

MINISTRY OF HUMAN RESOURCES MALAYSIA

**GUIDANCE FOR THE PREVENTION OF
STRESS AND VIOLENCE AT THE
WORKPLACE**

By

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FOREWORD

Contemporary community awareness and concern about the issue of stress and violence at work have been magnified to a significant degree by more and more attention given in the media to several dramatic and sometimes tragic workplace incidents perpetrated by disturbed individuals. The problems of stress and violence at work are slowly but surely emerging as a new challenge requiring the attention and resources of employers and managers. Taken together stress and violence could be responsible for a great number of occupational accidents and diseases leading to death, illness and incapacity. In many countries the related problems have been shown to affect all sectors and all categories of employees.

There is considerable cost for the individual employee relating to these problems in terms of physical and mental health problems, employment implications and the risk of job loss. For the enterprises, these problems result in direct costs, such as increased absenteeism, staff turnover, reduced productivity, training and retraining, as well as in indirect costs, such as reduced motivation, satisfaction and creativity and public relations problems. Their overall impact greatly reduces the competitiveness of the enterprise. What is known probably represents only the tip of the iceberg. The costs relating to these problems are only beginning to be understood and quantified.

There are three basic questions that need to be answered. What is the nature of stress and violence at work? Does work stress and violence affect health and well-being and, if so how? What can be done to eliminate or reduce these problems? This Guidance on the Prevention of Stress and Violence at Work has been prepared to answer these questions. Employers, employees and their respective organisations are encouraged to use this guidance, implement and continually refine their actions and programmes to eliminate and control the problems of stress and violence at work.

This guidance will be reviewed from time to time. Everyone is welcome to respond with feedback to the Department in writing with a view to making the guidance more comprehensive and up to date with the state of knowledge.

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1. SCOPE

Violence and stress are new major threats to societies and enterprises. Their cost in terms of disruption, bad image, absenteeism, turnover, accidents at work, burnout and compensation are increasingly becoming apparent. Most important, these threats negatively affect the overall capacity of organisations to perform and be competitive. The problem affects practically all sectors and all categories of workers. Eliminating the above threats is therefore a priority target for entrepreneurs, managers, employees and policy makers.

This Guidance is designed to offer an integrated workplace response to the problems of violence and stress that often manifest themselves together at the workplace. The Guidance also introduces an innovative approach whereby workers' health, safety and well-being become integral parts of the economic sustainability and organizational development of enterprises. By directly linking health and safety issues with managerial and developmental issues the guidance offers the tools for immediate, self-sustained action at the workplace to reduce and eliminate the above problems.

1.1 DEFINITION

STRESS

The physical and emotional response that occurs when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the employee.

Positive and negative stress

Under normal circumstances employees should be able, by activating their reaction mechanisms, to find new balances and responses to new situations. Stress is, therefore, not necessarily a negative phenomenon. It would be a mistake to concentrate only on the pathological aspect of stress without emphasizing its importance in the search for dynamic adaptation to a given situation. If health is considered as a dynamic equilibrium, stress is part of it for there is no health without interaction with other people and with the environment. Only excesses are pathological.

Some stress, therefore, is normal and necessary. But if stress is intense, continuous or repeated, if the person is unable to cope or if support is lacking, then stress becomes a negative phenomenon leading to physical illness and psychological disorders. From early disorders to real illness, the harmful consequences of stress cover a broad range from chronic fatigue to depression, by way of insomnia, anxiety, migraines, emotional upsets, stomach ulcers, allergies, skin disorders, lumbago and rheumatic attacks and can culminate in the most serious consequences of all: heart attacks, accidents and even suicides.

VIOLENCE

Incidents where employees are abused, threatened, assaulted or subject to other offensive behaviour in circumstances related to their work.

Physical violence and psychological violence

While the existence of physical violence at the workplace has been always recognized, the existence of psychological violence has been long under-estimated and only now receives due attention. Psychological violence is currently emerging as a priority concern at the workplace.

It is also increasingly recognized that psychological violence is often perpetrated through repeated behaviour, of a type which by itself may be relatively minor but which cumulatively can become a very serious form of violence. Although a single incident can suffice, psychological violence often consists of repeated, unwelcome, unreciprocated and imposed action which may have a devastating effect on the victim.

