



STRESS PREVENTION AT WORK CHECKPOINTS: PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENTS FOR STRESS PREVENTION IN THE WORKPLACE

ITENS DE VERIFICAÇÃO PARA PREVENÇÃO DE ESTRESSE NO TRABALHO: MELHORIAS PRÁTICAS PARA PREVENÇÃO DE ESTRESSE NO LOCAL DE TRABALHO

ÍTEMES DE VERIFICACIÓN PARA PREVENCIÓN DE ESTRÉS EN EL TRABAJO: MEJORAS PRÁCTICAS PARA PREVENCIÓN DE ESTRÉS EN EL LOCAL DE TRABAJO

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This work was developed by a group of experts from the International Labour Organization (ILO), who reviewed workplace stress issues and listed various stress factors in the workplace to prepare a checklist for identifying stressors. They emphasized that involvement on the part of workers and their superiors is essential for preventing stress and that using this checklist may be useful to “detect causes of stress at work and take effective measures to address them”.^{1:6}

Work-related stress is an important topic worldwide due to its many negative impacts on workers’ health, such as “circulatory and gastrointestinal diseases, other physical problems, psychosomatic and psychosocial problems, and low productivity”.^{1:6} Stress prevention is mandatory in all occupational areas.

According to some scholars, stress has many different concepts² and, despite the multiple causative factors, each person reacts in a peculiar way to the many labor stimuli, which, together, can cause organic instability. Thus, occupational stress may influence both personal and professional life.²

More than a guideline on stress, the illustrations from this work may also help as a guide for health care and safety practices at different workplaces, minimizing stress. It’s expected that this work complements the activities by ILO aimed at improving workplace conditions and preventing stress at work in many countries around the world.

There’re three main ways of using this

handbook: a) adaptation and application of checklist items to a specific work environment; b) use of written information; and c) organization of training workshops for planning and immediate implementation of changes in the work environment.

By applying such guidelines, one should select a certain number of items regarded as important for a particular workplace or prepare an adapted list with several items suitable for improvements. The selected points may be useful for training or “organizing trials at the work environments”, due to the fact that it helps the professionals to “look at workplaces from a new viewpoint and find areas for improvements”.^{1:10}

For preparing written information, one may use a limited number of items structured in a simple and uniform way. It’s useful to add items on the local conditions under study.

The third way is the organization of training workshops where the professionals can apply practical measures. There’re some useful suggestions, such as: using them to have a new perspective on labor conditions; organizing a discussion group to exchange ideas and generate improvements; finding good examples of local improvements which can encourage the group for immediate actions, among others.

One may either use the 50 items or create her/his own list containing those pertinent to the specific work environment (it’s advisable to adopt, in average, 20 to 30 items). The sequence could be: a) knowing the workplace;

b) defining the work area to be checked (conduct initial trials or discussion, write the results identified on the local reality, selecting priorities, and discussing the results with the group to take practical measures with regard of these benefits; c) communicating the manager and workers the proposed measures and the actions to be implemented to achieve the goals.

The checklist is filled in groups, allowing answers about the same point of interest. Workers may answer either yes or no, if they propose or not an action for that assertion, and they can also select if it's a priority, noting the proposed action.

The 50 checkpoints are distributed into 10 main measures, and each of them has 5 points of interest to be discussed with regard to the same stress prevention action which, perhaps, will be undertaken according to the professional group's needs.

The 10 main measures for stress prevention at workplace are described as follows.

Leadership and justice at work are important to stress prevention at work and the effective means of workplace action included in this group are checkpoints 1 to 5: communicating the policy and strategies for decent work; establishing procedures to prohibit discrimination; encouraging informal communication among managers and workers; protecting privacy; and addressing workplace problems promptly.

In order to prevent stress, excessive **Job demands** must be avoided at workplace. Those include checkpoints 6 to 10: adjusting the total workload; preventing excessive demands per worker; planning achievable deadlines; clearly defining tasks and responsibilities; and avoiding under-utilizing the capabilities of workers.

