

Steward News...

a publication for CUPE Activists in Alberta

Spring/Summer 2003

In this issue:

STRESS AWARENESS FOR STEWARDS

Reducing the Stress of Stewards & Union Activists

Stewards and Union Activists are CUPE's frontline

Stewards and union activists help members deal with workplace problems. Stewards play many roles: grievance handlers, organizers, educators, leaders and communicators. With these roles come responsibilities and lots of extra work. All this extra work can lead to stress on stewards and union activists.

What is Stress?

Stress is a physical response to a demand on the body. The demands or strains are called stressors. Stress isn't supposed to be a problem. In normal circumstances it is a powerful response that allows people to deal with sudden dangers. The stress cycle is:

1. a demand or danger, like running for a bus, public speaking, or handling a grievance;
2. removal of the demand or danger, like catching the bus, finishing the speech or settling the grievance;
3. state of relaxation – return to normal.

This is called normal stress – it came, it went, you relaxed. Normal stress may be good for us by strengthening and focusing our energies.

When we talk about stress, we really mean distress or chronic stress. Distress is caused when:

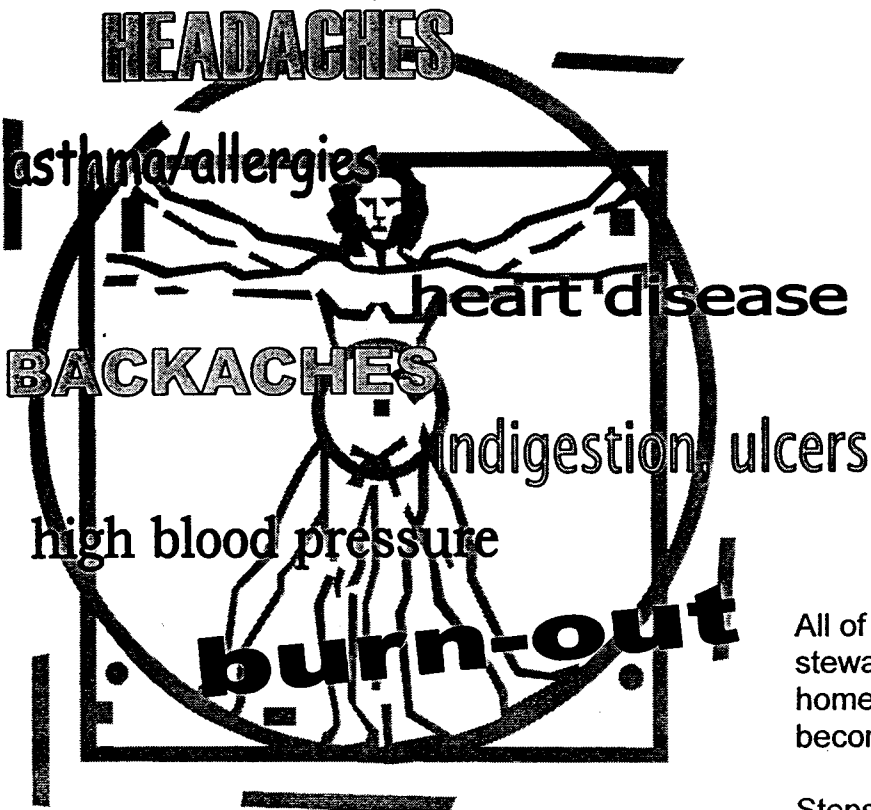
1. there is danger or facing a demand that doesn't stop;
2. having no way of dealing with it, and
3. never relaxing.



CUPE
On the frontline

Canadian Union of Public Employees – Alberta Division

Chronic Stress (Distress) can lead to:



Stewards can face a large range of demands or stressors. For example:

- being on the “front line” with:
 - the membership
 - management;
- filing grievances;
- dealing with members’ anxiety and frustration;
- trying to get members involved in union activities;
- too much union work and not enough people to do it;
- giving up breaks and lunch time to do union business;
- not spending as much time at home.