Physical and psychological violence often overlap in practice making any attempt to categorize different forms of violence very difficult. Some of the most frequently used terms related to violence are presented in the following list.

<i>Assault/Attack</i>	Attempt at physical injury or attack on a person leading to actual physical harm. It includes beating, kicking, slapping, stabbing, shooting, biting, sexual assault and rape, among others
<i>Threat</i>	Promised use of unlawful force resulting in fear of physical, sexual, psychological harm or other negative consequences to the victim(s)
<i>Abuse</i>	Behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct and involves the misuse of physical and psychological strength. <i>It includes harassment, bullying and mobbing</i>
<i>Harassment</i>	Unwanted conduct - verbal, non verbal, visual, psychological or physical - based on age, disability, HIV status, domestic circumstances, sex, sexual orientation, race, colour, language, religion, political, trade union or other opinion or belief, national or social origin, association with a minority, birth or other status that negatively affects the dignity of men and women at work <i>It includes sexual harassment</i>
<i>Sexual harassment</i>	Unwanted conduct of a sexual nature that is perceived by the victim as placing a condition of sexual nature on her/his employment, or that might, on reasonable grounds, be perceived by the victim(s) as an offence or humiliation or a threat to his/her well-being
<i>Bullying/ Mobbing</i>	A form of psychological harassment consisting in persecutory behaviour through vindictive, cruel, or malicious attempts to humiliate or undermine an individual or groups of employees, including unjustified, constant negative remarks or criticisms, isolating a person from social contacts and gossiping or spreading false information

1.2. LINKAGE

Special consideration should be given to the fact that stress and violence are closely interrelated. Violence is a main generator of violence while stress generates anxiety, tension, irritability and, in the worst cases, desperation that in turn may lead to violence. When stress and violence combine at the workplace, and they often do, their negative effects cumulate in an exponential way and activate a vicious circle very difficult to disentangle. It is therefore important to tackle stress and violence together and, since the means to reduce or eliminate them are largely the same, this is also the most cost-effective way of action

1.3. GENDER

The gender dimension should be given special consideration when tackling stress and violence at the workplace.

Stress at work affects both men and women. However, women are often faced with the additional burden of combining family and work responsibilities. Due to occupational segregation, women often find themselves in jobs where there is a heavy workload combined with little decision-making autonomy and participation. These two factors result in women often having to deal with more stressful situations than men. At work, women are also at particular risk of violence because they are concentrated in many of the high-risk jobs such as teaching, socialwork, nursing and other health-care, as well as in banks and shops. In general, men tend to be at greater risk of physical assault, while women are particularly vulnerable to incidents of a sexual nature such as harassment

2. APPROACH

Stress and violence at work are not isolated, individual problems but structural, strategic issues rooted in wider social, economic, organisational and cultural factors. The response therefore needs to be directed at the causes rather than the effects of violence at work. It should concentrate on the adoption of *preventive, systematic and participative interventions*.

2.1 PREVENTION

In the past, stress and violence have often been approached as problems to be tackled, once manifested, with remedial, occasional and often palliative interventions. The emerging approach focuses, instead, on a pro-active response to stress and violence with emphasis on prevention, the elimination of the causes of stress and violence, rather than on the treatment of its effects, and a long-term appreciation of each intervention.

Attention is consequently shifting from the consideration of stress and violence as a merely personal problem to the key role of the workplace to create or diffuse stress and violence. If, because of stress and violence, the working environment - *the shoe* - does not fit the employee - *the foot* - one can either act on the foot by forcing it into the wrong shoe, obliging the employee to perform in unhealthy, dangerous conditions with negative effects on his/her motivation, commitment and performance, and eventually the entire organisation's efficiency; or one can act to make shoe and foot matching each other either by changing the shoe - improving as far as possible, the conditions of work; or by finding the right shoe for each individual foot - putting the right person at the right place; or by allowing the owner of each foot to adjust available shoes to match his/her own foot - encouraging responsible employees to make reasonable adjustments to their working environment to improve the job-employee fit.

