



REST@Work

REducing STress at Work

With financial support from the European Union



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TOOLKIT

Stress assessment and management in SMEs

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For information

<http://www.uil.it/internazionale/rest-work.asp?menu=1>



25% of European workers report they suffer from work-related stress during all or most of their working time. A similar number of workers report that the work activity has a negative impact on their health. Psychosocial risks contribute to worsen such adverse effects of work.

Psychosocial risks are a source of concern for most companies: almost 80% of executives say they are worried about work-related stress.

Is the stress both positive and negative?

The term stress is often considered synonymous with anxiety, conflict, frustration, etc., thus leading to confusion of terminology.

In the mid-1950s, Hans Selye defined it as the "general adaptation syndrome to environmental stimuli/demands (stressors)" necessary for survival and life. The stress adaptation syndrome is a non-specific physiological response of the body to any demand for change by environmental stimuli (stressors).

Selye also made an important distinction between positive stress (eustress) and negative stress (distress).

In positive stress conditions (eustress) "people channel their vital energy into conducts perceived as positive and winning" and positive circuits are triggered off at psycho-physical level, which give rise to a state of wellbeing.

In negative stress conditions (distress), people channel their energy - in defensive ways - in the direction of situations perceived as negative, disagreeable or losing.

Environmental stimuli (stressors) are not positive or negative in themselves; in fact what is perceived negatively by a person (e.g. repetitive work) can be perceived positively by another.

Consequences of stress on people and companies

The experience of stress in its many forms may have negative social, psychological and physical repercussions. The outcomes of these disturbances will vary according to three main factors:

- the nature of the stressful event;
- the worker's cognitive and emotional evaluation;
- resilience (stress resistance).

Some of these changes may regard the circadian rhythm disruption, harmful eating behaviors (alcohol abuse, poor or excessive nutrition) and risk behaviors such as smoking or drug abuse, which, in the long run, may cause disturbances or disorders also at physical level.

From a cognitive viewpoint, concentration and memory problems may arise, while the social relations network may worsen.

Also some chronic degenerative diseases mainly linked to the mental sphere, the cardiovascular and endocrine systems, the gastrointestinal function and the immune system can be originated by stress.

In addition to individual stress responses, it is important to emphasize the impact that these responses may also have at organizational level. The connection between working conditions, the psychological stress resulting from them and its effects on people's behaviors within the organization can be found in several aspects such as: Work Performance, Incidents and Accidents, Absenteeism/Presenteeism, Early Turnover.

To improve the stress in the Member States

1 Pay attention to the difficulties shown by companies

Problems	Improvement actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stress is increasingly taken into account in assessing health and safety risks but, following the assessment, the conclusion drawn is mostly the lack of such risk. Prevention measures are implemented rarely. 	<p>Initiatives, also at territorial level, to foster the exchange of corporate experiences on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> assessment ways attaching priority to workers' possibility of expressing their stress "perception"; practicable solutions at corporate level. <p>Annex: work-related stress Checklist (CSL)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scarce involvement of workers and their representatives: for workers the stress risk assessment is mostly an unknown activity (42%) or an activity they know has not been carried out (40%), as also confirmed by HSRs and employers. The same applies to the prevention measures adopted: the HSRs state they have been involved in 6.6% of cases, while only 15% of HSRs have been involved throughout the whole evaluation process. 	<p>Initiatives promoted by the social partners, in particular, for the dissemination of information at company level so as to foster the involvement of workers and their representatives as factors of effectiveness of the assessment itself, particularly for stress.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 51.6% of cases, the awareness-raising initiatives have consisted in the distribution of booklets, leaflets and brochures. According to workers, specific training on stress has not been carried out in 82% of cases. 	<p>A good management of stress in risk assessment does not consider general information activities sufficient, but suggests specific training for the different corporate subjects including employers.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lack of attention to the need for supporting SMEs in stress assessment and management is seen as a particularly problematic factor, largely widespread in the countries involved in the Rest@work project (with some exceptions). 	<p>Considering the specificities of micro and small sized enterprises does not necessarily mean simplifying the message, but it must be specified by taking the peculiarities into account.</p>

