

A Series

Mental Health at WORK

... From Defining to Solving the Problem

WHAT CAUSES THE

PROBLEM?

The Sources of WORKPLACE STRESS



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Chair in
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and Safety Management



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Note: In this document, the masculine form applies to women as well as men, wherever applicable.

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SOURCES of work-related MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Determining the causes of work-related mental health problems is the first step in resolving them. It enables us to determine where – and especially how – to act in order to maintain not only the health of individuals, but also the health of organizations. According to Jean-Pierre Brun, Program Director of the Chair in Occupational Health and Safety Management at Université Laval (Canada), work-related mental health problems may be caused by events stemming from the private life of the **individual**, the **organization** where he works, or the **society** in which he evolves.



SOCIETY

Current social and economic conditions can play a major role in the development of work-related mental health problems. The rapid development of information and communications technologies, which led to **globalization of the economy**, has had a significant impact on the world of work. Domestic companies must now compete with foreign firms. On one hand, everything is more **performance-oriented** than ever: both organizations and individuals are asked to produce more with less. People must rise to the challenge and constantly outdo themselves. On the other hand, the increasing precariousness of work and the weakening of employment relationships encourage **individualism**. This often results in a lack of commitment and motivation and, finally, a complete withdrawal from work.

THE INDIVIDUAL

Sooner or later, we all have to cope with difficult situations in life. Whether these are personal, family, marital or financial situations, they will to varying degrees have an impact on our psychological well-being. Certain **personal characteristics**, such as **personality, gender and age**, may also influence a person's way of coping with such situations and make him more vulnerable to mental health problems. It is rare for people to leave their personality and problems at home when they go to work. Whether you want them to or not, they end up accompanying you. It is extremely difficult for people to separate their personal life from their working life.

WORK

The demands of today's employment environment play a major role in the stress that affects workers. **Technology** that is evolving at breakneck speed, **mergers, takeovers and layoffs**, increased productivity requirements and internal reorganizations are part of the daily life of managers and employees alike. The tension caused by these changes can challenge the psychological balance of workers and have a negative impact on their health, especially when the changes involve **work overload, lack of participation in decision-making** process or even a **lack of recognition** of the individual or the work done. These contributing factors will be discussed in detail in the next part.

A study conducted in Switzerland on the cost of stress shows that 58.1% of respondents believe that their stress is attributable to life at work, while only 4.5% consider that it is caused by their personal life.¹

In Canada, over the last 10 years, the high occupational stress indicator has doubled.²

SOURCES OF STRESS in an ORGANIZATION



One-quarter of Canadians consider their work to be a significant source of stress and anxiety.³

Some characteristics of the work environment may be a risk to personal well-being. According to a recent study conducted by the Université Laval Chair in Occupational Health and Safety Management in four Quebec enterprises,⁴ the organizational factors that are the most harmful to the mental health of persons are (in decreasing order of importance) work overload, lack of recognition by peers, a poor relationship with one's supervisor, lack of participation in decision making and a lack of information (at both the individual and organizational levels).

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT SOURCES OF STRESS IN ORGANIZATIONS⁵

1. Work overload.
2. Lack of recognition by peers.
3. Poor relationship with one's supervisor.
4. Lack of participation in decision making (individual and organizational levels).
5. Lack of information.

WORK OVERLOAD

An employee is in a work overload situation when there is **too much work** to be performed within **too short a time**. Many organizations are dealing with an economic context that has led them to slash jobs. The employees who remain must perform more tasks and shoulder more responsibilities to compensate for less staff.

In addition to carrying out a greater quantity of work, employees must often put in extra effort to accomplish their tasks. This is because more and more individuals are frequently interrupted by the telephone, colleagues, the fax machine or e-mail. Such **interruptions** may be perceived as frustrating because they delay the accomplishment of tasks and increase the mental effort required to get them done.

As well as having a major impact on individual mental health, work overload also contributes to certain physical disorders such as heart disease and high cholesterol.

