily a sudden, one-time event, but can be many small incidents that develop into an injury. This is the scenario in MSI and numerous stress-related impairments.
- History may be on our side. More and more individuals could be forced to launch civil lawsuits against negligent employers if the WCB refuses to compensate people unable to work due to stress. This is already happening in Great Britain. The pressure to change the WCB will come from workers and from employers who fear lawsuits.

Occupational Health and Safety Agency for Healthcare (OHSAH)

This new agency was created during B.C.'s 1998 health sector bargaining. The agency has a \$11-million budget over three years to fund programs, do research, and support workers and employers to develop strategies that prevent workplace injuries.

In general, we can use OHSAH to document the health impacts of restructuring on HEU members. Specifically, **the agency is focusing on MSI** and will fund projects relating to patient lifting and transferring. See *Resources* for OHSAH's address.

Collective agreements Changes to the collective agreement can help reduce stressful working conditions and prevent further stress. For example, you can bargain for stronger contract language on:

- backfilling and minimum staffing levels
- flextime, child care provisions, job sharing, parental leaves, and other measures that address work-family issues
- breaks, work rotations, and shift work
- the powers of joint health and safety committees, including training, education, and research/investigation skills for committee members

- training and education on injury prevention, ergonomic hazards, and stress reduction for all workers

Legislative approaches Unions in Europe have had some success in pushing for legislative and statutory action on workplace stress. In Britain, the Trades Union Congress is calling for a legally binding code of practice that requires employers to reduce stress at work. An amendment to the Swedish Work Environment Act gives workers protection from the “psychosocial hazards” of badly organized work.

Stress can also be tackled through laws and regulations relating to employment standards, parental leave, Employment Insurance, patient care standards, etc. For example, unions and community groups in New Jersey are campaigning for state laws to enforce safe staffing levels in hospitals and nursing homes. The campaign is a quality-of-care issue for patients and families, but would also directly reduce worker stress.

Other angles Broad-based organizing to reduce and prevent workplace stress can take many forms. The keys are education, raising awareness, developing alliances, and creating resources. As a union we can:

- educate the general public about how downsizing and other health care “reforms” are hurting patients and threatening Canada’s public health care system
- form alliances with unions, consumer groups (patients and families), and other citizens affected by cutbacks and inadequate services
- raise the consequences of workplace stress with the media, politicians, employers, bureaucrats, and health authorities
- provide anti-stress education programs for workers
- create union-influenced and union-run counselling programs that acknowledge the structural causes of – and solutions to – stress-related problems
- encourage the development of labour-friendly health clinics that support workers making stress-related claims to the WCB



The hidden costs of re-engineering

A major study of an Ontario teaching hospital raised serious questions about the true costs of re-engineering and amalgamation.

The 1995–97 study found that re-engineering the hospital resulted in “increased emotional distress among staff, less social support in the workplace and a loss of trust in the ... employer.” Staff also believed the quality of patient care had seriously declined.

These problems arose despite “considerable efforts by the hospital to communicate the need for change and to involve staff in the change process ...

“When combined with the costs of increased illness and absenteeism during the time period, ... the impact of these [re-engineering] changes may cost the health care system and society more than the savings initially anticipated by instituting the changes.”