You know what it feels like to be running on empty. In today’s fast-paced, high pressure society, stress and fatigue are two of the most common ailments we face. Whilst a little stress can be good for us—indeed many people perform best under pressure—it’s important to keep stress at a healthy level. Otherwise, you’re going to get sick.

The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 (HSE Act) requires employers to take “all practicable steps” to identify hazards, assess their significance, and control or manage their impact on employees.

Specifically, section six of the HSE Act requires all employers to prevent harm (illness and/or injury) to their employees, including harm arising from the way work is organised. Section seven states that employers must assess each hazard and test it for significance, and section nineteen states that employers should take “all practicable steps” to ensure their own safety and the safety of others at work.

Stress is a hazard covered by the HSE Act, so as an employer you will be held responsible if you do not comply with its provisions. Not that it should pose a problem—you wouldn’t have picked up this article if you didn’t want to look after your employees!

**Stress and fatigue—what’s the difference?**

Stress and fatigue might seem the same, but they are different. And the difference is important. The point is this: fatigue occurs as a result of stress.

OSH defines occupational stress as an awareness of not being able to cope with the demands of one’s working environment. It becomes a workplace issue when this realisation is of concern to the person and is associated with a negative emotional response.

Fatigue is defined as the conditions when a person is unable to respond to a situation because of previous emotional, mental or physical over-activity. This includes a person’s state of health where there may be a temporary inability to act, a decrease in ability to respond, or a strong disinclination to take any action at all.

Both stress and fatigue can have detrimental—and possibly quite dangerous—effects in the workplace.
What causes us to get stressed?

Stress occurs as a response to stressors—and these come in a variety of guises. Interestingly, many common life events like moving house or getting married actually rank amongst the biggest stressors. But occupational stressors are often less readily identified because they are more chronic in nature, affecting you eight hours a day, five days a week (and that’s if you’re lucky!)

Occupational stressors include both physical and psycho-social conditions, and they affect workers’ ability to cope on a daily basis. Factors like the physical work environment, the context in which work takes place (e.g., support available, organisational culture, career development prospects, etc), employee control over decisions, balance between work and home life, workload and workschedule all impact the level of stress we experience.

When the balance is upset in any of these areas, we get stressed—too much of a good thing overloads us, but too little makes us stagnate.

After experiencing a stressor, we initially try to adapt to the new situation. But this reflex is only temporary. After a time, our bodies can no longer tolerate the disruption to the natural balance, and our health becomes endangered.

How do I know when my stress levels are climbing?

We can’t expect to live the modern-day, fast-paced lifestyle without being exposed to some stressors along the way. But what we can do is realise when we are becoming overloaded and learn to manage our stress more effectively.

Indications that we aren’t coping with stress include:

**Personal symptoms:**

1. Raised blood pressure
2. Poor sleeping patterns
3. Difficulties concentrating
4. Depressed mood
5. Chest pains, headaches, palpitations, hyperventilation

6. Poor memory
7. Anxiety
8. Irritability
9. Loss of confidence
10. Fatigue

**Organisational symptoms:**

1. high absenteeism
2. low morale
3. high staff turnover
4. poor industrial relations and process improvement
5. poor quality and productivity

6. increased accident and illness
7. increased stress claims,
8. increased retirement rates and use of grievance procedures
9. loss of employee contribution to planning.

Does fatigue always result from stress?

Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of occupational stress. The definition above would suggest that fatigue mainly stems from a task that lasts too long, or work
that is too demanding for us to handle without time to recover. But another often-
overlooked cause of occupational fatigue is circadian disruption. This is the disturbance
to the natural rhythms of our internal body-clock, experienced particularly after long
distance air-travel—travellers commonly refer to it as jet-lag—or because of shift-work
that requires us to change our normal sleeping patterns.

Disruption to the body clock is often accompanied by loss of sleep, thus compounding
fatigue. Shift-workers are particularly at risk from fatigue; their work roster may require
them to sleep during the day, when their body naturally prefers to be awake, then work at
night when the body naturally wants to sleep. This is further impacted by irregular and
often prolonged hours of work, often leading to sleep deficit.

The most common symptom of fatigue is a non-descript general weariness. It’s your body
sending you a message—you need to rest! Other symptoms include forgetfulness, poor
communication and decision-making, apathy, lethargy and depression. These symptoms
may put workers at increased risk of workplace injury, due to reduced capacity to carry
out their work. It’s a very real hazard.

**What doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger?**

Well, actually…The worst thing you can do when stressed or fatigued is to persevere.
When suffering from physical stress or fatigue, continuing to exert yourself can result in
serious or chronic musculo-skeletal problems or occupational overuse syndrome. Apart
from the symptoms already outlined above, mental stress and fatigue instantly makes you
many times more susceptible to illness. But the consequences can be even more severe.
Chronic stress and fatigue can trigger a host of psychological disorders, hormonal upsets,
 stomatch ulcers…the list goes on.

So don’t carry on expecting to get used to things—follow the principles of elimination,
isolation and minimisation to stop outbreaks of stress before they reach epidemic
proportions.

**How do I cope?**

If you or your employees are already feeling the effects of stress and fatigue, the only
way to fully recover is to rest and recuperate. This might simply mean taking a few days
off or reducing overtime. After this, education in techniques for coping with stress can
help staff to look at the demands placed on them in a different light.

But we all know that prevention is much better than cure. Because occupational stress is
usually rooted in the workplace itself, the only way to truly eliminate it is for the
organisation to take responsibility. Reduce the number of stressors in your workplace,
and minimise their impact. Promote physical health through exercise, sleep and a healthy
diet. Coach and support employees rather than pressuring them. These techniques will
have the most impact, and they are surprisingly simple.

An essential part of having a healthy and safe workplace is ensuring that everyone keeps
clear, fresh and focussed. This avoids costly mistakes and accidents. You may be
surprised what a big difference you can make just by making a few changes in your
working environment and coping strategies. Best of all, by preventing harmful stress, you can make your workplace more pleasant, productive and profitable.

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Keri Monks is a second-year law student. This article is her first. It was commissioned by NZ Safety as part of an exclusive series examining workplace safety issues. For other articles in the series visit NZ Safety’s free information library: http://www.nzsafety.co.nz