To improve the stress in the Member States

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Pay attention to the difficulties shown by companies

Problems	Improvement actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In companies with up to 10 employees, the affective dimension is very important. This means that, by living together, difficulties can be solved more easily. Nevertheless the strong affective dimension may encourage harassment. • Dialogue - often informal in SMEs - is a first response. • Severe events are so destabilizing in a micro or small sized enterprise that they can undermine any further prevention action, particularly for psychosocial risks. • In small sized enterprises it is the employer who creates the work environment and his/her attitude may instill fear of discussing work-related stress. On the other hand, employees may be too reluctant to approach the issue because they may think there is no room for change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hence we must rely primarily on employers to increase knowledge and awareness. - The awareness of the problem is still too scarce in enterprises. This is the reason why national and local authorities, as well as the other relevant bodies, including the structures created by social partners (e.g. in Italy, the joint bodies), must adopt an advisory approach vis-à-vis employers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychosocial risks are often underestimated or misinterpreted, thus attaching ever greater importance to interpersonal conflicts rather than to the problems related to work organization. • Employers are often unaware of the extent of psychosocial risks and unacquainted with the existing tools to tackle them. • Micro and small sized enterprises have difficulty in having access to information and training. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Institutions and social partners should promote awareness on work-related stress and assist employers in identifying risk factors and planning the necessary measures to tackle them. - Institutions and social partners should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improve and extend service and economic assistance to micro and small sized enterprises; • make funds available for prevention and training activities in companies; • facilitate the access to self-evaluation tools through online services, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o work-related stress Checklist (CSL): http://www.uil.it/internazionale/rest-work.asp?menu=1 o Diagneo-Sante: http://www.diagneo-sante.com/

To improve the stress in the Member States

3 Practical advice to manage stress in micro and small sized enterprises

- An effective approach to SMEs implies real consideration of their specificities when conveying a message of prevention. An effective message implies establishing a strong interpersonal relationship within which the exchanges needed to create a climate of trust will be made.
Namely: "carrying out prevention with" - this is the principle for sharing views on prevention issues at territorial level - between employers and their associations, workers/their representatives and trade unions - which can promote the growth of an empowered and responsible community in which the individual entrepreneurs can find a condition motivating them to "change attitude", a kind of "public engagement" going well beyond legal obligations and law provisions, as well as the fear of penalties.
- As far as arguments are concerned, we shall insist on positive aspects such as the possibility of reducing sick leaves and absences, as well as improving the corporate image and workers' wellbeing. On the other hand, negative arguments must be managed with caution and care, especially those insisting on the costs of industrial accidents (a SME may certainly be affected but, on average, it records an accident every fourteen years - hence it cannot reason on the basis of experience).
- We shall offer support services following the company over time, as well as customized services, taking the specificities of the company and its owner into account.
Namely: "companies' direct and preliminary involvement in an information and assistance phase" is the factor enabling to implement a gradual intervention, "by staggering actions over time" on the basis of a step-by step approach. The meetings designed to delve into the issues or to training initiatives, in which the companies are preliminarily involved, are situations like "inclusion in a peer group" because those who look alike are more inclined to change their viewpoint on an issue, reconsider their way of thinking and analyze their previous spontaneous behaviors.
Namely: "care over time and ongoing coaching to companies": this is one of the most effective support strategies. With a view to improving the company's/entrepreneur's "safety culture" and changing the behaviors of all the subjects constituting this economic and life entity, the actions taken must be staggered over time, thus making proper arrangements to ensure continuity of the relationship. Considering that behavioral changes need reinforcements and sharing, because the issue lies in effecting lasting changes within the company, we can hardly hope to reach results with piecemeal measures. Actions shall ideally fit into a strategy and ensure continuity and consistency over time. The contact shall be maintained in one way or another. The message shall be repeated under other forms or it shall be repeated with communications gradually enriched with content.

Questionnaire of the work-related stress Checklist (CSL)

How to use the questionnaire

Before handing out the questionnaire it is necessary to emphasize to workers that the anonymity of individual employees will be preserved. In fact, tackling the issue of ensuring anonymity is essential because it dispels a common concern, namely that the results of the questionnaire are used to identify people with problems.

