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Stress and mental health



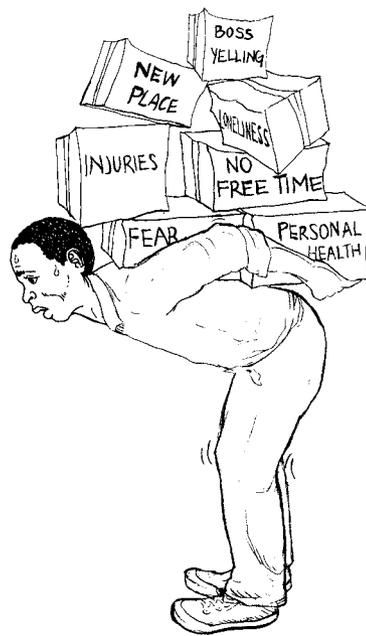
When our minds and spirits are healthy, we have the emotional strength to meet our needs and those of our families, to look for ways to solve problems, and to plan for the future. But when we are made unhealthy by too much stress, we are less able to cope with the challenges presented by life.

When work is dangerous, lasts too long, is too intense, and feels out of control, it can damage workers' mental health. To make factories healthier:

- Bosses must find respectful ways to involve workers in decision-making instead of imposing their decisions through force or fear.
- Workers' pay and benefits must allow for a decent standard of living and stability for workers' families.
- Toxic chemicals that affect the way workers think and feel must be banned from the workplace.
- Workers must have the time and materials to make quality products and take pride in their work.
- Work rules that prohibit talking and social interaction must be dropped.
- Health problems, including mental health problems, must not be stigmatized, and access to care for these problems must be encouraged.

Common causes of mental health problems

Not everyone who has the problems described in this chapter will develop a mental health problem. A person usually is more likely to develop a mental health problem when the pressures he faces are bigger than his ability to cope (manage the problems). Sometimes, mental health problems do not have a cause that can be identified, and we do not know why someone develops them. Regardless of the reason, people who suffer from mental and emotional health problems need support and help in talking about their problems and seeking help from a health worker. Employers must be pressured to change conditions in the factory that create problems for workers.



Fear

Fear is a particular kind of stress. Fear is often created on purpose by the boss and supervisors to control workers and keep them from organizing. When management threatens workers with firings, blacklists, violence, and other kinds of retaliation, they may be breaking the law and violating workers' human rights. Even if they do not hurt you in a visible way, they can harm your mental health. See the activity Facing fear together, on page 321.

Overcoming fear

We were very scared of what the boss and his thugs could do to us. Nobody wants to get hurt or lose their jobs. But we knew that this fear, the threat of violence, was their most powerful tool and we had to overcome it, stand together, and fight for our rights as workers, as women, and as human beings.



Economic insecurity

People work in factories because they need to earn money. And when income is not certain, when unemployment threatens the survival or well-being of your whole family, this can create fear and stress for the worker. Factory owners often threaten to cut back jobs or to move away, making workers fear for their jobs. Since many employers threaten to fire workers who complain, fear can keep you quiet in the face of injustice.



I don't want the plant to close! How am I going to send money to my family? They are going to think I am a bad daughter if I lose my job!



Fear of losing your job is used by employers to get away with not fixing conditions that harm workers.

Workload

Our bodies need rest to be healthy and so do our minds. Working long hours and on weekends stresses our bodies and minds. Overtime also limits the time we spend with family and friends, an important part of having healthy relationships. Too many hours can make us feel isolated, lonely, and exhausted.



The pressure to produce more in less time can also be harmful to workers, especially if the speed-up makes production lines move too fast to let workers complete each task well. Your body and your mind need lots of little breaks during the day to stretch, relax, and stay healthy. Some factories increase production line quotas in ways that make you feel like you cannot ever succeed. Every time you reach your production target, it gets raised again!

Work relationships

Relationships with your boss, supervisor, guards, and other workers can be stressful. Other people can make life easier or more difficult at work and outside the factory. It can be very hard to change these relationships, especially with people who have control over your job or salary.

Having a strong sense of unity with other workers can be a way of fighting for more equal relationships with the boss and union. But bosses often give workers isolated or solitary work or prohibit them from speaking or relating to their co-workers, making it hard to feel like you are all part of a community.

