



A Union of Professionals

WORK SHOULDN'T HURT

A Union Approach to Stress

Unions can have a powerful role in reducing the toll of workplace stress on their members. Many unions already are finding ways to reduce stress without knowing it. Among other things, unions can negotiate contract language and/or promote joint labor-management initiatives that provide for:

- Methods to ensure routine worker influence in work decisions;
- Varied or multiple work tasks with more control over the organization and pace of work;
- Job enlargement—career or professional ladders;
- Mentoring programs; and
- Elimination of the “hostile environment” that many workers experience day in and day out—guarantees of fundamental dignity and respect, including protection from employer harassment.

Examples of stress-reducing programs

- Well-designed management programs or joint-labor management programs that provide equal participation on the part of all employees;
- Ending mandatory overtime; and
- Limiting shift work as much as possible.

Unions can also work to head off stress with union-only programs. Unions have to remind members of the power that the contract gives them to protect their rights, dignity and control at work.

Unions often have to overcome the reluctance of members to act. Union programs that teach assertiveness training (especially for women) and interpersonal skills (how to talk to your supervisor without blowing up, etc.) have been shown to be effective in reducing stress.

A good union infrastructure is also essential, so members feel they have social support from the union.

AFT locals recognize the toll stress takes on members and are responding with programs. For instance, the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers recognized that regular exercise is a good antidote to stress, and the union negotiated language that allows members to use sick leave to pay for health club membership. MFT has also launched a union wellness program that is designed to help members cope with important health issues, including the stress of teaching and working in urban schools. The Burlington Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals in Wisconsin was successful at negotiating an end to mandatory overtime.

Other unions have run comprehensive “stress buster” campaigns. Stress programs vary from workplace to workplace, but generally the more successful programs have used some of the following elements:

- **Identifying the primary stressors in the lives of members.** The most common method to do this is a union survey of physical and social stressors and their health impact.
- **Designing a proposed intervention to reduce the stress.** A good and effective intervention does not require an “expert,” but always involves active employee participation. With adequate training and assistance to assess worker needs and the quality of the resources available within the organization to make change, workers can develop good interventions.
- **Working in joint labor-management committees to implement and evaluate the effect of programs.** This type of program will only be successful if there is adequate commitment on the part of management to make significant changes in work organization.

For more information, contact the health and safety team at 4healthandsafety@aft.org [May 2022]

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of 1.7 million professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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