



A Union of Professionals

## Health and Safety Program

### Chronic Stress – The Health Consequences

Too often, we think of stress as a “psychological” problem of an individual that can be controlled by will. But the research tells a different story. High levels of stress are toxic and a danger to your health. Read on.....

Are you a person who:



Has little or no control over the organization, content and/or pace of your work  
And/or



Feels that- over the long run- you have not been appropriately rewarded or recognized for your hard work and effort?

If you answered yes to either or both of these questions, recent research indicates that you may be at high risk of coronary heart disease and reduced immunity (i.e. more colds, flu etc.). Other work-related stressors associated with increased rates of disease include discrimination; bullying; monotony; social isolation or lack of support; job insecurity; and few promotional opportunities.

Occupational stress is taking its toll in the workplace. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the median number of days absent from work for 1997 cases of occupational stress was 23 days – four times the median absence for all other non-fatal work-related injuries and illnesses.

#### How can stress cause disease?

You don't experience anything in a vacuum. When you perceive that you are under enormous stress at work and are feeling overwhelmed, certain biological/hormonal reactions are triggered in your brain. A part of your brain (hypothalamus) alerts the pituitary, which in turn sends a signal to your adrenal glands to secrete several substances including cortisol. At normal levels, cortisol performs vital tasks in the body including maintenance of blood pressure and cardiovascular function, reduction of the immune system's inflammatory response, balancing the effects of insulin breaking down sugar for energy and regulating the metabolism of proteins and fats. Its most important job is to help the body respond to stress. However, when chronic stress causes too much cortisol secretion, the results can be disastrous.

**WORK**  
shouldn't  
**HURT**

Everyday signs of too much cortisol include:



Rapid weight gain, especially around the middle



Mood disturbances – irritability, anger



High blood pressure



Excessive fatigue

.....and persons with chronic stress and high levels of cortisol may be at risk of developing depression. The excess cortisol will not only cause depression but also destroy brain cells in the hippocampus - - impairing the short-term or working memory.

### **More Health Consequences**

Powerful research studies indicate that chronic workplace stress leads to other serious health effects such as:

- ❑ High plasma fibrinogen levels –associated with excess coronary heart disease in high demand and low control jobs.
- ❑ Increased insulin resistance – a person secretes too much insulin but it doesn't transport the glucose into the cells; insulin resistance is a precursor of adult-onset diabetes
- ❑ Blood fat or lipid disturbances with an increase in triglycerides
- ❑ A reduction in immunity and therefore a greater risk of infections and/or inflammation
- ❑ An increased risk of preeclampsia (a dangerous high blood pressure during pregnancy) for women employed in high stress jobs - - 2.3 times the risk compared to non-working women

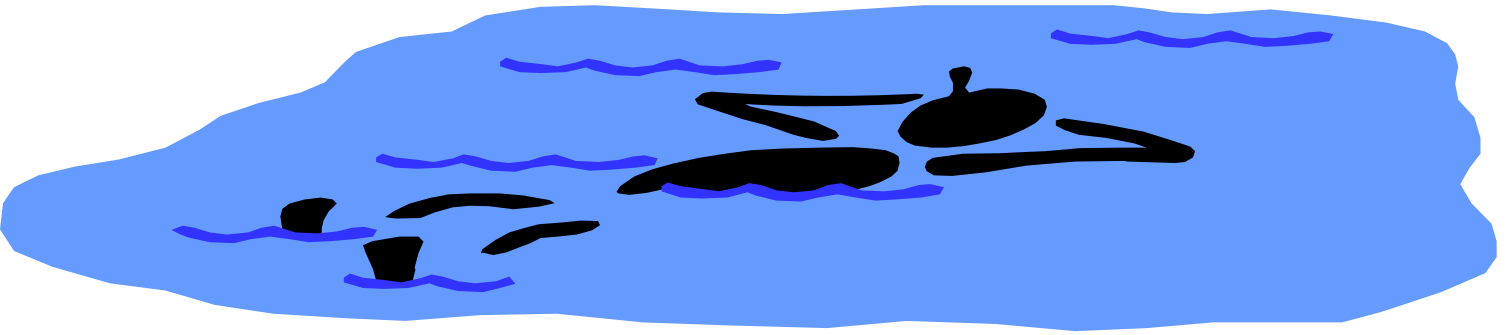
***Late breaking.....***evidence is mounting that stress increased blood levels of homocysteine, an amino acid now linked with elevated rates of heart disease and with dangerous changes in the arteries. In fact high levels of homocysteine can damage small blood vessels in the brain – leading to the loss of important cognitive or problem-solving functions.