Whatever the preventive approach used, prevention is certainly the most effective way to tackle effectively stress and violence. " *An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*" (L. Levi, *Preventing work stress*, Addison- Wesley, Reading, Massachusetts, 1981)

2.2 PARTICIPATION

A participatory approach means that all parties concerned consider it worthwhile to work together in reducing work- related stress and violence and that such parties have an active role in designing and implementing anti-stress and anti-violence initiatives. For a participatory process to occur, it is important to:

- create the trust necessary for open communication. It is particularly important to clarify, especially among low-status employees, that employees who share openly about their feelings of occupational stress and violence, and their ideas for changes in the work environment, are not only protected from reprisals but valued for their positive contribution by the management;
- adopt a consultative approach by involving the trade unions. The involvement of trade unions can contribute to generate awareness and sensitivity on the issues of stress and violence at the workplace and pave the way for a stronger commitment by the employees to accept and comply with in-house initiatives to combat stress and violence at the workplace;
- activate joint employee-management operational bodies and programmes to combat stress and violence at the workplace.

2.3 A STEP-WISE APPROACH

It is essential that anti-stress and violence action be carried on in a systematic way by a series of fundamental steps. These include:

- stress recognition;
- stress assessment;
- anti-stress intervention;
- monitoring and evaluation.

3. STRESS AND VIOLENCE RECOGNITION

The importance of early recognition of pre-conditions and signals of stress and violence needs to be emphasised since it allows to intervene before stress becomes a major problem or violence manifests itself. Even though each pre-condition and signal may be due to other factors, their combined occurrence at once may require the need to take anti-stress, anti-violence action. The following should be considered:

At the individual level

Stress:

- dry throat, muscle tension, headaches, indigestion, tics, insomnia, high blood pressure;
- irritability, impulsive behaviour, difficulty in making decisions, sudden increase in smoking or alcohol use;
- excessive worrying, feeling of worthlessness, brooding, forgetfulness, easily startled, daydreaming, etc.

Violence:

- Perpetrator: a history of violence; being male; being young; having a troubled childhood; substance abuse; certain forms of severe mental illness; and being in a situation conducive to violence, including having access to firearms;
- Victim: being young and inexperienced; being woman; “showing” a personality, temperament, attitudes and appearance that “trigger” violence by the perpetrator.

While the above features deserve consideration, it should be borne in mind that violence is always difficult to predict and that, since both the perpetrators and the victim vary widely in age, sex, race and background, it is important to avoid stereotyping, which can lead to discrimination.

At the workplace level

For both stress and violence

High levels of absenteeism, staff turnover, work accidents (including minor accidents) and disabilities are often linked with stressful and violent situations. Low productivity levels, poor quality production, frequent breakdowns and difficult inter-personal relationships in the workplace may also be associated with stress and violence.

4. STRESS AND VIOLENCE ASSESSMENT

One of the first steps when considering the prevention of work-related stress and violence is an assessment or diagnosis of the relevant hazards and situations at risk. This is often carried out through a stress or violence *audit*.

Each audit needs to be carefully adapted to the situation in the individual company or organization, and its various branches or departments. It may be a relatively formal process, or alternatively can be more informal and smaller in scale. In all cases, care should be taken in establishing the aims and objectives of the audit and in identifying a survey sample which is representative of the workforce and sufficiently large to make the survey findings meaningful. After the results of the audit have been analysed, it is very important to ensure that its results are made known to those who have taken part in the survey, as well as the workforce as a whole.

The following checklists may be useful in conducting the audit.