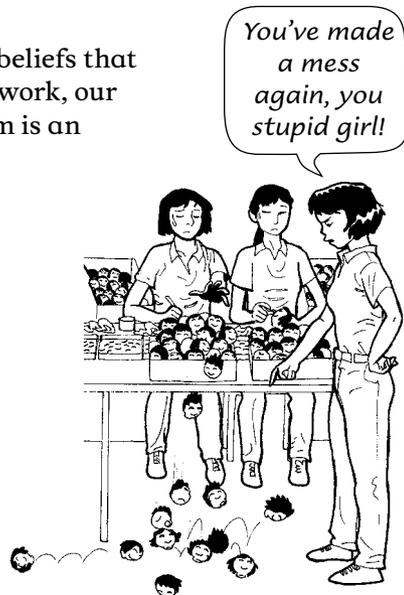


The workplace can be very unfair. Sometimes there's discrimination against workers, sometimes bosses favor some workers. This is especially true for women who see they are being paid less for the same work or effort that a man does for more pay. It is hard to feel like a community when workers are pushed and oppressed and made to feel like they don't deserve better. The bosses make workers compete against each other to get more power or money. Then they offer one worker more money or a better position and try to break apart all the trust we have built. How can we overcome all this oppression and rebuild relations of solidarity?

Self-esteem

Our self-esteem and self-value come from the beliefs that we grew up with, and our relationships in our work, our community, and our families. Good self-esteem is an important part of mental and emotional health. When we see ourselves in a positive light, we are better able to manage daily problems.

For many workers who spend most of their time working and living inside the factory walls and away from family and friends, self-esteem is heavily determined by work. Facing repetitive and monotonous work, having few breaks or holidays, bosses that yell insults to hurt workers, and having no time to make friends and build relationships, can create mental health problems for workers.



Work environment

Many bad conditions in the workplace can create anxiety and stress for workers, such as too much noise, too much or not enough light, temperatures being too hot or too cold, doing repetitive work, and working with chemicals that may harm you. Also when there are not enough washroom facilities, a lack of privacy, or facilities that are always dirty, this too can have an effect on mental health. Unsanitary or overcrowded eating facilities can also create stress for workers.

Injuries in the workplace

Injuries in the workplace obviously harm the physical health of the worker. But they can also harm that worker's mental health and the mental health of other workers who are witnesses to injuries. Experiencing injuries, either your own or seeing them happen to others, can make a worker feel unvalued, unsafe, fearful, helpless, and unable to trust the world or the people around her. Without even being aware of how much it weighs on your mind, you can be affected by trauma from an accident for many years.

Often when injuries or even death occurs in a factory there are no opportunities created for people to work through their feelings. In the worst cases, management refuses to stop production to acknowledge that a problem occurred. Entire factories of workers have suffered mental health problems after a serious accident.

Exposure to toxic chemicals can also cause mental health problems. In cases like this, it is very difficult to separate the physical health problem from the mental health problem. Physical injuries or chronic conditions can also result in mental health problems, including chronic pain, side effects from medicines, and head injuries. These problems are often made worse when workers hide injuries for fear of reprisals or losing their jobs.

Moving to a new place

Export factories attract people across long distances with the promise of jobs and income. Young women in particular often move away from their families and communities in order to find work in factories. Sometimes factories plan on drawing workers from far away and build dormitories (shared living quarters) for workers near, or even on top of, the factories. Whether or not the factory provides housing, living away from your family, community, culture, and your accustomed rhythms of life can make you feel lonely and homesick.



Loneliness

It is often difficult to be away from the people you love and who care about you. It can be hard to meet other people and make new friends, especially if you come from different places and cultures than they do, and if you are tired from working long hours.

Group living situations

Conditions in many factory dormitories are often difficult. Whether in factory-provided dormitories or in shared rooms in crowded neighborhoods near factories, workers are often forced to live with people they may not know very well, with limited privacy. For people who before had only lived with their families, or come from rural areas where it was always possible to find a little space to be alone, this can be very stressful.

The owner does not allow air conditioning in our dormitories so we want to stay longer at the factory, where it is cooler.



This mental stress is often made worse when conditions are physically dangerous as well, such as through overcrowding, not enough exits, fire dangers, not enough washing or sanitary facilities, and unclean cafeterias and cooking or eating areas.

Our communities and families

When young people, especially young women, begin to work in factories, their lives and the traditional ways of their communities begin to change in ways that may be both good and bad. People begin to have a different relationship to the land and young people may “forget” how to farm.