For example, Françoise has a job filling in claim forms in a busy office. Due to recent job cuts, she must now do the work previously shared between two people. Yet as far as her supervisor is concerned, client service is of the utmost importance. He insists that all forms be returned to clients within one week following their receipt. According to Françoise: "At first, I arrived earlier at work, I did not take breaks and I cut my lunch hour. Now this is not enough. I often leave the office late in the evening. My family life has been affected. My husband is really fed up and my children are constantly asking for me. This can't go on, I'm going to break down..."

Recognition is linked to motivation, job satisfaction, level of psychological distress and the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Harmonious work relationships have a positive impact on satisfaction and motivation at work.

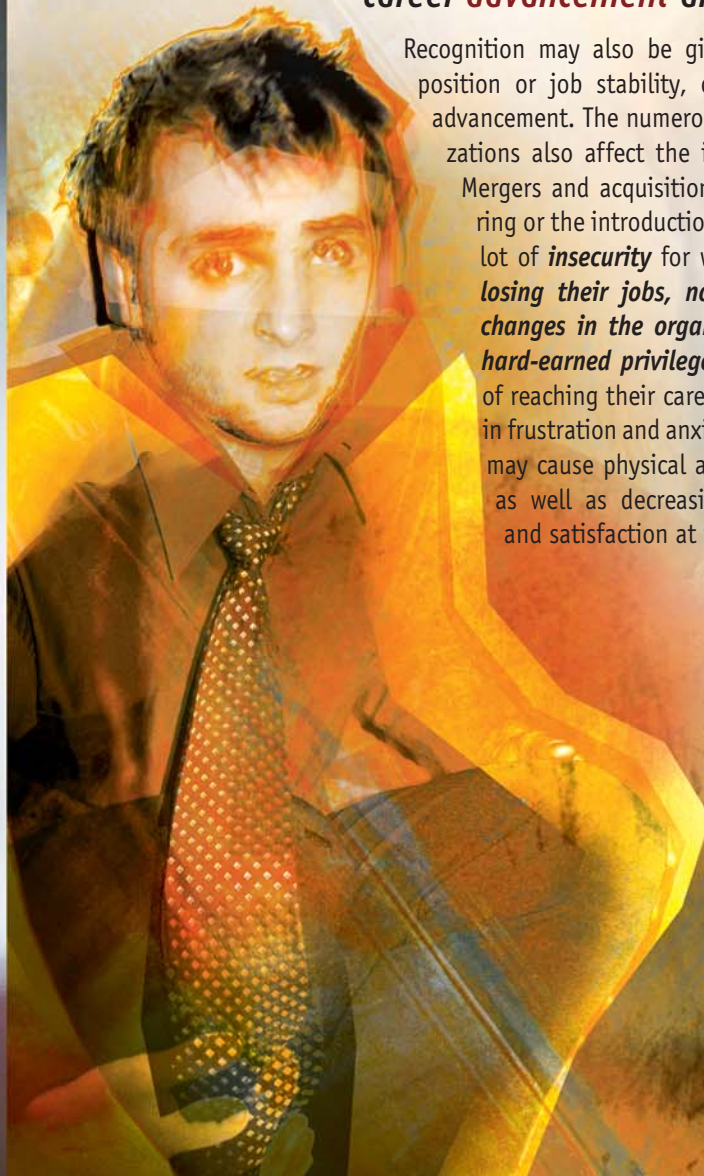
RECOGNITION AT WORK

Support from colleagues

It is normal for people to want to fulfill themselves at work. In order to do so, workers must feel **appreciated** and **supported by their colleagues**. They expect their work to be acknowledged by their supervisor, their colleagues or clients, not necessarily by awards or bonuses, but by **simple everyday gestures**. For example, good work may be brought to the attention of others, the employee may be encouraged or thanked, or be given signs of recognition. The person who feels appreciated at work is more satisfied and motivated. In general, that person is less liable to experience mental health problems.