Checklist of stressors

Work characteristic	Stressors	Absent/Low or Present/Medium or Obvious/Severe (please specify)
Organizational function and culture	Poor communications Organization as poor task environment Poor problem-solving environment Poor development environment	
Participation	Low participation in decision-making	
Career development and job status	Career uncertainty Career stagnation Poor status work Work of low social value Poor pay Job insecurity or redundancy	

Role in organization	Role ambiguity: not clear on role Role conflict Responsibility for others or continual contact with other people	
Job content	Ill-defined work High uncertainty Lack of variety Fragmented work Meaningless work Under-utilization of skills Physical constraint	
Workload and work pace	Work overload Work underload High levels of pacing Lack of control over pacing Time pressure and deadlines	
Working time	Inflexible work schedule Unpredictable hours Long hours or unsocial hours Shift/Night working	
Interpersonal relationships at work	Social or physical isolation Lack of social support from other staff Conflict with other staff Violence Poor relationships with supervisors and managers	
Home-work interface	Conflicting demands of work and home Low social or practical support from home Dual career problems	
Preparation and training	Inadequate preparation for dealing with more difficult aspects of job Concern about technical knowledge and skill	
Other problems	Lack of resources and staff shortages Poor work environment (lighting, noise, bad postures)	

From: T. Cox and A. Griffith: Manual on Occupational Stress in Nursing, ILO (1994).

Checklist of situations at risk of violence

Although both white and blue-collar workers suffer from stress and violence and all occupations somehow affected by stress and violence, there are a number of situations at special risk that is important to bear in mind in addressing these issues.

Situations at risk	Absent/Low or Present/Medium or Obvious/Severe (please specify)
<p><i>Working alone</i></p> <p>Workers working alone in small shops, gas stations and kiosks, as well as cleaners, maintenance or repair staff and others who work alone outside normal hours are at special risk of suffering physical and sexual attacks. Of lone workers, taxi drivers in many places are at the greatest risk of violence.</p>	
<p><i>Working in contact with the public</i></p> <p>A wide variety of occupations, particularly in the service and transport sector, and numerous working situations involve contact with the public. While in most circumstances this type of work does not generate special problems, there are cases where exposure to the public can create a higher risk of violence.</p> <p>-----</p> <p><i>Working with valuables and cash handling</i></p> <p>Whenever valuables are, or seem to be, within “easy reach” there is a risk that crime, and increasingly violent crime, may be committed. Workers in many sectors are exposed to such a risk. At special risk are workers in shops, post offices and financial institutions, and particularly those who handle cash.</p>	
<p><i>Working with people in distress</i></p> <p>Violence is so common among workers in contact with people in distress that it is often considered an inevitable part of the job. Health care workers are at the forefront of this situation. Frustration and anger arising out of illness and pain, old-age problems, psychiatric disorders, alcohol and substance abuse can affect behaviour and make people verbally or physically violent.</p>	

<p><i>Working in an environment increasingly “open” to violence</i></p> <p>Working environments which traditionally have been quite immune from violence are becoming progressively affected. Violence in school is part of this trend</p>	
<p><i>Working in conditions of special vulnerability</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing numbers of workers are becoming involved in occasional and precarious employment, exposed to the risk of poor working conditions, downsizing and job loss as well as of violence • Immigrant workers and people of different ethnic origin experience a disproportionate share of violent incidents. • Workers in rural areas and miners may also experience high levels of violence. • The most vulnerable group of all, children, are often exposed to physical and mental abuse. 	

From: D. Chappell and V. Di Martino, Violence at Work, ILO, 2000

5. ANTI-STRESS AND VIOLENCE INTERVENTION

Once the existence of stress has been recognised and the stressors identified, action to deal with stress should be taken. Wide-ranging types of interventions may be considered, leaving the choice of the most effective combination to the specific features of the particular work situation.

It is essential that action be undertaken at different levels:

- *at the primary level*, action is needed to identify and address problems at the level of the organization and the environment, with a view to preventing stress and violence at work;
- *at the secondary level*, interventions can be developed to help individual employees or groups of employees coping with stress and violence; and
- *at the tertiary level*, assistance can be provided to employees to help cure the symptoms of stress and to workers who have been subject to violence to recover from it.

5.1 *PRE-CONDITIONS*

- **Developing a “quality” workplace culture**

Great attention should be given to the general culture of the workplace. An “open” working environment, where dialogue and communication are extensively exercised, may help defuse the risks of stress and violence. In contrast, a "closed" authoritarian working environment where people work in isolation, with mutual suspicion and defensive attitudes towards external people, may increase the risk of stress and violence.