New businesses may bring strangers, increased noise, traffic, crime, and pollution to a formerly rural area. Relationships within the family and respect for older community members may change, leading to stresses for workers as well as people who do not even work in the factories. When life changes so much that the old ways of coping do not work any more, people may begin to have mental health problems.

Other sets of changes may take place in families when suddenly the woman is working outside the home and the man may be earning less or staying closer to home and doing more of the family care. Sometimes these changes in gender roles can be good: women may gain more independence and men may learn to value the work of raising children and maintaining the family. But changes like that, especially when they are forced on people and not the result of their own choices and decisions, can also be harmful. And whether change is wanted or unwanted, change often brings added stress and pressure to family relationships.

Problems outside work

It is stressful when a family member is sick, a marriage is having difficulties, or a friend moves to a distant city. Employers make it even more stressful when they do not give workers enough time or energy to attend to problems outside the factory without fear of losing their jobs.



Common mental health problems

Although there are many kinds of mental health problems, the most common ones are anxiety, depression, and misuse of alcohol or drugs. Stress is not a mental health problem in itself. However, when we are not able to recover from stressful situations, stress builds up in our bodies and minds. When someone can no longer cope with the challenges they face because of the stress they are suffering, then stress has become a problem.

Most people have some signs of stress at different times in their lives, because everyone faces problems at one time or another. Signs of mental health problems can vary from community to community. Some behavior that looks strange to an outsider may be a normal part of a community's traditions or values. At the same time, behavior that seems normal to an outsider may be considered strange or abnormal in a community. Since many factories include management and workers from foreign countries and cultures, this is important to remember.



Stress

When a person experiences stress, the body gets ready to react quickly and fight off or run away from what is causing the stress. These are the same effects caused by fear. Some of the physical changes that occur are:

- the heart starts beating faster
- blood pressure goes up
- breathing speeds up
- the digestion slows down

If the stress or fear is sudden and severe, you may feel these changes in your body. Then, once the fears or stresses are gone, you will feel your body slowly return to normal. But when fear or stress is less strong, builds up slowly, or continues for a long time, you may not notice the changes that happen in your body because you have grown so accustomed to them.

Anxiety (feeling nervous or worried)

Everyone feels afraid, nervous, or worried from time to time. Usually you know what is causing the feelings and usually they go away soon. But if anxiety continues or becomes more severe, or if it comes without any reason, then it may be a mental health problem. Signs of anxiety include:

- feeling tense and nervous
- hands shaking
- constant sweating
- heart pounding
- difficulty thinking clearly
- frequent physical complaints that are not caused by physical illness and that increase when you are upset

A **panic attack** is a severe kind of anxiety. In addition to the signs above, you will begin taking quick and shallow breaths even without noticing, and feel terror or dread, a strong feeling that something terrible is about to happen, and maybe that you or a co-worker might get sick, have an accident, or die. A panic attack can happen suddenly and can last from several minutes to several hours.

To handle a panic attack, you must make a strong effort to regain control of your breath. Force yourself to take deep breaths. Breathe in as deeply as you can through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Do this for as long as it takes for you to feel like you have control over your breathing. If your friends and family are prepared and know what to do, they can support you.

Burnout

Stress or anxiety that continues for a long time and finally overwhelms a worker's ability to cope can lead to "burnout." Burnout combines feelings of mental and physical exhaustion with a sense of personal isolation. Some physical signs of burnout can be:

- headaches
- intestinal problems
- lack of energy
- high blood pressure
- difficulty sleeping
- low sexual desire, inability to enjoy sex
- difficulty remembering things
- various muscle and joint pains

Depression (extreme sadness or feeling nothing at all)

It is natural to feel sad at different times in our lives: when a friend or family member is very ill or dies, when you lose a job, or when a marriage or relationship ends. But depression becomes a mental health problem when any of these signs last for a long time:

- feeling sad most of the time
- sleeping too much or too little
- difficulty thinking clearly
- feeling like crying, or crying for no apparent reason
- loss of interest in pleasurable activities, eating, or sex
- physical problems such as headaches or intestinal problems that are not caused by illness
- slow speech and movement
- lack of energy for daily activities
- thinking about death or suicide

Some people can cope and heal from depression by talking about their problems with another person or support group. Some people also need medicine, called anti-depressants, to get better. Ask at your community health clinic for information, as these medicines may have side effects.