Lack of job *stability*, *career advancement* and *fair pay*

Recognition may also be given through adequate pay, position or job stability, or the possibility of career advancement. The numerous changes affecting organizations also affect the individuals who work there. Mergers and acquisitions, organizational restructuring or the introduction of new technology create a lot of **insecurity** for workers. Some are **afraid of losing their jobs, not being able to adapt to changes in the organization of work, or losing hard-earned privileges**. Others see their chances of reaching their career goals disappear, resulting in frustration and anxiety. Such difficult conditions may cause physical and mental health problems, as well as decreasing motivation, productivity and satisfaction at work.



INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

There is much less tension at work when there is a general feeling of trust and people feel supported. Employees are motivated and satisfied. On the other hand, when there is mistrust, hostility and competition, employee satisfaction and mental well-being are likely to be compromised. There are generally three levels of interpersonal relationships in an organization: relationships with peers or **colleagues**, with **management** and with **clients**.

Relationships *with management*

The *management style of a supervisor* can have an impact on the mental health of employees. For example, a manager who has an authoritarian relationship with employees does not have much chance of developing the atmosphere of trust and mutual assistance that is necessary to create a cohesive group. On the contrary, such a relationship will spark tension and conflicts. By the same token, a manager who advocates participative management – who is available, gives recognition, provides feedback and supports employees – contributes to improving considerably their mental well-being, as well as their satisfaction and motivation at work.

Relationships *with colleagues*

Good relationships with colleagues make life at work a lot easier. As well as encouraging regular *cooperation* and *assistance*, they help to develop the attentiveness, support required to get through hard times. Friendship between colleagues nurtures the sense of belonging to a mutually supportive group in which the individual feels recognized and appreciated, which adds to mental well-being. An atmosphere of mistrust and hostility, however, may create ambiguous loyalties and lead to low levels of communication, satisfaction and mental well-being.

Relationships *with clients*

Attention should be paid to two aspects of this type of relationship. The first aspect is linked to the number of interactions an employee has with clients. An employee who is isolated for long stretches of time may suffer from *boredom*. Motivation and satisfaction may be compromised. The second aspect relates to how demanding the clients are. Employees must invest a lot of *patience* and *energy* in order to meet the expectations of a client who is constantly demanding more.

People who have jobs that involve dealing with angry clients are more likely to have symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The quality of an employee's relationship with his immediate supervisor is a determining factor in that employee's performance.

Insufficient participation at work may be related to a high degree of psychological tension, alcohol abuse, depression, poor physical health, as well as low self-esteem and low job satisfaction.

Employees who can express their feelings and discontent to their supervisors, as well as to their colleagues, are more likely to be satisfied in their work.

PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

The degree to which employees participate in the decision-making process may have an important impact on mental health. Two types of decision making are generally involved: **organizational** and **personal**.

Organizational decisions

Organizational decisions have to do with the **orientation** and **strategies** adopted by the organization. For example, employee participation in the purchase of new machinery or the development of a new method of managing work schedules could reduce the level of stress and increase employee satisfaction.

Individual decisions

Decisions that directly affect an individual's **work** and **daily life** can also have an impact on this worker, although to a lesser extent than decisions at the organizational level. These types of decisions could involve, among other things, allowing office employees to express their preference for the type of software to be used, or asking for the cooperation of operators in a control room. Organizations that allow employees to make these types of decisions may increase employees' self-esteem and reduce their level of stress.

LACK OF INFORMATION

Access to information is essential to mental well-being. In order to avoid feeling tense and insecure, employees must receive two types of information: **organizational** and **individual**.

Information at the *organizational level*

Organizational information keeps employees informed about the **overall direction** and **general operation of the organization**. Organizations sometimes go through tremendous turbulence that creates significant upheaval for employees. If employees are not kept up to date on new developments at the organizational level, they may feel insecure and experience increased tension.

Information at the *individual level*

Job-related information enables employees **to perform their work as well as possible**. This can be as simple as providing the person who makes deliveries with an itinerary, or telling someone who works on an assembly line the number of units that are going to be produced.

QUALITATIVE WORK OVERLOAD

An employee who feels unable to perform his work properly because the tasks are **too complex** is considered to be in a situation of qualitative work overload. In order to meet high market standards, organizations continuously increase their performance and efficiency standards. Employees must continuously try to surpass themselves, which explains why employees are increasingly experiencing qualitative work overload. The rapid evolution of technology and new ways of organizing work also contribute to work qualitative overload.