The results will only analyze the positive and negative aspects of work and data will be presented as a summary. Experience shows that preliminary discussions to clarify the goals are essential.

The reference target should include managers, workers' representatives, labor doctors, HR, workers

Dimensions	Item	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
Organizational culture	1. Are you satisfied with the work assigned to you?				
	2. Can you influence the way in which you carry out your work?				
	3. Are you involved in the decision-making process?				
	4. Are you informed of the changes regarding the workplace?				
	5. Are you involved in the changes regarding the work activity?				
	6. Are the tasks and responsibilities assigned to you well-defined?				
	7. Are you appreciated when you do a good job?				
	8. Are you encouraged to develop your abilities and skills?				
Workload	9. Do you feel you have to work too much to be promoted?				
	10. Do you feel ongoing pressure to do more?				
	11. Are you assigned too much work to be carried out in a short lapse of time?				
	12. Do you think that the work assigned to you is too difficult?				
	13. Do you feel that changes are excessive?				
	14. Must you perform tasks other than your own skills and job profile?				
Quality of relations and support	15. Is the relationship with your superior "good"?				
	16. Is the relationship with colleagues "good"?				
	17. Can you rely on your direct superior' support?				
	18. Can you rely on your colleagues' support?				

Possible actions for the three main dimensions of the work-related stress Checklist (CSL)

Action plan

Once the questionnaire analysis has been carried out, it is useful to promote a discussion group to ensure that the results reflect the company's reality. Furthermore, this group can be very useful in coming up with solutions and ideas for taking actions. Some suggestions are presented here for the different dimensions analyzed. The suggestions are not mutually exclusive: an action taken for a dimension can also be relevant for another dimension.

The level of involvement is a central aspect. In fact, on the basis of the analysis results, the related action plan must be agreed with the employer and with the workers' representatives and then promoted among the employees.

Dimension 1 – Organizational culture (items 1- 9)

Actions

- a. To take simple actions, such as say "thanks" at the right moment;
- b. to train managers to provide positive feedback;
- c. to identify whether there is too much variety of tasks or insufficient variety;
- d. to consider horizontal growth (for example new skills, greater autonomy, diversification) in a job if vertical growth (higher level in the organizational hierarchy) is not possible;
- e. to provide appropriate information for understanding the reasons at the origin of changes;
- f. to ensure adequate support to workers during the phase of change, so as to make them aware of its impact on the work activity;
- g. to provide appropriate information to enable workers to understand their roles and responsibilities;
- h. to ensure that everyone is provided a clear description of his/her work/responsibility, which is regularly reviewed and updated.

Dimension 2- Workload (items 10-14)

Actions

- a. To provide training/information so as to increase workers' awareness of stress;
- b. to ensure a certain degree of flexibility in work/life balance;
- c. work underload or overload (scarcely challenging job or insufficient resources in terms of time, staff or equipment);
- d. to check whether deadlines are set by internal or external customers and to what extent the goals are unrealistic;
- e. to look for a smarter way of working (and not a way to work more);
- f. to ensure that employees clearly know priorities (for individuals and for the department);
- g. to encourage employees to be honest as to the possibility of meeting deadlines;
- h. to take early action (at least within 4-6 weeks) to reduce long term absences.

Dimension 3 – Quality of relations and support (items 15-18)

Actions

- a. To train managers to provide timely and constructive feedback to workers;
- b. to organize regular weekly meetings between managers and employees to discuss practical/operational issues;
- c. to put workers in the position to share the information relating to their job;
- d. to consult the employees on the best way to communicate the plans for managing activities;
- e. to devote more time to celebrate success (informal lunches, out-of-office meetings, as well as more formal involvement in newsletters/corporate communications);
- f. to establish systems (or improving the existing ones) designed to favor workers' reporting of the occurrence of unacceptable behaviors;
- g. to select teams combining competence and experience with good interpersonal relations;
- h. to work out written policies for harassment/bullying and communicate them to employees;
- i. to encourage employees to recognize the others' individual contributions and the benefits for the whole team;
- j. to implement job rotation (where possible) to enable employees to better understand mutual roles.



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