An organisational culture based on tolerance, equal opportunities and cooperation can also contribute to the establishment of a working climate where violence and stress have little play. In contrast, if discrimination and segregation are explicitly or implicitly part of the culture of the organisation, this can be reflected in all behaviours and relationships, both internally and with the outside world.

In the service sector, the decentralization of services and responsibilities at a local level may help employees to become more aware of local issues and better respond to the needs of the customers, as well as to forecast difficult situations which might generate stress or degenerate into violence. This would be quite difficult to achieve within a centralized, de-personalized organization where relationships are highly formalized.

The following organisational features may help identifying the existence of a “quality” workplace culture:

- the organisation shares goals with its staff;
- the organisation encourages problem-sharing and group problem solving;
- the organisation provides an environment where the efforts of the staff are recognized, feedback given and opportunities created for personal and professional development;
- there is a strong and supportive social environment.

- **Issuing a clear policy statement**

As part of a “quality “ workplace culture, a clear policy statement of intent should be issued from the top management to recognize the importance of the fight against stress and violence at work.

The statement should contain at least the following matters:

- a declaration indicating a real commitment to make the issue of stress and violence a real priority in the organisation;

- a caution stating that no violent behaviour or behaviour intentionally generating stress will be tolerated ;
- an engagement in support of any action targeted at creating a stress and violence- free environment;
- a directive stating that supervisors and managers have a positive duty to implement the policy and to demonstrate leadership by example.

- **Raising awareness**

It is essential that the policy statement is accompanied by initiatives to raise awareness among the management, supervisors and staff of the deleterious effects of stress and violence and of the advantages of undertaking immediate action to eliminate or reduce stress and violence from the workplace. The following implications should be clearly highlighted :

For the individual:

Negative stress activates a variety of physical and emotional symptoms that can lead to serious diseases if the situation lasts. Suffering and humiliation resulting from violence usually lead to lack of motivation, loss of confidence and reduced self-esteem. As with stress, if the causes of violence are not eliminated or its impact contained by adequate intervention, these symptoms are likely to develop into physical illness, psychological disorders, or tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse.

At the workplace:

Stress and violence cause immediate, and often long-term disruption to interpersonal relationships, the organisation of work and the overall working environment. Employers bear the direct cost of lost work and more expensive security measures. They are also likely to bear the indirect cost of reduced efficiency and productivity, the deterioration of product quality, loss in company image and a reduction in the number of clients.

In the community:

Stress may eventually result in unemployment, psychological and physical problems that strongly influence an individual's social position. The costs of violence include health care and long-term rehabilitation costs for the reintegration of victims, unemployment and retraining costs for victims who lose their jobs as a result of such violence, and disability and invalidity costs where the working capacities of the victims are impaired by violence at work.

- **Enhancing information and communication**

Circulation of information and open communication can greatly reduce the risk of stress and violence at work by defusing tension and frustration among workers. They are of particular importance in removing the taboo of silence which often surrounds cases of sexual harassment, mobbing and bullying.

The following should be encouraged:

- information sessions;
- personnel meetings;
- office meetings;
- group discussions and
- team working

In the service sector, particularly for employees in contact with the public, effective communication can do much to prevent stress and violence. In the case of hospitals, the provision of information to patients, their friends and relatives is crucial in lessening the risk of assault. This is particularly the case in situations involving distress and long waiting periods, as often occurs in accident and emergency departments. Even the usually well-balanced individual may be apprehensive and anxious about unfamiliar surroundings and procedures. In such situations, people are less worried when they have sufficient information to reduce uncertainty.

It is also recommended that staff are informed in the best way possible to cope with stress and aggression, by providing guidelines and staff development programmes, devoted particularly to these issues. Assistance from supervisors and other employees should be available if a client or member of the public becomes aggressive or physically violent. Mutual support among the staff members should be emphasized.

5.2 ENVIRONMENTAL INTERVENTION

- **Improving the general environment**

The physical features of a workplace can be a factor in either defusing or acting as a potential trigger for stress and violence. Special attention should be therefore given to the level and ways in which employees are exposed to the following factors and to the adoption of adequate solutions, in line with existing regulations, to reduce or eliminate any negative impact:

- noise
- odours
- illumination
- temperature
- humidity
- ventilation
- dust
- vibrations
- dangerous substances

The Occupational Safety and Health Act, 1994, Section 15, contemplates a general duty for the employer to provide a safe and healthy workplace and secure the welfare of employees. Providing a safe and healthy workplace includes ensuring that there is no negative impact from the factors listed above.