INSUFFICIENT WORK

It is interesting to note that **insufficient work** may also lead to the development of mental health problems. If you have ever held a job where you had so little to do that the workday seemed endless, you will certainly understand.

Likewise, **repetitive and monotonous** jobs may contribute to the development of work-related mental health problems. They often require few skills and make use of a limited range of physical and mental functions. Because such jobs do not stimulate employees, they may rapidly become restrictive and boring.

RESTRICTIONS RELATED TO TIME

Process automation and the use of new technologies often oblige employees to work within tight time frames. They have to follow the pace of automated machines, which are fast and make few mistakes. Certain production processes have similar effects. For example, just-in-time processes leave little leeway for employees, who have to maintain an **intense pace of work**. In such circumstances, work may become a source of tension.

Just like having too many or too high a level of responsibilities, boredom at work can lead to anxiety and depression.

For example, Allan works on an assembly line. He feels that he only plays a small role in a large industrial firm and is unable to keep up with the pace of his assembly line. However, he is obliged to work at the same rate as everyone else if he doesn't want to slow down or stop the manufacturing process. "The work pace is unbearable. We're running from morning to night to the point where I can't even unwind when I get home. I don't sleep well, I have stomach problems and I'm getting more and more impatient!"

Conflicts and role ambiguity reduce performance and job satisfaction and increase absenteeism.

Workers who have little decision-making power at work have more symptoms of anxiety and depression than do other workers.

ROLE CONFLICTS

Employees experience role conflict when they are confronted with **inconsistent expectations** from their supervisor or colleagues. For example, a boss who continuously increases quality standards, while shortening production time, subjects employees to role conflicts. Role conflicts also occur when the values, beliefs or goals of employees **contradict** the expectations of their supervisors or colleagues. For example, this is the case with hospital managers who may find it difficult to balance job cuts with quality care for patients. Finally, role conflict may arise when the **materials** and **resources** needed to properly perform the work are **not available**.

ROLE AMBIGUITY

Role ambiguity occurs when employees **do not know what is expected** or what tasks to perform. For example, they may not have any information about the goals or mission to be accomplished, or they may be unaware of the deadlines to be met. If this happens, it will be hard for them to make progress in their work.

SKILLS AUTONOMY

Skills autonomy refers to the capacity **to use one's skills** and **to develop new ones**. For example, a person who works in a rigid environment in which the rules are precisely defined and strictly applied will have trouble using his imagination, creativity and initiative. Such conditions give rise to tension, which may also lead to work-related mental health problems. Job scarcity is a condition that may oblige people to temporarily accept employment in which they cannot apply their skills.

DECISION-MAKING POWER

People are said to have decision-making power when they choose how to perform their work and participate in related decisions. Semi-independent work teams are a good example of the delegation of decision-making power to employees. Not only do these teams have the ability **to plan and organize their work**, but they also have the latitude to deal with the demands or situations with which they are confronted on a daily basis.



WORK SCHEDULES

Irregular work schedules can disrupt physiological rhythms. People subject to an irregular work schedule are more likely to have sleep disorders and gastrointestinal problems. They may also have behavioural problems such as eating disorders or alcohol abuse. Persons suffering from these problems are more likely to be absent from work.

Working long hours is another potential source of tension. In addition to affecting physical health, working long hours is harmful to mental health. These employees may also experience difficulties balancing their personal, family and work lives because they spend most of their time at work and go home exhausted.

Difficult working conditions can have negative consequences for performance, job satisfaction and motivation.

Persons who work at night tend to sleep less and not as deeply during the day.

Working excessively long hours does not necessarily increase productivity. On the contrary, there is a tendency for individual efficiency to diminish.

