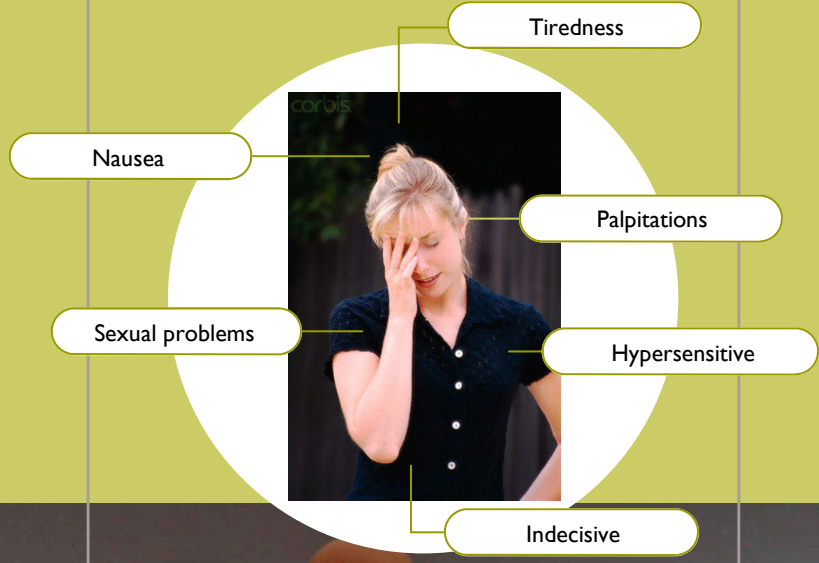




# Women and Stress



## STRESS AND WORK

Work-related stress has long been a major hazard for a wide range of workers and this is increasing during the current economic recession. Since 1996, all seven Trades Union Congress (TUC) surveys have found that stress was THE major workplace concern for union safety reps. Indeed, it is the second most widespread occupational health problem in the UK, after back pain.

Women workers aged 45-54 have the highest rate of stress and these are made worse in some occupations. Higher than average stress levels, for instance, are found in local government workers and teachers, which then has a direct impact on teaching assistants and other schoolworkers.

The most recent local government sickness absence survey (2006/7) found that stress was the most important single cause of absence, accounting for nearly a quarter of all days off sick.

And the bad news is that things will get worse during the recession. This can provide many stumbling blocks – tipping individuals from ‘coping well’ into stress, or from stress into anxiety or depression.

A report for the mental health charity Mind identified the main sources of work-related stress as:

- **Poor working conditions**
- **Long hours**
- **Relationships at work**
- **Job insecurity**
- **Travel**
- **Organisational structure**
- **A mismatch between job requirements and the individual’s capabilities, resources or needs.**

Further research concludes that most stressful jobs involve “emotional labour”. Workers in such occupations have to interact with members of the public or service users as part of their jobs and are also required to display a set of emotions adhering to strict rules. Social care workers, in particular, will recognise this ‘emotional labour’.

## **While we're still catching up with men in some aspects of our lives, we appear to be way ahead in one undesirable category... stress!**

Over the last few decades, the British working environment has become increasingly populated by women. Roughly the same amount of women work in the UK as men. So, as women we not only face the stresses that come with childcare, housework and general caring but also those the modern workplace brings with it.

Our parents now live longer - into their 80s and 90s - adding to our caring responsibilities when we are already juggling demands of work and children. Budgets for social services are tight; the policy is to keep elderly people at home increasing the pressures of caring. It is evident there is extra pressure on women. With job losses and cuts in income looming in the recession, demands are likely to grow disproportionately on us as we bear the main caring role. The burdens of keeping a job, raising children and looking after elderly parents are driving more than ever before to the edge of a nervous breakdown.

A 2003 report by the charity Women at the Crossroads showed how many women in mid-life found themselves in a poverty trap, as a result of lower pay, part-time working and relationship breakdown. We are less likely to own our home, have lower status at work and carry a greater share of household duties.

Stress is one of the biggest causes of ill health in the workplace with 1 in 5 of us reporting we feel very or extremely stressed at work. Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health problems, and the majority of cases are caused by stress. We are particularly susceptible to developing depression and anxiety disorders in response to stress

compared with men. A survey by the NHS showed a rise of more than 12% in the proportion of women suffering depression and anxiety since the mid-1990s. There was no corresponding increase amongst men.