Sometimes depression can lead to other problems, including suicide (killing oneself). Many people might consider suicide when their problems seem bigger than any solution. However, if a person has a plan about how to kill herself, has lost the desire to live, or has tried suicide before, she is more at risk for suicide. She needs help immediately. To help, first try to talk with her. If talking about her problems does not help, or if you are afraid she might hurt herself, then she needs to be watched closely. Talk to her family and friends, but tell her you will be doing so before you do. Encourage someone to be with her at all times. Ask them to remove dangerous objects from her surroundings. If there is a trained mental health worker, find out how she can receive care.

Mental illness

People with mental illness need help from trained mental health workers. A few signs of mental illness are:

- hearing voices or seeing things that others do not
- not taking care of oneself
- behaving in strange ways that are not consistent with a person's cultural, social, or family beliefs or traditions

Illnesses, toxic chemicals, drugs, or injuries to the head and brain can cause similar signs, so it is important that someone who has these signs gets help as soon as possible. People who suffer from mental illness deserve to be treated with love, dignity, respect, and kindness.



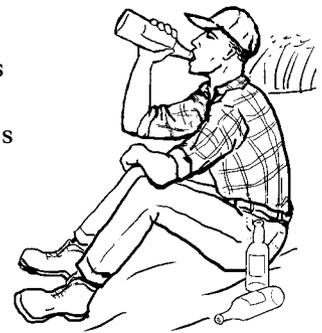
Health
Info

Alcohol and other drugs

Many kinds of drugs are used in religious rituals or social events, as medicines, or along with a meal. But when a person's life begins to revolve around consuming drugs, especially alcohol, those drugs can create physical and mental health problems, and make existing problems worse.

People misuse alcohol and other drugs to escape from problems, to reduce stress, or to not feel fear. In societies where workers have little ability to change the conditions of their lives, alcohol and other drugs seem to offer a way to feel better, at least temporarily. In some factories, workers are encouraged or even forced to take drugs that keep them awake. These drugs may be addictive, and it can be hard to stop taking them, even when you are not at work.

Unfortunately, drugs and alcohol usually make problems worse and leave us less able to improve our lives. Instead of working to improve bad situations, people who misuse drugs or alcohol spend their time, money, and health trying to avoid and forget their problems.



When does use become misuse?

People who are misusing drugs or alcohol often:

- feel they need a drink or a pill to get through the day or night.
- use it at unusual times, like the morning, or when they are alone.
- lie about or hide how much they use.
- have money problems because they spend so much on drugs or alcohol.
- become violent against their friends and families.
- endanger themselves or others by using drugs or alcohol at work.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is an organization that helps people stop drinking or taking drugs. There are AA groups in every country. To become a member of AA is free. A person needs only one thing: a desire to stop drinking or taking drugs.



Members meet regularly to share their experience with alcohol. Every member has a sponsor — a person who has stopped drinking for a period of time and who can give support and guidance.

There is also a group that supports the family and friends of alcoholics and drug addicts, called Al-Anon. These groups can give you the tools and support that you need to help family members who abuse alcohol.

Organizing to reduce stress in the factory

When you organize for higher pay, health benefits, or access to toilets or clean water, you are organizing to reduce the problems that cause stress. You can do a lot to reduce your feelings of stress, but it usually it takes a lot of workers together to pressure the management or the government to make the changes that eliminate the causes of stress. As a group, you can work to remove or reduce many of the causes of stress at work.

Reducing stress and improving conditions that affect workers' mental health will benefit everyone in the factory, including the boss. Workplaces where workers are respected, paid fairly, and treated well have fewer people missing work, a more committed workforce, and fewer conflicts that can interfere with work.

Unfortunately, many factory owners refuse to see that being organized and respected reduces workers' stress and improves conditions for work. They see any organizing as a threat to their power and profits. Management often responds to worker organizing with penalties, firings, and violence. This creates enormous amounts of stress for organizers, and fear for workers.

Only you and your co-workers can decide whether organizing around an issue would improve conditions in your workplace. The activities and ideas in chapter 3 can help you think about what might work best for you.

By organizing for:

Better wages and benefits	—————>	reduce stress.
Achievable production goals	—————>	improve self-esteem.
Safe working conditions	—————>	reduce accidents and injuries.
Labor and human rights	—————>	end abuse and fear.
A voice in your job and workplace	—————>	end powerlessness.

