

Stressed at work? Causes and ways to tackle it

"In your experience, what causes stress at work?" – we asked colleagues at UGent and other office workers this and similar questions. We discussed sources of stress at work with 39 participants in six focus groups, in and outside of academia. While our participants reported a wide range of answers, one thing became clear: work intensity including high workload and time pressure was mentioned as a key category of stressors at work. Seems logical, right? But there is a lot more to it...



25% of workers in Europe experience work-related stress for most or for all of their working time. Moreover, an equal amount of workers reported adverse health effects caused by their work. Such health issues included mental consequences such as depression, burnout, or problems in work or private relationships, as well as physical consequences like sleeping disorders, musculoskeletal pain, or cardiovascular problems. However, not only the workers themselves are influenced by stress at work, but also their organizations get affected. Indeed, workers' performance can be negatively influenced by stress at work, which can lead to errors or poor decision making. Further outcomes include absenteeism, frequent sickness absence, poor time-keeping, high staff turnover, or even aggressive communication or bullying.

Better understanding stress at work

There are several theoretical models and numerous large-scale quantitative studies looking into the causes of stress at work. However, stress is a complex and multivariate process, and stress experiences are based on self-perception and therefore highly individual and subjective. While subjectivity is often perceived as a drawback in research, we embraced the opportunity to put ourselves in the shoes of our study participants. Concretely, we organized focus groups in which a small group of people openly discussed their personal opinions and experiences about stress at work.

The drivers of stress at work

As one expects, **work intensity** was the biggest topic discussed, meaning too much work in too little time leads to stress. **Working time quality** included working overtime to get tasks done in time, which was suggested by our participants to cause work-life imbalance. For our participants, their **social environment** was also highly relevant, mentioning that lack of support from colleagues and inefficient communication with supervisors were highly stressful. One topic proved to be complex – **decision latitude**. On the one hand, freedom, or the liberty to make one's own decisions, was mentioned to be helpful. On the other hand, depending on the person and situation, it was also described as very stressful when work limits were not set. Stress at work regarding **prospects** included non-permanent contracts and downsizing by not replacing staff leaving the team. In addition to the aforementioned drivers of stress at work for which there is also evidence in existing literature, we found evidence for two new sources of stress: 1) **organizational stressors** including vague team structures or a lack of clear definitions of work responsibilities and 2) while **workers' physical health status** is usually researched as an outcome of stress at work, our participants experienced it as a source of stress, e.g. poor sleep quality having an adverse effect on their work performance. Surprisingly, **physical environment** and **earnings** were not mentioned in our focus groups.

Ways to tackle stress at work experiences

Tips for your role as a supervisor:

- Based on the complexity of decision latitude – tailor the approach of guiding colleagues based on their individual preferences. Not everyone needs the same amount of supervision!
- Transparent communication is key – include your colleagues in decision-making and when setting work priorities and work goals to decrease stress at work.
- Monitor the psychosocial risks your colleagues are exposed to (e.g., ongoing time pressure) and support the risk management policy of the organisation you work for.
- Consider the health of your colleagues as a whole – physical and psychosocial well-being are equally relevant! Important: don't forget to take care of your own well-being by taking breaks, delegating tasks, etc.

Tips for your role as a worker:

- Work intensity is a key source of stress – discuss work limits with your supervisor.
- Rely on your social environment by asking your supervisor and colleagues for support to ventilate and to find solutions for your challenges together – it can be a protective factor from stress at work.
- If you want to reach out for further help, contact your supervisor, the HR department, the assigned confidential contact person, or the prevention advisor for psychosocial aspects.



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Read more about this study in the published article.