

Resolution 2267 (2019)¹

Stress at work

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The world of work has become overwhelmed by stress. Confronted with critical changes in work organisation and labour relations, working people are faced with enormous pressure to meet the growing demands of working life. When this pressure is amplified by an imbalance between the perceived demands and the perceived resources and abilities of individuals, it can become detrimental to their well-being and health, both physical and psychological, and endanger public safety in extreme situations. This troubling reality adversely affects workers, organisations, national economies and society at large. Stress at work is our collective responsibility – and challenge.
2. European countries acknowledge workplace stress as a serious public health issue and have integrated stress management into workplace health and safety policies, with a growing but still insufficient emphasis on psychosocial risks. However, the burden of work stress in Europe and globally go beyond purely medical risks: with around half of European workers considering stress to be common in their workplace, stress prevention, management and reduction need to be mainstreamed at different levels of public governance, as well as in the private sector.
3. The Parliamentary Assembly considers that the situation in Europe merits a “stress test” for all institutions in order to check the inventory of measures currently in place to ensure workplace stress prevention and management, and to identify areas that require further intervention.
4. The Assembly notes that most European and national reference texts evoke stress at work implicitly as part of mental health needs but do not explicitly recognise mental health disorders linked to stress as occupational diseases, reflecting the current guidance from the International Labour Organization (ILO). Moreover, studies by the World Health Organization (WHO) show that there is still much confusion in the regulatory field between normal pressure and stress at work; this confusion is sometimes used to excuse poor managerial practice.
5. The Assembly also regrets widespread confusion concerning the notion of occupational burnout (a state of extreme emotional and physical exhaustion) and its recognition as an occupational disease. While the ILO list of occupational diseases of 2010 cites “post-traumatic stress disorder” and “additional mental or behavioural disorders not mentioned”, the European Commission’s Recommendation on the European Schedule of Occupational Disorders does not list any stress-induced disorders. However, the burnout syndrome is increasingly recognised at national level in Europe as a major occupational health issue.
6. The Assembly welcomes national, corporate and European initiatives aimed at improving balance between work and private life and ensuring the effective exercise of the right to equal opportunities at work, in line with the requirements of the European Social Charter (ETS Nos. 35 and 163). It believes that member States should better take the gender dimension into account through policy instruments in light of evidence showing that women and men respond to and manage stress at work in different ways and that women at work are the worst affected, especially when they carry a double burden of work and household responsibilities.

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 1 March 2019 (see [Doc. 14824](#), report of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, rapporteur: Mr Stefaan Vercamer).*



7. Considering that the very nature of work is expected to change significantly over the coming decade as robots and artificial intelligence applications step in to replace humans for many jobs and create new man-machine teamwork patterns, the Assembly believes that this looming source of permanent stress over job insecurity should compel all stakeholders to review the organisation of work and distribution of workloads and tasks in a way that enables reduction in stress levels and fosters job sharing.

8. In light of the above considerations, the Assembly calls on the member States of the Council of Europe to:

8.1. carry out an in-depth evaluation of existing domestic legal and policy measures for workplace stress prevention, management and reduction, bearing in mind the gender dimension;

8.2. identify legislative and regulatory gaps in their workplace health and safety policies with a view to ensuring a better coverage of psychosocial risks, in particular for highly exposed sectors of activity (such as health-care workers, social workers, police officers, teachers and customer-service providers);

8.3. expand the national list of occupational diseases in order to explicitly list stress-induced disorders, including occupational burnout;

8.4. put in place obligations for all employers to:

8.4.1. adopt a comprehensive approach to stress assessment, management and prevention with an organisational and individual focus;

8.4.2. implement specific protocols against bullying, harassment, gender-based discrimination and other inappropriate behaviour at work;

8.4.3. ensure adequate protection against workplace stress for the more vulnerable categories of workers (young people, immigrants, pregnant women and older workers);

8.5. study the implications of robotisation and artificial intelligence for workers' rights, ethics and the organisation of work with a view to preserving jobs for people and a healthy work-life balance;

8.6. encourage employers to adopt a stress-reducing organisation of work with shorter, four-day weeks (with 28 to 32 work hours per week), flexible work time options, greater autonomy, teleworking possibilities and job-sharing schemes, notably for working parents and carers;

8.7. as appropriate, consider carrying out national or sectoral awareness-raising campaigns on stress at work and on publicly available or online information resources, support and training tools.