You can:

By promoting equality and community in the workplace, you help create a more positive situation for the mental health of all.

Reduce the stress of organizing

Organizing for change in a factory, whether it is forming a safety committee or building a union, takes time that workers usually use for rest and relaxation. Because of fear of reprisals from management, not all workers or community members will be in support of these efforts. But for many workers, being part of a struggle to improve things is less stressful than doing nothing.

- **Participate in committees:** One of the worst causes of stress is feeling that you have no input into or control over your work. As your committee discusses ways to improve working conditions, also introduce ideas for reducing stress.
- **Set up a personal support networks:** Get families, friends, and neighbors to share responsibilities for meals, childcare, and transportation. Knowing you can depend on others can keep you from feeling too stressed.
- **Work with people and groups in the community:** Approach churches, local organizations, and other unions and worker associations for moral support and solidarity. Knowing that others in your community support your efforts can keep you from feeling isolated.
- **Keep information flowing:** Make sure the people you are working with know what is happening and that their views are being heard. Valuing communication promotes participation and feelings of community.
- **Reduce tension at meetings:** People may be tired, worried, or upset. Making meetings participatory and productive can help people see that organizing will improve their lives and spirits.
- **Celebrate the small victories:** Don't forget to recognize peoples' work and successes along the way. Knowing that progress is being made can help keep people hopeful through a long process.
- **Have fun:** Laughing, singing, sports, and other ways of having a good time can reduce feelings of stress. Knowing that organizing can include enjoyable activities can both attract more people to the work and build closer and healthier ties among them.



Helping yourself and helping others

A person suffering from mental health problems can begin to feel better with treatment, support, and understanding. There are many things a worker can do on her own and with others.

- **Learn what causes stress for you and others:** It helps to talk to someone about our problems. Sometimes all we need is someone to listen to us compassionately, and maybe they also have ideas about what to do to resolve the problems. You can help others by listening to them, too.



- **Stretch during your breaks, and invite others to join you:** It is not always easy to find the time to breathe deeply or move around, but even a few minutes of stretching and deep breathing can help calm you and put you in a better position to deal with stress at work. In your free time, make an effort to do things you enjoy. Sing, play music, dance, or play sports during time off and during breaks at work. Exercise and moving your body are great ways to reduce stress. Involve other people.

- **Eat foods and use traditional medicines that help:** In many communities around the world, people use foods and traditional medicines to heal from mental health problems. Eating enough food and a variety of foods, particularly fruits and vegetables, provides nutrition needed to keep the body and mind healthy.



Although there are many remedies that can help us soothe and balance our bodies and minds, there are some that might do more harm than good. Be careful with remedies that are expensive or are sold as a miracle solution — these are often useless.

Tea from the tila plant is a natural way to calm anxiety.

- **Help each other make time:** Ask friends or family members to help with your chores or childcare so you can have a few moments to yourself, and offer to help with theirs in exchange. When you share chores with someone else, you can also take turns resting.
- **Talk and listen to each other:** Most factory work is planned so that each worker, although surrounded by people, is alone with her task.
- **Form a support group:** Bring people together to talk about problems and connect with others who might be experiencing similar things. Although it is easier for one person to lead the meetings, a good leader will give everybody a chance to talk about their situation and will also help keep the group on track (with time and topic). Before the group starts, talk about the rules of the group, what you hope to accomplish during the meeting, and how each person can participate and be a better listener.

Activity

Make time to relax

Spiritual practices such as yoga, meditation, or prayer can help to calm your mind and body as well as build inner strength.

This is an example of a relaxation exercise. You can do this alone or with a group. If you are in a group, ask someone to lead this session (make sure there is time for the leader to relax, too).

1. Find a place where you can sit or lie undisturbed for a few minutes. It is best if it is also a quiet place, but you can do this anywhere and at any time.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Take slow, deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. Feel your heartbeat slow.
4. You can pray, or repeat a positive word or phrase, or simply try to keep your mind blank.
5. Do this for a few minutes as often as you can.



There are lots of different ways to relax and to quiet the mind. Some people sing, some sit quietly, some exercise. You can do all of these things, too!

Close your eyes and imagine a safe, peaceful place where you would like to be at this moment or think about a word or phrase that makes you feel good about yourself.

Keep thinking about this place as you breathe deeply in through your nose and then out through your mouth.

Keep breathing, thinking about the safe place or a positive thought.