### **What is stress?**

Stress is the reaction of our body to something that upsets the normal balance in our life - a situation where demands on us exceed our ability to cope. Stress affects different people in different ways. Too much stress can affect our bodies and minds. The chemicals that are released by our bodies as a result of stress can build up over time and cause various mental and physical symptoms:

The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) says the symptoms of stress can become visible in behavioural, physical, mental and emotional changes:

#### **Behaviour**

- **Find it hard to sleep**
- **Change your eating habits**
- **Smoke or drink more**
- **Avoid friends and family**
- **Have sexual problems**

#### **Physical**

- **Tiredness**
- **Indigestion and nausea**
- **Headaches**
- **Aching muscles**
- **Palpitations**

#### **Mental**

- **Be more indecisive**
- **Find it hard to concentrate**
- **Suffer loss of memory**
- **Feelings of inadequacy**
- **Low self-esteem**

#### **Emotional**

- **Get irritable or angry**
- **Be anxious**

- **Feel numb**
- **Be hypersensitive**
- **Feel drained and listless**

If you have been experiencing some of these symptoms for a long period of time you are at risk of developing high blood pressure which can lead to heart attacks and stroke. Long-term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, contribute to infertility, and speed up the aging process.

### **How can I help handle my stress?**

As women, we tend to carry a higher burden of stress than we should – don't let it make you sick. Often, we aren't even aware of our stress levels. Listen to your body, so that you know when stress is affecting your health. If you frequently find yourself feeling frazzled and overwhelmed, it's time to take action to bring your nervous system back into balance. You can protect yourself by learning how to recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects. Here are ways to help handle stress:

- **Relax** it's important to unwind. Each person has her own way to relax.... deep breathing, yoga, meditation, massage therapy. If you can't do these things, take a few minutes to sit, listen to soothing music, read a book....
- **Make time for yourself** it's important to care for yourself. No matter how busy you are, you can try to set aside at least 15 minutes each day in your schedule to do something for yourself - take a bubble bath, go for a walk, call a friend....
- **Sleep** sleeping is a great way to help both your body and mind. Your stress could get worse if you don't get enough sleep. You also can't fight off sickness as well when you sleep poorly. With enough sleep you can tackle problems better and lower your risk of illness. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep every night.
- **Eat right** fuel up with fruits, vegetables and proteins. Good sources of protein can be peanut butter, chicken, or tuna salad. Eat wholegrain, such as wheat breads and wheat crackers. Don't be fooled by the jolt you get from caffeine or sugar. The energy will rapidly wear off.
- **Get moving** Believe it or not, getting physical activity not only helps relieve your tense muscles but helps your mood too! Your body makes endorphins after you work out; these relieve stress and improve your mood.
- **Talk to friends** talk to your friends to help work through your stress.
- **Get help from a professional** if you need it Talk to a counsellor. There also are medications that can help ease symptoms of depression and anxiety and help promote sleep.
- **Compromise** it's not always worth the stress to argue. Give in once in a while.
- **Write down your thoughts** have you ever typed an email to a friend about your lousy day and felt better afterwards? Grab a pen and paper and write down what's going on in your life! Keeping a journal can be a great way to get things off your chest and work through issues.
- **Set limits** when it comes to things like work and family, figure out what you can really do. There are only so

many hours in the day. Set limits with yourself and others. Don't be afraid to say NO to requests for your time and energy.

- **Try to avoid dealing with your stress in unhealthy ways** this includes drinking too much alcohol, using drugs, smoking or overeating.

As working women, we have many roles: spouse, mother, caregiver, friend and worker. With all we have going on in our lives, it seems almost impossible to find ways to de-stress. But it's important to find those ways. Your health depends on it.

But there is a further health warning! Such diet and relaxation techniques may go some way to alleviating stress. However, these only temporarily relieve a condition that already exists. What needs to be done is to remove the root cause of the problem. In the majority of cases, this cannot be done by individuals alone. That is why you are in UNISON - so we can provide help and assistance and a collective solution to your stress. And don't leave it till its too late - if you're under stress and it is causing health problems, call us immediately.

### **Who can I go to?**

There are certain things you can do with regard to diet and relaxation techniques that may go some way to alleviating stress. However, these only temporarily relieve a condition that already exists. What needs to be done is to remove the root cause of the problem. In the majority of cases, this cannot be done by individuals alone. That is why you are in UNISON - so we can provide help and assistance and a collective solution to your stress. And don't leave it till its too late - if you're under stress and it is causing health problems, call us immediately.