On the other hand, workers who are able to control their work "will enjoy working and be more productive".^{1:25} **Job control** consists on checkpoints 11 to 15, which include: engaging workers in decision-making about work organization; increasing workers' latitude and control over their work; organizing work so that new skills and knowledge are developed; encouraging the participation of workers in improving work; and organizing regular meetings to discuss workplace problems.

There're also measures which can provide practical and either formal or informal social support in the workplace. They're especially important because also improves coping skills. The **Social support** (checkpoints 16-20) consists of: close management-worker relations; mutual help among workers; the use

of external sources of assistance; organization of social activities; and provision of direct help when needed.

It's important to provide a safe, healthy and comfortable environment for workers. This can be "achieved by assessing and controlling environmental risks with the active participation of workers".^{1:49} Some measures are particularly important for preventing stress related to the **Physical environment** (checkpoints 21 to 25): establish clear procedures for risk assessment and control; provide a comfortable working environment; eliminate or reduce hazards at their source; provide clean, refreshing rest facilities; and establish emergency procedures and response plans.

Long working hours, irregular shift systems, adequacy of holidays, maternity leave, and breaks are some work-related stressors. **Work-life balance and working-time** must reflect both the enterprise and workers' needs (checkpoints 26 to 30): involving workers in the design of working hours; accommodating the needs of both the work and the workers; avoiding excessively long working hours; facilitating the maintenance of family responsibilities; and adjusting breaks and rest time.

Another important aspect of stress prevention has been recognized by work performance through the good work one can make. Practical measures in **Recognition at work** include checkpoints 31 to 35: praising good work by the workers; systematically informing workers of the consequences of their work; implementing a system for workers to express their opinions; treating women and men equally; and providing good career prospects.

There're some common offensive behaviours which can be prevented, such as: bullying, mobbing, sexual harassment, threats, and violence. The checkpoints 36 to 40, about **Protection from offensive behaviour** at work, are: establishing an organizational framework concerning offensive behaviour; organizing training and raising awareness; establishing procedures and action models; providing rapid intervention to help those involved; and organizing working areas so as to protect workers from offensive behaviour.

It's also emphasized that, among others factors, stability is important for reducing stress at work. Thus, some measures about **Job security** are listed in the checkpoints 41 to 45: increasing the possibility of stable employment; clear statement of employment conditions; regular wages and benefits;

ensuring fair parental leave; and protecting the rights of workers and their representatives.

At last, everyone benefits from **Information and communication** at workplace. Workers “play an active role in achieving mutually agreed goals”^{1:109} when informed about important decisions. Open communication is facilitated by checkpoints 46 to 50: going to the workplace and talking with workers; maintaining daily and easy communication between supervisors and workers; informing workers of important decisions; informing top management of workers’ opinions; and giving workers any plans to bring about change.

There’s an interesting explanation about the importance of each checkpoint in all groups. For instance, the first group, **Leadership and justice at work**, consists of five checkpoints. The first one is “develop and communicate the workplace policy and strategies for stress prevention at work”.^{1:18} There’s an explanation about “why” stress at work could be related to this item (working conditions and organization). It’s informed “how” to deal with this checkpoint if it’s a priority at workplace, such as workplace policy, achieving a decent work, involving managers on such a process, and set concrete goals for a certain period of time.

At the end of the explanation of each checkpoint, there’re some more hints and points to remember about such an item, and some pictures to illustrate better and maybe to be showed to workers, if needed.

Human being relationship, mainly at workplace, is a difficult matter to address. Anyway this handbook offers some easy and good directions that have to be read and experienced in practice by occupational health members around the world as one of the effective manners of preventing stress at workplace.

The ILO director also requests information and feedback about its trial application experience, in different countries and industries, so that these checkpoints may help further improvement and revision of this work.

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