In the specific context of possible violence and aggression in the workplace, especially those open to the public, the design of workplaces requires special attention and involves the following additional factors:

- crowding
- comfort of seating which is crucial especially where waiting is involved
- comfort and size of waiting rooms
- toilet facilities
- controlled entrances
- alarms
- security guards
- protective barriers
- surveillance cameras and
- systems to alert other employees that urgent help is needed.

◦ **Improving the workstation design**

The design of the workstation is of fundamental importance in providing employees with comfortable working conditions and thus contributing to the alleviation or elimination of stress and violence at the workplace. It is recommended to use the following checklists to identify relevant aspects in the arrangements of workplaces and of work seating.

Guidelines for the arrangements of workplaces

1. The worker should be able to maintain an upright and forward-facing posture during work
2. Where vision is a requirement of the task, the necessary work points must be adequately visible with the head and trunk upright
3. All work activities should permit the worker to adopt several different, but equally healthy and safe, postures without reducing capability to do the work
4. Work should be arranged so that it may be done, at the worker's choice, in either a seated or standing position
5. The weight of the body, when standing, should be carried equally on both feet
6. Work activities should be performed with the joints at about the mid-point of their range of movement
7. Where muscular force has to be exerted, it should be by the largest appropriate muscle groups
8. Work should not be performed consistently at or above the level of the hearth
9. Where a force has to be exerted repeatedly, it should be possible to exert it with either of the arms, or either of the legs, without adjustment to the equipment
10. Rest pauses should allow for all loads experienced at work

Guidelines for the work seating

1. Seat should provide stable bodily support, allowing the feet to support less than a third of the body weight, in a posture that is appropriate to the activity, psychologically satisfactory and comfortable over a period of time
2. Seat should allow changes in posture with and without adjustment of the seat
3. Seat should be adjustable. In particular:
4. Seat width should cope with largest user hip widths
5. Seat depth (length) should cope with the shortest use thigh length
6. Seat height should be adjustable
- 7 An adjustable backrest must provide support for the lower back
8. All adjustments must be quick and easy to make
9. Seat surfaces should be lightly padded, covered with non-slip material and with a “ waterfall” edge at the front
10. Seat should be swivel and easy to move

From: V. Di Martino and N. Corlett, Work Organisation and Ergonomics, ILO, 1998

° **improving the interface man/new technology**

Far from rigidly pre-determining tasks and functions in organisations, in most situations the introduction of new technology opens up opportunities and alternatives for organisational change. The way such alternatives are used will, in turn, determine the way new technology will impact on stress and violence at the workplace.

Thus computer technology allows for full determination and control of the pace at which workers have to work. They may thus be subject to undue time pressure, long working periods without intervals or prolonged waiting periods. This may in turn generate fatigue accumulation and stress – technostress - as well as sensations of monotony, boredom and dissatisfaction which may eventually lead to violence. It is however also possible to organize the introduction of computer technology in a completely different way, allowing workers increased responsibility and more flexibility in their working arrangements and consequently reducing, rather than generating, stress and violence at the workplace.

For a stress and violence-free introduction of new technology it is important that:

- new technology is introduced in a phased way;
- new technology is spread by successful examples, starting with critical applications and demonstrable benefits;
- new technology is introduced through a large involvement of those concerned and largely based on consensus;
- new technology is introduced ‘discretely’ according to the real needs of organisations and their employees;
- new technology is seen as a means to create a knowledge-based organisations relying on the creation of new skills, on interpersonal enrichment and on the understanding, by each employee, of the scope and meaning of his/her own work;
- pace of work, working arrangements and pauses are human-tailored rather than technology-driven

The special risks of working with VDUs are addressed by DOSH Guidelines on Occupational Health and Safety in the Office, 1996. The Guidelines provide guidance on office environment, safety in the office, and working with VDUs, including work surface height; chair adjustment; keyboard and screen placement; lighting, glare and reflection; using a mouse; and rest breaks.