## What actions can an individual take?

True stress reduction depends on eliminating high demand, low control jobs or high strain jobs (see union section) while taking individual action. Here's the latest research advice.

- T ***Get more sleep*** – if you sleep less than 8 hours a night, you may be building up a sleep deficit. Not enough sleep has been associated with high blood pressure and cortisol levels
- T ***Lose a little weight*** – at least two studies have found that if you lose as little as ten pounds, cortisol levels go down (can't guarantee that stress will)
- T ***Get some exercise*** – regular exercise (30 minutes of moderate exercise four-five days a week) will reduce cortisol levels and blood pressure
- T ***Find social support*** at work and in your family – research has found that persons with large social networks succumb less often to work-related stress than isolated workers.
- T ***Map out alone time***, especially if you are a woman – studies show that working women who are parents secrete much higher levels of cortisol day and night (regardless of their marital status) than women without children. Working mothers need time that belongs strictly to them.
- T ***Experiment with meditation*** and other quiet contemplation. Meditation has been shown to reduce blood pressure levels
- T ***Reduce noise levels*** at work and at home. Studies have shown that high levels of noise can cause irritability, stress and raise cortisol levels
- T ***Place yourself in situations where you feel more in control*** – get involved in the union, the PTA, church or other community organizations.
- T ***Find ways to have more fun and joy in your life.***
- T ***Make sure that you get 400 micrograms of folate (folic acid) every day*** and plenty of vitamins B-6 and B-12. These B vitamins have been shown to significantly reduce circulating homocysteine levels. A Harvard University study found that nurses who consumed the most folate and vitamin B-6 over 14 years were 45% less likely to have a heart attack than those who consumed the least. High levels of folate are found in black-eyed peas, spinach, asparagus, lentils and chicken liver. Good sources of B-6 are banana, plantain, and chicken and beef liver.

**T** *Try not to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs.* Alcohol, especially, has been shown to raise homocysteine and cortisol levels in heavy drinkers.  
**A Union Approach to Stress:**



## Unions and Stress

Unions can have a powerful role in reducing the toll of workplace stress on their members. Many unions already are finding ways to reduce stress without knowing it. Among other things, unions can negotiate contract language and/or promote joint labor-management initiatives that provide for:

- ❑ Methods to assure routine worker influence in work decisions
- ❑ Varied or multiple work tasks with more control over the organization and pace of work
- ❑ Job enlargement – career or professional ladders
- ❑ Mentoring programs
- ❑ The elimination of the “hostile environment” that many work in day in and day out - guarantees of fundamental dignity and respect including protection from employer harassment

Examples of “stress-reducing” programs include:

- ❑ well-designed school-based management programs or joint-labor management programs that provide equal participation on the part of all school employees
- ❑ ending mandatory overtime
- ❑ limiting shift work as much as possible

Unions can also work to head off stress with union-only programs. Unions have to remind members of the power that the contract gives them to protect their rights, dignity and control at work. Unions often have to overcome the reluctance of members to act. Union programs that teach assertiveness training (especially for women), and interpersonal skills (how to talk to your supervisor without blowing up etc.) have been shown to be effective in reducing stress. A good union infrastructure is also essential so members feel they have social support from the union.

AFT locals are beginning to recognize the toll stress takes on members and are responding with programs. For instance, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) recognized that regular exercise is a good anecdote to stress and negotiated language that allows members to use sick leave to pay for health club membership. They have also launched a union wellness program that is designed to help members cope with important health issues including the stress of teaching and working in urban schools. Th Burlington Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (FNHP) in Wisconsin was successful at negotiating an end to mandatory overtime.

Other unions have run comprehensive “stress buster” campaigns. Stress programs vary from workplace to workplace but generally the more successful programs have used some elements of the following:



**Identifying the primary stressors in the lives of members.** The most common method to do this is a union survey of physical and social stressors and the health impact.



**Designing a proposed intervention to reduce the stress.** A good and effective intervention does not require an “expert”, but always involves active employee participation. With adequate training and assistance to assess worker needs and the quality of the resources available within the organization to make change, workers can develop good interventions.



**Working in joint labor-management committees to implement and evaluate the effect of programs.** This type of program will only be successful if there is adequate management commitment to make significant changes in work organization.