



ENWHP Briefings

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Tackling Stress at Work

Employees, enterprises, and the national economies, all benefit from a reduction in mental disorders

The significance of psycho-social illnesses, which has long been underestimated, is no longer being denied. Work-related stress is one of the biggest occupational health problems in the European Union, exceeded only by diseases of the muscular and skeletal systems. Approximately 50% of absenteeism is a result of mental disorders. A manual that was compiled by the European Commission in 1999 concludes that about half of the 150 million employees in Europe feel that they are under considerable pressure work. And the trend continues to rise. Since 1990, the number of people who have fallen ill at work due to stress has more than doubled. The effects on the physical and psychological health of these people differ, ranging from diseases of the heart or the blood circulatory and digestive systems to psychological problems. These psycho-social risks not only cause physical strains, but are also damaging to enterprises and the economy. The EU estimates that the financial cost of stress at workplaces in the community (EU 15) amounts to 20 billion Euro annually. The international work-organisation ILO estimates the total costs of psychological strains at work at 3% of the community's GDP.

So what causes stress at work and how can it be managed? According to the European Commission, work-related stress can be defined as *“a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and harmful aspects of work content, work organisation and the working environment. It is a state characterised by high levels of agitation and distress and often by feelings of not coping”*. In other words: increasing intensification of work, work overload, hectic, and schedule pressures, all mean that increasing numbers of workers no longer feel able to cope with their work. Equally, a lack of challenge, monotony and poor communication can also produce feelings of stress.

The causes of work-related stress can be found by examining both personal attitudes and the working conditions, for example in the work organisation, work equipment, and the work environment (e.g. noise). This differentiation is based on an assumption that stress cannot be attributed to one individual problem.



Stress can occur on the one hand as a result of personal characteristics inherent in each individual (physical, psychological and psycho-physical factors), and on the other hand can arise from measurable external factors. Workplace Health Promotion can be *condition-oriented*, i.e. manipulate these external factors, as well as *behaviour-oriented*, i.e. influence the conditions for performance and personal expectations in a positive way. The increasing number of seminars on offer (e.g. coping with stress for managers), for relaxation-training, or crisis-intervention for individual occupational groups indicates that companies now recognise that there is close relationship between stress and work. Employees now hear the phrase “That is your personal problem“ less frequently, and the problems for the economy are becoming more apparent.

The ENWHP is working to disseminate successful strategies for reducing psycho-social strains at workplaces. Workers, enterprises, and social security systems all benefit from a working environment that is designed to promote health and support the use of individual resources. The ENWHP carried out a separate project in 2003 supported by the EU-Commission which concluded with the development of recommendations and a European strategy for health promotion and prevention in relation to “Mental Health“.