



3 MOST COMMON WORKPLACE PROBLEMS

Stress

WHAT'S DIFFERENT about work you find satisfying and challenging and work you dread? What makes some work healthy and some work a risk to your mental and physical health?

Over the last two decades, research has found that the most stressful jobs place heavy demands on you while giving you little control over how or when to meet the demands. You may have to meet a production quota or solve a problem for a client but have no control over the amount of time you're given to do the job or the workplace rules that govern your actions.

Sometimes the conditions that produce stress are short-lived and you can gather resources to cope with the situation. But sometimes they persist with no end in sight and your ability to cope dwindles over time.

In the short term, you may feel frustrated, hostile or anxious. In the long term, stress can contribute to serious ailments such as depression, heart disease, and diabetes.

Harassment

DISCRIMINATION AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT are illegal in Canada. If you're the victim of such abuse, you can charge your employer with a violation under the Human Rights Act and argue your case through the courts. But there are other, less obvious forms of harassment that take place in our workplaces everyday.

Supervisors and managers are in roles of authority and power. But they don't always use this power well. Sometimes, their misused authority over you can result in loss of self-esteem, self-confidence, and feelings of personal incompetence. You could be a victim of workplace harassment if your boss:

- micromanages everything you do, continually demanding to review or inspect all your work and monitoring when you arrive or leave, and when you take a break;
- steals credit for your work and takes unfair advantage;
- invades your personal privacy through methods such as electronic spying, monitoring of personal phone calls, or video surveillance;
- verbally belittles, insults or threatens you;
- assigns you so much work or overtime that your personal life suffers.

Occupational or Environmental Health Hazards

IT'S YOUR EMPLOYER'S RESPONSIBILITY to provide a safe and healthy workplace. But too often, other factors such as budgetary constraints or the bottom line take priority, at the expense of your health.

Occupational Hazards

- repetitive strain injuries to hands and arms are now responsible for almost half of all workplace injuries in Canada. Tendonitis, tenosynovitis and carpal tunnel syndrome are most prevalent among those doing monotonous and repetitive jobs such as typing, data processing and light assembly work. Others report frequent headaches, eye problems and dizziness from looking at a computer screen six to eight hours per day;
- shift work can contribute to a number of physical ailments, such as gastrointestinal problems and sleep disorders, while disrupting social and family life;
- many back problems are due to lifting in the workplace, developing slowly over time through what's known as repetitive micro trauma. Workers in health care have one of the highest rates of work-related back problems, with some of them lifting as much as 3,000 pounds in an eight-hour day;
- workers involved in direct patient or client care are often targets for violent attack. Health care workers, corrections officials, social service workers, teachers, public works employees, and retail workers are especially at-risk.

Environmental Hazards

- in today's energy-efficient, air-conditioned offices, workers breathe in stale and often contaminated air day after day. Office workers may face exposure to chemicals such as ozone from copying machines, while health care workers use a variety of chemicals that include detergents, disinfectants, and lab chemicals.
- high levels of noise in the workplace can cause hearing loss, affect balance and visual senses, place stress on the heart and strain the vocal chords.
- improper lighting in the workplace can cause excessive eye strain and result in tiredness and eye fatigue. It can also contribute to generalized fatigue and stress. Symptoms from too much light include burning, tearing and redness of the eyelids, as well as reduced sharpness of vision. Symptoms of too little light include double vision and headaches, as well as reduced ability to quickly adjust your focus between near and far objects.



HOW A UNION CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Alleviating Stress

HAVING A UNION ON YOUR SIDE means more control in your daily work life.

Through the collective bargaining process, you and your fellow co-workers have the opportunity to make your concerns known, to suggest improvements, and argue your case for a better way. A collective agreement is just that, an agreement, aimed at getting down in writing what your employer expects of you, and what you expect of your employer.

For instance, in order to give you more control and relieve job stress, your agreement could state that employees:

- be allowed to vary your tasks and move around at various times of the day;
- have input in deciding how jobs are done and how quickly;
- have the opportunity to make the maximum use of your skills, and to learn more;
- are aware of clear tasks, jobs, and roles to minimize conflicting expectations.

Many unionized workplaces have what are called Labour-Management Committees, where employee representatives regularly meet with management to discuss issues as they arise and ensure ongoing communication.

If you believe something isn't right in your workplace, a trained union professional is always there, ready to go to the employer on your behalf and seek to resolve the issue before it takes a toll on your health.

Preventing and Rectifying Harassment

IN CASES OF DISCRIMINATION AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT, the union's legal experts would help you understand your rights according to the Human Rights Act and guide you through the legal process in the courts.

In the case of other forms of workplace harassment, the union would help you develop a plan to rectify the situation. They might, for example, advise you to first inform the harasser that their behaviour is unwelcome (if possible) and begin documenting when and where the harassment occurs, and by whom.

The collective agreement can also play a role. It's the ideal place to formally state that such behaviour is unacceptable. After that, any harassing employer could be charged with violation of the collective agreement.

Many unionized workplaces also have employer-supported Employee Assistance Plans, where you could go to receive support and counselling free-of-charge.

Reducing Health Hazards

THROUGH THE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING PROCESS, you have the opportunity to negotiate for a safer and healthier workplace. For instance, your contract could state that your employer must:

- pay for regular eye check-ups for those working long hours at the computer, or provide more frequent breaks for those working in data entry;
- give plenty advance notice of shift schedules, provide ongoing workshops explaining techniques for coping with shiftwork, or provide alternative work for employees who for physical, mental or social reasons are unable to work shifts;
- provide wheeled carts for carrying and spring-loaded bins to reduce bending, or develop cooperative back-to-work plans for those suffering from disabling back pain;
- implement a buddy system for workers at risk of violent attack;
- institute semi-annual testing of air quality and noise levels;
- complete a lighting audit of all work stations in order to ensure appropriateness.

Many unionized workplaces also have Safety and Health Committees made up of employee and management representatives. Their sole responsibility is seeking to assess and improve working conditions on an ongoing basis.

The MGEU's staff Health and Safety specialist often sits on these committees, offering advice and expertise on the latest research.