Myriam had been working nights for approximately seven years when the first symptoms appeared. "I had more and more trouble sleeping, and that wasn't because of noise, because I was alone at home. If I did fall asleep, it was not a deep sleep and lasted a few minutes. Most of the time, my body simply refused to sleep. I could look at the ceiling in my room for hours at a time. You can imagine that under such circumstances, going to work was increasingly difficult and the nights were endless. Without realizing it, I began drinking more coffee and smoking more. I was absent from work more often as I could not function properly. I felt very tired and I knew this could not go on for long. I was an empty shell. What had to happen did happen..."

WORK ENVIRONMENT

An unhealthy environment and difficult working conditions have also been associated with work-related mental health problems. For example, people who are exposed to high **noise** levels or to **variations in temperature** are more likely to feel tense. **Pollution, humidity, poor lighting**, an inadequately configured workstation or continuous work in front of a computer screen are other factors that may damage the health of employees. Such conditions may cause fatigue, irritability, loss of sleep and memory, and difficulties concentrating.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The structure of an organization can cause mental health problems as well. People who work in a **centralized** organization where decisions are made by upper management have little input into decision-making. Studies show that employees working for **decentralized** organizations are much more satisfied and have better job performance.

PERSONAL VULNERABILITY

Certain personal characteristics are known to make us relatively **vulnerable to work-related mental health problems**. They influence the way we perceive situations and shape our reactions and behaviour. These characteristics, which may make some people more sensitive to the risk factors present within an organization, include a **type A personality** (described in the next paragraph), as well as **age, gender** and a **“negative affect” personality** (defined below).

THE TYPE A PERSONALITY

Type A individuals are highly **competitive**. In extreme cases, they can be bad-tempered and even hostile. They seem to be in a **constant rush**, with no letup. They are extremely **ambitious** and tend to be **perfectionists** with a need to take control. These individuals are more vulnerable to mental health problems because they are so involved in their work. They are **focused, productive** and **performance-oriented**. They have a continuous need to outdo themselves and have a tendency to establish (for themselves and for others) goals that are too high in relation to their capabilities. Type A personalities are unable to stop. They rarely have leisure activities outside their work. They feel guilty when they relax.

Men with a type A personality run twice the risk of having a heart attack than men with a type B personality.



A **type B** personality is usually described as the opposite of type A. Type B individuals are **relaxed, open** and **pay attention to their social** and intimate relationships. They are **patient, laid-back** and **not very competitive**. They prefer letting others define work requirements and adapt to them quite easily.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TYPE A PERSONALITY	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TYPE B PERSONALITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Competitive● Must constantly outdo themselves● Perfectionist● Impatient● Ambitious● Always in a rush● Hostile● Bad-tempered	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Relaxed● Non-competitive● Open● Attentive to relationships● Patient● Laid-back



AGE AND GENDER

Little is known about the impact of **age** on work-related mental health problems. However, it is known that certain problems have a tendency to appear among specific age groups. This is the case with depression, for example, which appears most often around the age of 35.

We also know that the type of stress that a person undergoes at work can vary according to age. A good example of this is the stress related to learning new technologies. Approximately 16% of workers aged 45 years and over state that acquiring new computer skills is a source of stress, compared with only 8% of those in the 15 to 24 year age group.

While acquiring new computer skills may not be stressful for young workers, other factors may be. For example, 37% of workers aged 24 and younger consider long working hours or the number of requirements at work to be a source of occupational stress, compared with 25% of workers aged 25 to 44. This is not surprising, because younger workers are new to the labour market and face different types of pressure from workers who are in mid-career. On the other hand, younger workers are less likely to have to deal with the conflicting demands of work and family life.

A recent study on the cost of stress, conducted in Switzerland, reveals some interesting differences between the stress felt by different age groups. The following table shows that young or middle-aged persons have a tendency to feel more stress than older persons. In fact, the proportion of people claiming to be stressed “often or very often” had a tendency to drop among higher age groups – ranging from 27.7% to 31.5% in the 15 to 44 year age group, and from 20.5% to 22.0% in the 45 to 65 year age group.