All of the above is on top of the demands on stewards to do their daily job and try to have a home life. The result is that many stewards will become possible “burn-out” victims.

Steps need to be taken to develop healthy coping mechanisms, generate more member involvement and utilize more creative approaches in communicating within the union.

Steward’s Stress

Researchers have shown that high stress is linked to three important aspects of how work is organized.

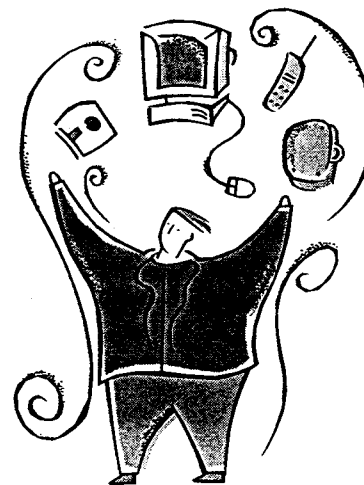
- High demand
- Low support
- Little control

Much of the steward’s life is determined by events outside his or her *control*. There may also be a *high demand* on the steward’s time and energy and *little support* for the work they do.



Reducing Stewards'/Union Activists' Stress

1. **Be informed.**
 - Know your contract.
 - Know your rights.
 - Know what is going on in the union.
 - Know what is happening in your workplace.
 - Know where to find the answers you don't have.
 - Know what resources are available.
2. **Get support from your local.**
 - Create a support network.
 - Meet together as stewards regularly.
 - Talk about the problems you face as a steward.
 - Talk over difficult grievances.
 - Learn to ask for help.
 - Develop a communication network.
 - Develop a Stress Committee within the union.
 - Make sure you are trained to do your job.
 - Don't get isolated.
3. **Develop your base with the members.**
 - Know the members you are responsible for.
 - Ask them if things are okay - find out what's bothering them.
 - Don't wait for them to come to you.
 - Remind members of meetings.
 - Keep members informed on the status of their grievances.
 - Let them know why it is taking a long time.
 - Introduce yourself to new members.
4. **Be proud of being a steward.**
 - Remember why you became a steward.
 - Remember why you are involved in your local.
 - Wear something that shows you are proud of your local.
 - Learn about the history of the labour movement.
 - Remember who your allies are and what you're fighting for.
5. **Pay attention to yourself.**
 - Learn relaxation techniques and use them.
 - Watch your nutrition.
 - Do some regular exercise.
 - Learn your own stress signals and listen to them.
 - Learn to say no when you have to.
 - Schedule family and social time and keep it.
 - Don't offer to do things you really won't be able to do.
 - Let people know when things are getting to be too much.
 - Don't say things are OK when they aren't.



Union Programs to Deal with Workplace Stress

Workplace stress is on the rise. In a Statistics Canada 2000 survey, 34 percent of working Canadians cited too many demands or hours as the most common source of workplace stress. CUPE has challenged the stressful conditions faced by our members in a variety of ways. Some of these strategies are:

1. **educating the membership** – contact your National Representative or Education Representative to find out more on stress workshops for CUPE members;
2. **collective bargaining demands** – negotiating joint health and safety committees to investigate overwork, staffing levels and limits on job descriptions;
3. **legislative and political action** – lobby the Alberta Government to develop and enact preventative legislation to address overwork;
4. **grievance and arbitrations** – use of grievances to protect workers from stress-related disciplinary action;
5. **stress surveys** – to document the link between working conditions and negative health effects.

More information on the above strategies is available from your National Representative.

An excellent resource is CUPE's Health and Safety Guideline: Enough Overwork: Taking Action on Workload available from your National Representative or online at www.cupe.ca



Union Education for Stewards

Here are a few examples of workshops for stewards:

Stress in the Workplace
Violence in the Workplace
Effective Stewarding
Advanced Stewarding
Understanding Diversity
Conflict Resolution

Check the CUPE Alberta website, www.cupealberta.ab.ca for these and other workshops.

If you have questions, comments, ideas regarding workshops and/or upcoming issues of Steward News, please contact:

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