

Workplace stress & alcohol and drug use

What is stress?

Stress is a physical, mental, and emotional response to environmental demands and/or threats. It can arise from personal, work, family or social circumstances (e.g., grief, loss, trauma, violence or poverty).

At low levels, stress can be beneficial. It increases alertness and focus, and can improve performance. It activates the **fright, flight or fight** response. If stress is prolonged or excessive, it can be harmful and lead to:

1. chronic physical and mental health problems
2. increased alcohol and drug use.



Factors that contribute to workplace stress

Workplace stress occurs when workers feel they do not have the physical, mental, financial, material, and/or timing resources and supports required to meet workplace demands. Stress may be caused by difficult work conditions, demands or relationships.

Working conditions	Work demands	Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Physical characteristics of the workplace (e.g., temperature, noise, crowding, vibrations) ■ Inadequate resources to work safely and efficiently ■ Shift work and changing rosters ■ Travel and long commutes ■ Excessively long shifts ■ Inadequate recovery time between shifts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Unrealistic workloads ■ Lack of role clarity ■ Limited control over work ■ Repetitive work ■ Deadline pressure ■ Job insecurity ■ Low levels of recognition and reward ■ Inadequate training and support ■ Organisational change ■ Working long hours, taking work home ■ Prolonged or intense mental or physical activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Unfair treatment (e.g., bullying, harassment, underpaying, playing favourites, overloading with work, denying opportunities) ■ Culture of blame ■ Conflict with managers, supervisors or co-workers ■ Lack of, or poor communication between manager and workers ■ Strained working relationships ■ Discrimination ■ Limited support by managers and co-workers.



Workplace stress and alcohol and drug use relationships

Workers exposed to long and/or excessive periods of workplace stress are at greater risk of experiencing:

1. anxiety and depression
2. heart disease, high blood pressure, and weakened immune systems
3. fatigue
4. injury and accidents
5. risky alcohol and/or drug use and its associated financial, social, physical and mental harms.

There is a complex relationship between chronic stress and alcohol and/or drug use.

Workers may:

- require prescription medicine to overcome the physical and mental illnesses associated with chronic stress
- experience a temporary release from work and life pressures and/or physical and mental pain through the use of alcohol or drugs.



Workplace Stress Indicators

High rates of:

- absenteeism
- staff turnover
- accidents and injuries
- worker compensation claims
- conflict between management and staff, and co-workers
- bullying allegations.

Low:

- productivity and efficiency
- job satisfaction, morale and team cohesion
- quality of relationships
- client satisfaction (e.g., with customer service).

Individual Stress Indicators

- Fatigue
- Headaches and muscular tension
- Mood swings
- Drop in work performance
- Sleep disturbances
- Stomach upsets and indigestion
- Memory problems
- Feeling frustrated, irritable, angry or worried.



Using alcohol or drugs does not reduce the amount or severity of stress and pain in someone's life. Rather, long-term reliance on alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism can exacerbate existing problems or cause new ones, such as a substance use disorder.



Alcohol

Alcohol can contribute to:

- depression and/or an alcohol-related mental health disorder
- increased risk of self-harm and suicide
- poorer outcomes for people with existing mental health conditions.



Cannabis

Ongoing and regular cannabis use can contribute to the development of mental health symptoms or worsen an existing mental health condition.

Cannabis has been linked to several mental health conditions including:

- panic attacks
- depression and anxiety
- psychotic episodes
- schizophrenia.



Methamphetamine

Workers may use methamphetamine to help them work harder and longer and counteract stress and/or fatigue. However, several mental health symptoms may be experienced during the intoxication and/or 'come down' and 'crash' phase.

Mental health effects include:

- mood swings and panic attacks
- anxiety and depression
- paranoia and hallucinations
- loss of enjoyment in usual activities
- difficulty sleeping.

Regular methamphetamine use can cause:

- 'ice psychosis' which can result in aggressive or violent behaviour
- social, work and financial problems.



Cocaine

Cocaine has similar effects as methamphetamine. Workers may use cocaine for the same reasons they use methamphetamine. That is, to help them work harder and longer and to counteract stress and/or fatigue.

In addition, cocaine may be viewed as more desirable than methamphetamine as it is often seen as a celebrity party drug.



Heroin

Workers may use heroin and/or other opioids to improve mood and/or reduce pain. While heroin's immediate effects include euphoria, pain relief, and drowsiness, regular and ongoing use:

1. is linked to depression
2. can worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety
3. can increase suicide risk
4. can lead to heart and blood vessel disease.

Heroin can also mask symptoms of psychosis and reduce the effectiveness of psychiatric medication.



Prescription and over-the-counter medicine

Medicines can impact stress in various ways. Workers may be prescribed medicine for mental health issues and/or physical ailments.

However, some medications can worsen feelings of stress if taken with other drugs and/or alcohol. Medicine should always be taken on the advice of a doctor, chemist, and as directed on the pack.

Resources and handouts are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/external-site-resources>.

References are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/references>.