

Work stress and burnout

Explain dangers

Work stress is one of the most common negative impacts on mental well-being. We experience stress when the demands of our jobs are greater than our capacity to cope with those demands. Prolonged work stress can lead to burnout.

It is not always easy to recognize burnout. You may believe you are simply struggling to keep up during a stressful time. Stress, however, is usually experienced as anxiousness and a sense of urgency. Common symptoms of burnout are feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, or apathy.

Prolonged stress can result not only in mental health problems, but also serious physical health problems such as cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders.

Conditions that may lead to high work stress and burnout include*:

- Excessive workload
- Conflicting demands and lack of role clarity
- Lack of involvement in making decisions that affect the worker and lack of influence over how the job is done
- Poorly managed organizational change and/or job insecurity
- Ineffective communication and lack of support from management or colleagues
- Psychological and sexual harassment, and third-party violence

Construction and trades workers can experience additional stressors, including:

- High-risk work environments and tasks
- Extreme weather conditions
- Exposure to traumatic events at work
- Chronic pain, fatigue, and isolation

Identify controls

Supervisors can take certain actions to manage work stress and prevent burnout, such as:

- Providing clear expectations to workers and confirming those expectations are understood

- Making sure workers have the necessary resources and skills to meet expectations.
- Providing ongoing training
- Helping workers understand their value
- Enforcing reasonable work hours
- Helping to assess workload demands and set realistic expectations
- Encouraging social support and respect among workers and within work teams

As a worker, you need to:

- **Prioritize:** Make a list of your work demands and review them with your supervisor if you have any concerns.
- **Refresh your skills:** There may be an easier or more efficient way to accomplish certain tasks. Be open to learning new skills, new ideas, and new ways of doing things.
- **Take breaks:** Take time to relax and refocus, and then return to your work with a clearer mind.
- **Connect with others:** Do not spend your entire workday with your head down. To help prevent burnout, work needs to be about more than just the endless completion of tasks.
- **Make life more than work:** Engage in activities and connect with people outside of your workplace. This is critical to your long-term ability to avoid burnout.

If work stress or burnout is impacting your mental health, talk to your supervisor or connect with your doctor, family, and/or friends for support.

Demonstrate

Think about how you, as a supervisor, manage stress and prioritize tasks at work—and offer any relevant tips.

Make yourself available to workers to discuss their job tasks and stressors, as needed, to improve mental well-being and prevent burnout.

*helpguide.org/articles/stress/burnout-prevention-and-recovery.htm

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Facilitator support resources

Prepare

- Review IHSA's [Mental health safety talks: facilitator's guide \(W131\)](#) for advice on how to talk about mental health with workers, encourage participation, and become a workplace mental health leader.
- Watch [this video for a simple exercise](#) to help calm yourself down in stressful situations.
- Read [this webpage about burnout response](#) for leaders—including how to identify employee burnout, recognize workplace factors, and take proactive steps for prevention.
- Bookmark [this guide to burnout prevention and treatment](#) to learn what you can do to regain control over stress.
- Post the [Taking Action of Workplace Stress poster](#).

Reinforce

Think about how you, as a supervisor, manage stress and prioritize tasks at work—and offer any relevant tips. Make yourself available to workers to discuss their job tasks and stressors, as needed, to improve mental well-being, and prevent burnout.

Next steps

Consider holding sessions with workers (either one-on-one or as a group) to discuss work stressors. Remember, however, to focus on finding solutions. Encourage others to think of creative ways to minimize the risk of burnout by using the [hierarchy of controls](#).

More resources

Explore the following resources:

- [Self-assessment strategies](#) to help identify risks and prevent burnout.

- The Canadian Mental Health Association's [What's Your Stress Index?](#) quiz can help workers get a sense of the amount of stress that may be affecting them.
- These [assessment tools](#) can help workers identify if they may be at risk of burnout.

Questions

Consider asking your crew these questions after delivering the safety talk:

- What is one task that you do at work that causes you psychological stress?
- If you could change this task to reduce the stress, what would you change?

If no job-related stressors are proposed by the group, pick a task that you believe fits the description and work through it together using the hierarchy of controls. Ask your crew if they can:

- Physically remove the stress (e.g., stop the task all together)? (Elimination)
- Replace the stress (e.g., shift thinking around task)? (Substitution)
- Isolate themselves from the stress (e.g., limit exposure to the task)? (Engineering controls)
- Change the way they work (e.g., find a less stressful way to complete the task) (Administrative controls)
- Protect themselves from the harm caused by the hazard (e.g., build resilience to manage stress)? (Personal protective equipment)

Do you have questions? Did your crew have questions you could not answer? Remember, it is okay to not have all the answers. **For further support, please contact IHSA by email: info@ihsa.ca.**