

Managing Teacher Stress - INTO Guidance

Introduction

Teachers are subjected in everyday life to a wide range of pressures. Most teachers have developed a wide range of resources and strategies for coping with pressure. Sometimes teachers cope well and do feel that the pressure is having any adverse effect upon them. At other times teachers will have difficulty in dealing with the situation and this is when the term “stress” may be used.

Any situation that places a teacher under pressure is technically "stressful". Stress is not necessarily harmful or unpleasant. When a teacher is able to cope satisfactorily with the stress and finds it positive in its effect, it is referred to as "stimulation" or "challenge". For the purpose of this guide, the term "stress" refers to the reaction of a teacher to those pressures that are harmful, unpleasant, or disabling.

A simple definition of stress is:

“when the pressures upon a teacher exceed the resources to cope with those pressures.”

When some external force disrupts a teacher’s ability to cope satisfactorily, they feel threatened and need to take action to restore their own stability. If a coping strategy cannot work then the teacher is **stressed**. If the failure to cope happens often then the teacher begins to suffer **chronic stress**.

Can increased stress affect my health?

Stress can play a major role in:

- High blood pressure;
- Heart attack;
- Migraine;
- Asthma;
- Ulcers;
- Menstrual difficulties;
- Overactive thyroid gland;
- Diabetes;
- Skin disorders;
- Depression.

Some of the effects of stress may be worsened by lifestyle factors – such as lack of exercise or a diet high in animal fats. Individuals can also use props to handle prolonged exposure to stress. These may be as harmful as the stress and as levels of stress increase, so does consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, and tranquillisers.

What are the effects of stress?

When an individual is stressed hormones are released into the blood, digestive processes slow down, stomach acid increases and the immune system weakens against attack by foreign bodies. Stress therefore can effect:

1. **Physiological changes** including:
 - Dry mouth and throat
 - Butterflies in the stomach

- Flushed face / moist palms
- Pounding heart
- Muscle cramps

2. **Physical health** of the individual manifested through:

- Appetite loss / Comfort eating / Weight loss / gain
- Sleeplessness
- Sweat bouts
- Headaches

3. **Mental or emotional health problems**

Society's attitude to individuals with mental health problems differs greatly from those who are physically ill. As a result of this individuals may hide their emotional and mental problems and not ask for help until the problems are seriously out of control. Psychological problems can manifest themselves as:

- Fatigue
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Hostility and aggression
- Psychosomatic complaints
- Neuroses.

As a result of this the individual can feel

- Irritable / Indecisive / Inadequate
- Unable to complete single tasks
- Fearful over minor problems

Workplace Stress

Workplace stress will result if an employer demands more from an individual employee than they are able or motivated to give. This can occur when the workload is too large for the staff present and the time available. Lack of training or physical resources causes stress. **Some employers however regard stress as an individual rather than a collective problem.**

A school or college that is affected by workplace stress, may show symptoms like:

- High levels of absenteeism
- High labour turnover
- Industrial relations difficulties
- Apathy among the staff

Possible sources of stress

A well-organised school is characterised by a comfortable working environment in with all the necessary resources. A poorly organised school, which is under resourced or in a poor state of repair is a source of stress. Teachers who work in poorly resourced or maintained schools probably know how to improve matters but they are the last to be asked. Teachers and Health and Safety Reps should ensure that they are consulted in relation to workplace issues which may increase teacher stress. These include:

Machinery and equipment

This should be designed to suit all users. Equipment, which is improperly maintained or badly designed can cause muscle fatigue and cramps and can be the start of skeletal problems such as Repetitive Strain

Injury (RSI). If poorly maintained or designed equipment hinders teachers from meeting “deadlines” it will raise anxiety levels and consequently raise stress levels.

Noise and vibration

This can cause stress even at levels where there is no damage to hearing.

Temperature, ventilation and light

Teachers complain more of discomfort and ill health when they have no control over the temperature and air quality of the school. Some teachers may take up uncomfortable postures because light fittings are badly sited. In other situations the quality of light is so hard it is a source of “painful pressure”

Long hours

Long hours disrupts family and social life, causes fatigue and increases accident risks when concentration and attention fail.

Lack of job satisfaction and control

This can arise from poor job design factors including:

- Too much / little work
- Low status work
- The pace and flow of work
- Lack of job control
- Under utilisation of skills
- Working with visual display equipment.

These are some of the triggers of occupational stress- and one of the slowest to be tackled by employers.

New technology

New technology makes management and teachers change their way of working. Equipment and systems constantly evolve. Deadlines have speeded up and multiplied. The body also must adapt to the physical risks. These are all stressors.

Relationships as stressors

- Bad relationships with supervisors
- Sexism / racism / ageism (including harassment and discrimination)
- Pupil / parent complaints / violence
- Impersonal treatment at work
- Lack of communication
- Job insecurity

Workers may be forced to adapt to styles of work that do not come naturally to them. Too much work and work that is too difficult brings pressure. Extra staffing and resources may not be available. Too rigid application of disciplinary procedures increases an individuals feeling of insecurity.

One of the major sources of workplace stress is the fear of unemployment.

The Law

Employers have a duty of care under the Health and Safety at Work Order (NI) 1978 to ensure that, so far as is reasonably practicable, their workplaces are safe and healthy. Under the management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, they are also required to assess risk. The INTO view that stress should be treated like any other health hazard.

Following the case of *Walker -v- Northumberland County Council (1994)* an employer's legal duty of care has been extended to embrace psychiatric damage (which includes work related stress).

The benefits of reducing stress

The benefits of reduced workplace stress include:

- Improved employee health
- Reduced sickness absence
- Lower teacher turnover
- Better relationship with parents etc

INTO believes that occupational stress is a real problem, with its origins in work and how it is organised. It is a health and safety issue for our members. The safety rep has a key role to play in this. However the ultimate responsibility lies with the school – your employer.

Tackling workplace stress

All employers should recognise the importance of tackling workplace stress. Each school should have a policy negotiated with INTO on the prevention of occupational stress. The policy should contain:

- An **agreed definition** of workplace stress
- A recognition that the problem exists and is a **health and safety** issue
- A list of **factors** that contribute to stress
- A list of symptoms caused by stress
- **Agreed procedures** for a teacher to identify stress issues with details of designated individuals charged with any implementation of the policy
- An agreement to **train and support staff** in relation to work related stress
- An agreement that no teacher will be **detrimentally treated** for raising the issue of or supporting a colleague who raises a claim of occupational stress
- A commitment to **jointly review** the policy in conjunction with INTO

Lifestyle Campaign

The use of *lifestyle campaigns* to reduce the effects of workplace stress has been shown to have positive effects on physiological systems. However they cannot remove the cause of the stress itself.

Counselling

The use of counselling is another approach to addressing workplace stress. When certain stressors have been eliminated these programmes can help employees cope, however the issue of confidentiality and proper training of counselling staff must be addressed.

Advice

Any member who believes that they are suffering from work related stress should contact the school rep or Northern Office.

February 2003