STRESS FELT, BY AGE GROUP, SWITZERLAND

Stress felt/Age	15-24 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	45-54 years	55-65 years
Never	15.3%	17.3%	13.6%	19.5%	25.4%
Sometimes	53.2%	55.0%	56.6%	60.0%	52.6%
Often/very often	31.5%	27.7%	29.8%	20.5%	22.0%

Source: Ramaciotti & Périard, 2000⁵

As far as differences based on **gender** are concerned, women are more subject to anxiety and to psychological distress than men. They are also twice as likely to suffer from depression than their male colleagues. On the other hand, men are three times more likely to have alcohol and drug abuse problems than women.

These gender-based differences are not necessarily due to biology. The combination of low educational levels and poor working conditions make women more susceptible to mental health problems. The phenomenon of work-life conflict highlights these differences quite well. Women who hold full-time jobs still spend more time than their spouses do on meeting family obligations. These women often have to shoulder the weight of numerous responsibilities as wives and mothers. It is also worth noting in this context that women are more likely than men to hold jobs in which they are subordinates and have little autonomy. Women are also more involved in occupations, such as teaching and nursing, that are both intellectually demanding and involve helping others.

PERSONALITIES CHARACTERIZED BY **NEGATIVE AFFECT**

Individuals who have personalities characterized by negative affect tend to see the proverbial glass of water as being half empty, while those with personalities characterized by positive affect see it as being half full. Persons who are susceptible to negative affect, or “pessimists,” **tend to feel negative emotions** such as sadness, anxiety, guilt, anger and hostility. They are also more likely to suffer from depression. They tend to interpret stressful situations as a threat and to react to them impulsively. Finally, it seems that the stress management strategies they use are less effective.

When individuals with a personality characterized by negative affect see a situation as being unfair, they are more likely to leave their employment, are more mistrustful of their supervisor, and less committed to the organization than their peers who are more susceptible to positive effect.

MAIN PERSONALITY TRAITS OF INDIVIDUALS SUSCEPTIBLE TO SIGNIFICANT NEGATIVE AFFECT

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Anger
- Hostility
- Impulsiveness
- Perceive stressful situations as threatening
- Less efficient stress management strategies



EFFICIENT **PERSONAL** MECHANISMS

People develop various mechanisms to reduce the impact of occupational stress and to avoid mental health problems. Some will try to reduce the pressure by consuming alcohol or drugs. This is obviously the wrong thing to do. Others will try to manage their time better, to solve their problems and express their needs. The latter approach is much more likely to be successful in combating mental health problems. Other effective personal mechanisms include taking advantage of **social support** systems and **maintaining a healthy lifestyle**.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Seeking social support is a very effective way to reduce tension and the risk of developing mental health problems. Family members, friends and colleagues are reliable sources of information, feedback, assistance in solving problems, practical help and confidence building. Their support can be critical for helping us get through difficult situations. For example, the quality of the relationship with one's spouse has an impact on the quality of one's work life, especially as far as women are concerned. **Similarly, help and support from colleagues** may help a person meet stringent job requirements and reduce the negative impact of stress.

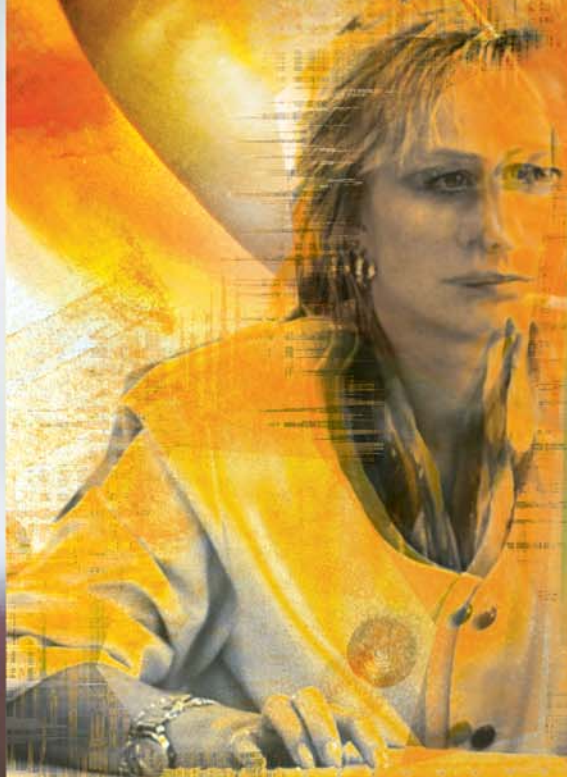
LIFESTYLE

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle helps us to adapt to various work requirements and to life in general. On the other hand, having few **interests outside of work**, **poor eating habits** or a lack of **exercise** reduces a person's ability to cope with stress.

