



Occupational Stress

What is it? Stress is the result of any emotional, physical, social, economic, or other factors that require a response or change. It is generally believed that some stress is okay (sometimes referred to as “challenge” or “positive stress”), but when stress occurs in excessive amounts, both mental and physical changes may occur.

“Workplace stress” is the harmful physical and emotional responses that can happen when there is a conflict between job demands on the employee and the amount of control an employee has over meeting these demands. In general, the combination of high demands in a job and a low amount of control over the situation can lead to the greatest amount of stress.

Stress in the workplace can have many origins or come from one single event. It can impact on both employees and employers alike. As stated by the Canadian Mental Health Association:

“Fear of job redundancy, layoffs due to

an uncertain economy, increased demands for overtime due to staff cutbacks act as negative stressors. Employees who start to feel the “pressure to perform” can get caught in a downward spiral of increasing effort to meet rising expectations with no increase in job satisfaction. The relentless requirement to work at optimum performance takes its toll in job dissatisfaction, employee turnover, reduced efficiency, illness and even death. Absenteeism, illness, alcoholism, “petty internal politics”, bad or snap decisions, indifference and apathy, lack of motivation or creativity are all by-products of an over stressed workplace.”¹

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Internationally...

■ The Higher Education Funding Council of England’s (HEFCE) study of occupational stress in UK Higher Education Institutions found that the most significant source of stress was concern about job security.

■ The NTEU’s (National Tertiary Education Union, Australia) “Occupational Stress in Australian Universities: A National Survey” found that 50% of the Australian university staff in the study were at risk of psychological illness, compared with 19% of the Australian population.

Categories of Job Stressors	Examples
Factors unique to the job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workload (overload & underload) • Isolation at the workplace • Physical environment (noise, air quality, etc.) • Pace/variety/meaningfulness of work • Autonomy (e.g., The ability to make your own decisions about your job or about specific tasks) • Hours of work
Role in the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role conflict (conflicting job demands, multiple supervisors/managers) • Role ambiguity (lack of clarity about responsibilities, expectations, etc.) • Level of responsibility
Career development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under/over promotion • Job insecurity (fear of redundancy either from economy, or lack of tasks or work to do) • Less than expected career development opportunities and overall job satisfaction
Relationship at work (interpersonal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with administration - coworkers - subordinates • Threat of harassment and violence
Organizational structure/climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meaningful participation in decision-making • Management Style • Communication patterns

See note 2



Symptoms

According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety (CCOHS), experiencing stress for long periods of time (such as lower level but constant stressors at work) will activate an automatic response system which doesn't get the chance to "turn off". When this happens, the ability to cope with stress becomes compromised. Signs and symptoms include:

- **Physical:** headaches, grinding teeth, chest pain, shortness of breath, pounding heart, high blood pressure, muscle aches, fatigue, insomnia, frequent illness
- **Psychosocial:** anxiety, irritability, sadness, defensiveness, anger, mood swings, hypersensitivity, apathy, depression, slowed thinking or racing thoughts, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, or of being trapped
- **Behavioural:** overeating or loss of appetite, impatience, procrastination, increased use of alcohol or drugs, withdrawal or isolation from others, neglect of responsibility, poor job performance, change in religious practices.

Interventions

Reduce stress & enhance well-being in university staff.

Policy and university level interventions

Devise strategies to increase the financial and staffing resources available to universities. Lack of financial and staffing resources are a key factor affecting stress and well-being within universities. Political decisions need to be made about whether current levels of government funding are appropriate and sufficient to support the research and teaching demands placed on Canadian post-secondary education systems. Are resources provided by government allocated in the most appropriate manner?

Workplace interventions

- **Review the fairness of procedures and processes** related to promotion, redundancy, and performance appraisal, with the aim of increasing the fairness of procedures.
- **Review the adequacy of current pay, promotion, reward, and recognition systems.** Are there more or better ways that good performance can be rewarded and recognised? Do the processes recognise excellence in teaching and administration, as well as research? Are there clear promotion paths for general staff?
- **Review teaching and research demands.** Are the workloads and expectations appropriate and sustainable? Are there ways to balance workloads more effectively and avoid periods of intense work pressure (e.g., exam grading deadlines)?
- **Develop processes and programs to reduce job insecurity, and/or assist staff to cope with job insecurity.** For example, develop standardised communication processes that ensure staff receive adequate notice of renewal or non-renewal of their contracts, develop outplacement services for staff on non-continuing contracts.
- **Develop leadership capabilities.** There is clearly a mismatch between staff expectations of university leadership and the quality of leadership they perceive is being provided. Effective leadership development is complex and first requires an understanding of what constitutes good leadership within each university, identifying the gaps between current and expected leadership practices, and then tailoring training and development to meet the identified needs. It is recommended that the processes guiding the selection, training and mentoring of academic staff for leadership positions be reviewed, along with the processes used for motivating, recognising, and rewarding good leadership practices.

Other Sources of Help

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) at: www.cmha.ca

Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) at: www.ccsa.ca

Canadian Health Network at: <http://canadian-health-network.ca>

Helping myself

- Staff experiencing stress need access to appropriate counselling service. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) were reported to be most helpful in a large survey of Australian academics. If your institution does not have an EAP, contact CAUT Occupational Health & Safety Department for advice on establishing one.
- Take charge of your situation by taking 10 minutes at the beginning of each day to prioritize and organize your day. Be honest with your colleagues, but be constructive and make practical suggestions. Be realistic about what you can change.



- Regular physical exercises and "mental health" breaks during the day are effective stress releasers.

References

CCOHS - Workplace Stress
www.ccohs.ca

AUT (UK) Occupational Stress
Management Model Agreement
(Mar 2001)

NTEU (AUS) "Occupational Stress in
Australian Universities: A National
Survey" (July 2000)

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Occupational Stress in Higher
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1. From Canadian Mental Health Association, "Sources of Workplace Stress" Richmond, B.C.
2. Adapted from: Murphy, L. R., Occupational Stress Management: Current Status and Future Direction in Trends in Organizational Behavior, 1995, Vol. 2., p. 1-14.

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