

***EMPLOYERS GETTING STARTED***  
***On the Road to Mental Health and Productivity***

**MODULE FIVE**

**COMPREHENSIVE STRESS POLICY**

**Highlights**

**Module Five:**

- Spells out a detailed approach to the management and reduction of chronic job stress in the workplace – and provides a clear, factual description of what good stress and bad stress are and are not.
- Warns about common stress traps which employees routinely fall into and links healthy stress and conditions of performance in the form of a “STRESS AND PERFORMANCE MATCH-UP.”
- Describes the “ten faces of stress” and notes the special vulnerability of working women who are pregnant, employees returning to work after a heart attack, stroke or depression, employees with chronic illnesses.
- Organizes stress policy into two major categories – information (the facts) and prevention (management practices) – and with respect to prevention:
  1. Specifies which managements need to be modified to reduce the triggers of unhealthy job stress.
  2. Identifies questions employees can ask themselves to take personal responsibility for their own health by seeing if they are “stressed out” and what the sources of the stress are.
  3. Sets out – in precise detail – the pathways to burn-out in a descriptive chart.

This module gives you the ingredients of a well-defined policy on chronic stress. This is an essential part of prudent and effective management of mental health issues in today’s intensified workplace.

Stress policy must be developed with employee in-put and it can be measured by periodic surveys which have the credibility of honest intent by the employers.

Meanwhile, unions and employers must work closely on this.

The Roundtable cautions both parties about contesting the definition of stress as a medical condition in its own right. It is not. But, day-to-day, it can be a serious health risk which is the next best/worst thing.

## **THE FACTS**

### What Stress Is

- Stress is not all bad, or all good. Some keeps us on our toes. Too little makes us disinterested. Too much – even of a good thing – can upset our well-being.
- Stress is not a state. It is a process, a set of variables, with how we react to circumstances at work or in life, an individual experience.

### Physical Basis

- There is a relationship between stress, the nervous system and brain regulation of the cardiovascular system. This demonstrates the physical basis of stress-related problems including depressive disorders.

### Two Kinds

- There are two concepts: disruptive stress and constructive stress. Otherwise stated, anxiety stress and motivation stress.
- Human beings have a protective mechanism which alerts us to withdraw when the anxiety form of stress faces us. Uncertainty is one source of this kind of stress.

## **Stress Traps**

Stress can become dysfunctional over time when:

- The skills of the individual and expectations of their boss and the demands of the job and resources available to do it are not aligned.
- Workplace practices seem routinely unfair or illogical.
- The “struggle to juggle” obligations at home and work never let up. Job and home stress are synergistic.
- Workplace stress intensifies near the close of the workday and is taken home. According to the Institute for Work and Health, this poses a greater risk to the cardiac health of people than smoking.

- When job stress becomes chronic, it can:
  - Override our natural defences to ward off infection and viruses, escalate the production of inflammatory hormones that drive heart disease, obesity and diabetes, spark flare-ups of rheumatoid arthritis, trigger depression.
  - Escalate hormonal release which boosts our heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and blood flow to our muscles. This is OK from time to time and for limited periods. But not continuously.
  - Cause accidents on the job. Stress, a trigger for depression, fuels and feeds off sleep deprivation and lost concentration.

### **Ten Faces of Stress**

A “Stress Policy” should help employees (including executives) to recognize what unhealthy stress looks like. It has a face – in fact, 10 faces:

1. Growing irritability and impatience, “no end in sight” reactions to even routine requests for information.
2. Inability to stay focused, finishing other people’s sentences to “save time,” wincing at new ideas (who needs another new idea), being unable to sit still, looking distracted and far away.
3. Staying out of sight, keeping the world at bay, being testy about casual interruptions such as a phone ringing, not looking up when talking to others.
4. Treating the concerns of others about workload and deadlines with contempt and “join the club” sarcasm.
5. Displaying frustration with one’s own boss in the presence of others and leaving angry voicemails after regular business hours.
6. Stretching the workday at both ends, calling in sick a lot, persistently late for meetings.
7. “Working at home” to avoid the negative energy of the office.
8. Limiting eye contact with others except to “react,” finding it painful to smile openly, your cheeks heavy, a fuzzy feeling behind your eyes.
9. Finding small talk hateful. Tuning-out what others say. Missing deadlines, losing faith in yourself and others, resenting and even alienating customers.

10. Eventually, physical symptoms of pain and burning, breathing troubles, back problems. Burn-out may migrate to a diagnosable and dangerous medical condition.