5.3 ORGANISATIONAL INTERVENTION

The organizational setting appears to be equally if not more important than the physical environment in diffusing or exacerbating stress or violence. Poor organization may lead to an excessive workload for a specific group of employees (while others may be relatively inactive), slow down their performance, create unjustified delays, develop negative attitudes among workers and induce aggressive behaviour among the customers. The same effects may be induced by labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures, putting both employees and customers under serious stress.

Engineering out the organizational problem at the source usually proves much more effective and less costly than increasing the coping capacity by means of protective intervention at the individual level. Ensuring that staffing levels are appropriate, that tasks are assigned according to experience and competence, that tasks are clearly defined, that working hours are not excessive and that shifts are adequate to the particular situation, are all effective means to reduce stress and avoid aggression between employees and in their contact with the public.

◦ **Changing work practices**

Changing work practices is a most effective, inexpensive way of diffusing stress and violence at the workplace. A combination of different measures is usually recommended. Since every working situation is unique, so is the mix of measures which can best respond to that situation.

In the service sector, particularly for employees in contact with the public, change in work practices can be extremely important in limiting stress, dissatisfaction and violence from clients. The most influential factors for reducing client aggression are speedy and efficient service, which can be stimulated by various measures such as staff rotation for particularly demanding jobs, rostering more staff at peak periods, designing how staff move between different working areas, tailoring client flow systems to suit needs and resources, and keeping waiting times to a minimum.

Organizational solutions can also help in reducing the risks of exposure to criminal attack. These may include changing the job or system of work to give less face-to-face contact with the public, thus limiting the opportunity for violent and threatening behaviour. The improvement of cash-handling procedures and the introduction of automatic ticket dispensers/collectors and cash machines can also assist, but, at the same time, it is important that these measures do not make violence a greater risk for members of the public instead, because staff are less present or visible.

◦ **Improving job content**

Job design is another essential element in respect of stress and violence. An efficient design should provide for an appropriate variety of skills, capacities and activities and ensure that, to the largest possible extent that:

- tasks performed are identifiable as whole units of a job rather than fragments;
- jobs make a significant contribution to the total operations of the organisation which can be understood by the worker;
- jobs provide an appropriate degree of autonomy;
- jobs are not excessively repetitive and monotonous;
- sufficient feedback on task performance and opportunities for the development of staff skills is provided;
- jobs are enriched with a wider variety of tasks;
- job planning is improved;
- overload is not excessive;
- pace of work is not excessive.

◦ **re-arranging working time**

Re-organising working time to avoid excessive work pressure and, as far as possible, better meet both the needs of the production and those of the employees concerned, is a most effective way to diffuse stress and avoid violence. In line with current regulations it is recommended to:

- adapt the length of working time to the workload;
- avoid the massive recourse to overtime ;
- provide adequate rest pauses ;
- create autonomous or semi-autonomous teams dealing with their own working time arrangements;
- keep working time schedules regular and predictable;
- arrange, as far as possible, shift schedules so that shifts are rotated rapidly, in a forward fashion, and that the longest period of rest should follow the night shift;
- keep , as far as possible, consecutive night shifts to a minimum

The 1955 Employment Act contains specific provisions for the regulation of working time including rest days, the length of working hours, rest breaks, shiftwork, and the maximum numbers of hours of overtime allowed.

◦ **Circulation of best practices**

It is recommended that positive examples and best practices are largely disseminated among all parties concerned. The message delivered in this way is a most powerful one since it is based on real experience, deals with concrete issues, refer to situations in which the parties can recognize themselves and offer practical solutions for immediate implementation. Circulation of best practices can be facilitated by:

- production of case studies presented in a simple and concise way;
- creation of networks among organisations with interest in similar issues;
- organisation of informal visits and meetings among the parties concerned;
- informal communication via web and electronic newsletters.

