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## Work and your health

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### Summary

- Work is important on many levels and may provide meaning and focus for our lives.
  - Work-related issues may include job dissatisfaction, workplace injury, stress, discrimination and bullying, violence, accidental death, retirement, retrenchment and unemployment.
  - Common causes of work-related stress include long hours, heavy workload, job insecurity and conflicts with co-workers or bosses.
  - The stress of dealing with changing work circumstances that are out of your control can increase the risk of health problems such as anxiety and depression.
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Work is important to most of us on many levels. Doing a job we enjoy and find satisfying can provide a meaningful focus for our lives, as well as bringing in an income. Our standard of living hinges on the money we make, while employment often contributes to our self-image and self-esteem.

Work-related problems can affect our physical, emotional and mental health. Common issues include job dissatisfaction, workplace injury, stress, discrimination and bullying, violence, accidental death and retirement. Job loss, retrenchment or unexpected loss of income can also cause distress and hardship.

### What to do about job dissatisfaction

Not everyone has the opportunity to work in a rewarding and challenging job. Some people experience job dissatisfaction because they are unhappy or unsafe at work. Previous choices or life circumstances can limit a person's ability to change their employment.

People who are unhappy in their jobs may have problems such as:

- Conflict with bosses or workmates
- Bullying, discrimination or harassment
- Boredom
- Overwork, stress or safety issues
- No promotion prospects
- Poor pay.

### Dealing with stress at work

The cost of workers compensation claims for stress-related conditions in Australia is very high. Common causes of work-related stress include long hours, heavy workload, job insecurity and conflicts with co-workers or bosses. On a strictly business level, workplace conflict leads to downturns in productivity and increases in absenteeism. It is in an organisation's best interests to ensure that employees are happy at work.

Paying attention to your 'work-life balance' can help you manage work-related stress. Burnout can occur when a person strives too hard in one area of life while neglecting everything else. 'Workaholics', for example, put all their energies into their career, which can put their family life, social life and personal interests out of balance.

### Discrimination at work

Unlawful discrimination occurs when someone is treated less favourably than another person or group because of characteristics such as:

- Race, colour, national or ethnic origin
- Sex
- Age
- Disability
- Pregnancy status
- Marital status
- Religion
- Sexual preference
- Trade union activity.

Workplace discrimination can occur when:

- Recruiting and selecting staff
- Offering terms, conditions and benefits of employment
- Deciding who receives training and what sort of training is offered
- Selecting staff for transfer, promotion, retrenchment or dismissal.

### **Workplace violence and bullying**

Workplace violence is conflict escalated to the point of physical, emotional or psychological attack. It includes threats, insults, racial abuse, sexual harassment or physical contact such as pushing or punching. The attack may come from anybody in the workplace, including an employer, co-worker, customer or service user.

Bullying is a form of violence that can occur in the workplace. Bullying includes any behaviour that intimidates, offends, degrades or humiliates another person.

### **Dangerous workplaces**

Some workplaces pose a greater health threat than others. For example:

- **Shift work** – a person working the night shift is at greater risk of a range of disorders, accidents and other effects. These may include obesity, cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal problems, transport accidents, work-related accidents, family problems and divorce.
- **Certain occupations** – jobs in forestry, fishing, mining, transport and storage, agriculture and construction are the most dangerous in Australia.
- **Hazardous work practices** – any workplace that doesn't promote and enforce safe work practices is dangerous, regardless of the industry. Examples of hazardous work practices include not wearing personal safety equipment or failing to use proper manual handling techniques.

### **Workplace injuries: selected statistics**

General information on workplace injuries from the Australian Bureau of Statistics includes:

- About six Australians in every 100 experience a work-related injury every year.
- About half of all work-related injuries require time off work.
- People who work in jobs that require physical labour are at higher risk of injury.
- 'White collar' jobs (such as working in business, science or education) offer the lowest risk of injury.
- The most common health issues for office workers include musculoskeletal injuries such as repetitive strain injury (RSI).
- The rate of injury is highest in younger workers. Contributing factors may include job inexperience, lack of adequate training, and a tendency to work in jobs that present an increased risk of injury, such as retail.
- The highest injury rate by age group is among men aged 20–24 years, with about 10 injured per 100 employed men. By comparison, the injury rate among women of the same age is half that.
- The industries with the highest risk of injury for female workers include accommodation, cafes and restaurants.
- The industries with the highest risk of injury for male workers include agriculture, forestry and fishing.

## Workplace injuries

Workplace injuries may occur as a result of:

- Overuse or poor handling techniques
- Moving objects
- Noise or air pollution
- Vehicle accidents
- Tool or machine failure or misuse
- Falls
- Electrocutation
- Drowning
- Accidents with dangerous goods or hazardous substances – for example, a liquid splash
- Suffocation or asphyxia
- Infection
- Violence.

## Accidental deaths in the workplace

In 2007–08, work-related injury caused the death of 150 Australians, with men accounting for 137 of those fatalities. About 80 per cent of those fatalities occurred in four industries:

- Construction
- Transport and storage
- Agriculture, forestry and fishing
- Manufacturing.

Generally speaking, the most common causes of work-related fatal injury include:

- Vehicle accidents (account for about four workplace deaths in every 10)
- Falling objects
- Moving objects
- Falls
- Becoming trapped in moving machinery.

## Retirement

Responses to retirement depend on the reason for leaving the workforce. For example, a person who planned for their retirement is more likely to feel positive about it, while a person forced into early retirement due to redundancy or illness may find it harder to cope.

## Retrenchment or unemployment

Job loss, retrenchment and unexpected unemployment can cause hardship and distress that may lead to health problems. It is normal to experience a range of reactions, which may include shock, anger, guilt and a sense of powerlessness. Over time, the build-up of financial pressures, feelings of failure or being undervalued, and the emotional exhaustion of prolonged job hunting can lead to **stress**, **anxiety**, **depression** and **fatigue**.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Career counsellor or psychologist
- Your manager
- Human resources manager at your workplace

- Occupational Health and Safety Officer in your workplace
- Your union
- Accountant or financial planner
- WorkCover Advisory Service Tel. 1800 136 089
- Industrial Deaths Support & Advocacy Inc. (IDSA) Tel. (03) 9654 3353
- Worksafe Victoria Tel. 1800 136 089 or (03) 9641 1444 (for referral only)
- Victorian Trades Hall Council (OH&S Unit) Tel. (03) 9659 3511
- The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement Tel. (03) 9265 2111 or 1800 642 066
- Job Watch Tel. (03) 9662 1933 or 1800 331 617
- ACTU Workers' Line Tel. 1300 362 223
- Centrelink Employment Services Line Tel. 13 2850
- Seniors' Information Victoria Tel. 1300 135 090
- Department of Jobs and Small Business, Tel.1300 488 064.

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