### **Special Vulnerability**

Employees especially vulnerable to the health risks of chronic stress:

- Working women who are pregnant.
- Employees returning to work from heart attack, stroke and depression or anxiety.
- Employees with chronic conditions such as asthma, depression or diabetes.

### **PREVENTION**

In the workplace, it is important to align goals and expectations to create realistic possibilities. This model links healthy stress and conditions of performance.

#### STRESS AND PERFORMANCE MATCH-UP

Healthy person/healthy work environment

Goals/expectations/output

plus

Values recognized/values lived

Incentives offered/rewards given

Life balance/ workplace stability

Skills/ jobs/standards

### **Management Practices**

Certain management practices should be modified to reduce the triggers of unhealthy job stress by:

1. Continuous imposition of unreasonable demands on subordinates and withholding information that is materially important to them to carry out their jobs.
2. Refusal to give employees reasonable discretion over the day-to-day means and methods of their own work and failing to credit or acknowledge success.
3. Rejecting “out of hand” employee workload and deadline concerns and creating a treadmill effect in the allocation of work and priorities.
4. Pushing unnecessarily tight deadlines as a force-feeding technique and talking personally to direct reports only when there’s a problem and, in doing so, creating an email-only culture.

5. Changing priorities without notice or reason, tolerating ambiguities in work assignments, expectations and outcomes. Meaningful job descriptions and annual performance reviews are an anachronism in this environment.
6. The treadmill effect at work – one deadline morphing into another and draining the work experience of its essential “job fulfillment” quota.

### Personal Responsibility

A series of questions will help employees evaluate the kind of stress they are experiencing at work – for example:

- Does the job at hand call upon the skills, time and resources I actually possess?
- Conversely, do I feel responsibilities piling on and resources disappearing?
- Does my job right now create the opportunity for fulfillment of some sort?
- Do I feel I can contribute – or is this just a treadmill I’m on?
- Do I realistically think the job I’m doing right now will add up to something?
- Do I realistically think the job I’ve been given to do under deadline can be successfully completed and recognized as such?
- Does the task at hand flow from a job that is meaningful?

### U.K. Stress Code - 2003

Bill Callaghan, Chairman of U.K. Health and Safety Commission: *“There is a difference between the buzz people get from doing a busy and challenging job, and an unreasonable pressure which can harm health, lead to absence and put additional strain on people trying to cope in an already pressurized environment.”*

Based on Whitehall Studies, the Code is supported by six guidelines:

- 85% of employees must say they can cope with the demands of the job
- 85% must say they have adequate say over how they do their work
- 85% say they receive adequate support from co-workers and bosses
- 65% say they are not subjected to bullying
- 65% say they understand their roles and responsibilities
- 65% say they are allowed to be involved in organizational change

## PATHWAYS TO BURNOUT

*A first step toward international standards governing the return to work from mental illness  
Eliminating the stigma of mental health problems in the work place*

### PATHWAYS TO BURNOUT

*As a matter of good business and good health, remedies are called for to eliminate and reduce the effects of poor management practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce*

- A **bad match** between the demands of an on-going job and the individual's resources and skills to handle those demands
- Taking serious responsibility without authority, recognition or appreciation
- **Losing or lacking control** over the things that need to get done
- Work and role **overload**
- **Unclear functional goals** as a steady diet
- **Constant fire-fighting** which seems useless or unnecessary
- **Losing private time**, all the time

*Depression predictors vary by occupation:*

#### **Factory Workers**

- Minimal control over workload and excessive environmental noise

#### **White Collar Employees**

- Role ambiguity, lack of control over their work, lack of support from co-workers

#### **Teachers, Physicians, Healthcare Workers, "Caring Professionals"**

- Job strain

*10 High-Risk Management Practices*

1. Imposing **unreasonable demands** on subordinates and withholding information materially important to them in carrying out their jobs.
2. Refusing to give employees reasonable discretion over the day-to-day means and methods of their work.
3. **Failing to credit or acknowledge** their contributions and achievements.
4. Creating a **treadmill** at work – too much to do, all at once, all the time.
5. Creating **perpetual doubt**, employees never sure of what's happening around them.
6. Allowing **mistrust** to take root. Vicious office politics disrupt positive behaviour.
7. Tolerating, even fostering **unclear company direction** and policies, job ambiguity and unclear expectations.
8. **Sub-par performance management practices** – specifically employee performance reviews – even good ones – which fail to establish the employee's role in the company's near or mid-term future.
9. **Lack of two-way communication** up and down the organization.
10. Managers rejecting, out of hand, an employee's concerns about workload

**JOB STRESS AND HOME STRESS HAVE A SYNERGISTIC EFFECT**

*As a result, the line between is blurred between health conditions that are or are not work-related*