Emotional support from colleagues, and especially supervisors, tends to reduce work-related stress and mental health problems.

To **SUM UP**...

Now that we know more about workplace **stress**, as well as about its **causes** and **consequences**, the next and last step will be to determine what types of action should be taken to effectively prevent work-related mental health problems. This will be examined in Booklet 3, entitled "Solving the Problem: Preventing Stress in the Workplace."



ACTIVITY

Instructions: In the following table, indicate all of the causes of stress in your workplace:

CAUSES OF WORKPLACE STRESS

- Work overload.
- Lack of recognition (by colleagues).
- Lack of recognition (job stability).
- Lack of recognition (possibilities of career advancement).
- Lack of recognition (salary).
- Poor relationship with a supervisor.
- Poor relationship with colleagues.
- Poor relationship with clients.
- Lack of participation in the organization.
- Lack of relationships with colleagues.
- Poorly disseminated information within the organization.
- Poorly disseminated information at the individual level.
- Qualitative work overload.
- Insufficient workload.
- Time-related requirements.
- Role conflicts.
- Role ambiguity.
- Insufficient autonomy to develop skills.
- Little decision-making power.
- Difficult work environment and working conditions.
- Irregular work schedule.
- Overloaded work schedule.
- A centralized organizational structure.
- Others:

Details:

ACTIVITY

Instructions: Under the heading “stressful situations” write in the sources of stress that you identified in the preceding activity. Then, after reading about the levels of prevention presented in the first part of Booklet 3, suggest various prevention activities that could be carried out to avoid mental health problems in your organization.

There will always be situations that cause stress. However, you can prepare yourself to cope with these situations and not have them affect your health. You can start by asking yourself the following questions:

- AT WORK:**
- 1 **What situations are especially stressful for me?**
 - 2 **What would improve this situation?**
 - I) What could the organization do to improve the situation?
 - II) What could my trade union/association do to improve the situation?
 - III) What could my work team do to improve the situation?
 - IV) What could I do to improve the situation?

Stressful situations (Booklet 2)	The organization (Booklet 3)	My trade union/association (Booklet 3)	My team (Booklet 3)	Myself (Booklet 3)

USEFUL *INTERNET* SITES

(Links active on June 2005)

Association of Psychiatrists of Canada

<http://www.cpa-apc.org/index.asp>

Addressing Psychosocial Problems at Work (SOLVE)

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/whpwb/solve/index.htm>

Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health

<http://www.camimh.ca>

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety

<http://www.cchst.ca/reponsessst/psychosocial/stress.html#top>

Canadian Health Network

<http://canadian-health-network.ca>

Canadian Mental Health Association

<http://www.cmha.ca>

Chair in Occupational Health and Safety Management (Université Laval)

<http://cgsst.fsa.ulaval.ca/smt3>

Internet Mental Health

<http://www.mentalhealth.com>

Industrial Accident Prevention Association (IAPA)

<http://www.iapa.on.ca>

Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et en sécurité du travail (IRSST)

<http://www.irsst.qc.ca>

Mental Illness Foundation (Quebec)

(514) 529-5354

<http://www.fmm-mif.ca>

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

Stress at work

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswk.html>

Non-Institutional Resources for Psychological Health in Quebec

[Regroupement des ressources non institutionnelles en santé mentale de la région de Québec]

(418) 640-5253

<http://www.clic.net/%7errnismq>

Public Health Agency of Canada

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/mh-sm/mentalhealth/sevice_systems.htm

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