5.4 INTERVENTION ON THE INDIVIDUAL

◦ Selection

Selection tools such as written tests, interviews, performance tests, psychological tests and other prediction devices are commonly recommended. Selection may help in identifying those individuals who are more tailored to certain jobs, less likely to get stressed, frustrated or angered because of it, and consequently less prone to violent workplace responses. Although selection may have an important bearing in terms of stress and violence prevention it should be used and interpreted with care and caution. In particular, when selection is used to screen out the “bad apples” - those who have a violent profile and constitute a risk to the workplace - every attention should be used to avoid stereotyping, generalization and discrimination.

◦ Training and education

Regular and updated training is essential to stress and violence prevention. Training involves instilling interpersonal and communication skills which defuse and prevent a potentially threatening situation; developing competence in the particular function to be performed; improving the ability to identify potentially stressful and violent situations; and preparing a “core group” of mature and specially competent staff who can take responsibility for more complicated interactions. Guidelines for specific occupations should further identify the special training needs and skills required for preventing or coping with stress and violence under different circumstances.

For counter staff and interviewing employees, for instance, improved interpersonal relations skills are a vital element in reducing aggression. Employees should also have knowledge of the nature of client aggression, the motivations of aggressors, cues to impending aggression, how to conduct interviews properly and to adhere to prescribed procedures, and how to respond to emotional clients. Specific advice should be given on when and how contact with a client should be ended to protect the employee from violence.

◦ Fitness

Maintaining physical fitness and emotionally stable psychic conditions is an effective way to fight and overcome stress and violence. Organisations and employees have a shared interest in this respect. It is recommended that special attention and encouragement be given to the development of regular physical exercise, proper eating and sleeping habits, relaxation techniques and leisure activities in free time, particularly those involving socialisation among staff members.

◦ Counseling

Psychological support and counseling appear to be an important aspect of the coping strategies that can be activated within organisations. This should be carried out periodically and, in particular, on occasion of high emotional stress or violent situations. Victims of stress and violence can experience a wide range of disturbing reactions such as anxiety, feeling of vulnerability and helplessness, disturbed sleep,

difficulty in concentrating, increased fear, irritability, obsessive thoughts and images, feelings of shame, anger, frustration, guilt, changes in beliefs and values and a desire to retaliate. It is therefore essential to help such victims in dealing with the distressing and often disabling after-effects of stress and violence, as well as to prevent severe psychological problems from developing later.

Psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical nurse specialists and social workers should provide counseling, or the employer can refer staff victims to an outside specialist. In addition, peer counseling, or support groups may be established. Appropriate and promptly rendered counseling reduces acute psychological trauma and general stress levels among victims and witnesses. The quicker the response, the more effective and less costly it will be.

° **Debriefing**

Debriefing is recommended in all but the most trivial cases. It usually involves meetings among staff and as many people as possible who are concerned in the stressful or violent situation. This will give employees who suffer from stress and victims of violence an opportunity to let out their feelings and to share their experience with others. Depending on the gravity of the situation, it is recommended that the managers responsible for the area or people affected by it, as well as management with special information or relevant expertise, be present. External consultants may also be involved in debriefing activities.

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Finally, it is important to activate effective monitoring and evaluation systems.

° **reporting and recording**

It is recommended to record and report all incidents related to stress and violence, including both minor and potential incidents where no actual harm has resulted. Apparently trivial events should not be neglected, since they may become relevant later, assisting in detecting persistent patterns of behaviour or identifying an escalation in aggression.

It is also recommended that all employees should know how and where to report, without fear of reprisal or criticism. Employees should also be encouraged to report on conditions where they are subjected to excessive or unnecessary risk related to stress and violence; and to make suggestions for reducing the risk of violence or improving negative working conditions.

° **evaluation**

It is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of anti-stress and anti-violence measures after they have been introduced. In this respect it is recommended to:

- monitor the results of changes that have been introduced on a continuous basis;
- allow workers to provide regular feedback, to check how well they are working and to make modifications as necessary;
- hold periodical joint management-employee meetings to discuss the measures put in place;
- review the management plan on a regular basis.

A plan-do-check-act cycle would thus be activated whereby evaluation is at the same time the final moment of a cycle of anti-stress and anti-violence measures and the basis for introducing a new cycle of such measures. The following figures show how the cycle operates and how it contributes to organisational development.

