

A FACT SHEET FOR SCHOOL EMPLOYEES

PROTECTING SCHOOL EMPLOYEES FROM STRESS AT WORK



SCHOOL ACTION FOR SAFETY AND HEALTH

Labor Occupational Health Program, University of California, Berkeley
Commission on Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation

This factsheet was developed by the Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP) at the University of California, Berkeley as part of the School Action for Safety and Health (SASH) program administered by the Commission on Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation in the California Department of Industrial Relations through an interagency agreement with LOHP at UC Berkeley.

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How Does Workplace Stress Affect Workers' Mental and Physical Health?

The American Institute of Stress explains that workplace stress is by far the major source of stress for American adults, and that job-related stress has been increasing steadily for decades. Workers face growing demands with little control over their work and research shows that these workplace conditions are associated with increased health disorders like heart attacks and hypertension.¹

Stress can be a “physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension.” Another popular definition of stress is “a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources that the individual is able to mobilize.” Research from before the pandemic has shown that teachers are one of the most stressed professions. Stress can lead to burnout, which can lead to teachers leaving the profession that adds to the turnover problem among teachers throughout the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, workplace stress has increased dramatically. School employees are working under high levels of stress to keep school communities functioning first online and then more recently during emerging virus variants, leaving school employees exhausted. In these unprecedented times of uncertainty and death, school employees are working long hours and doing their best to support their students.²

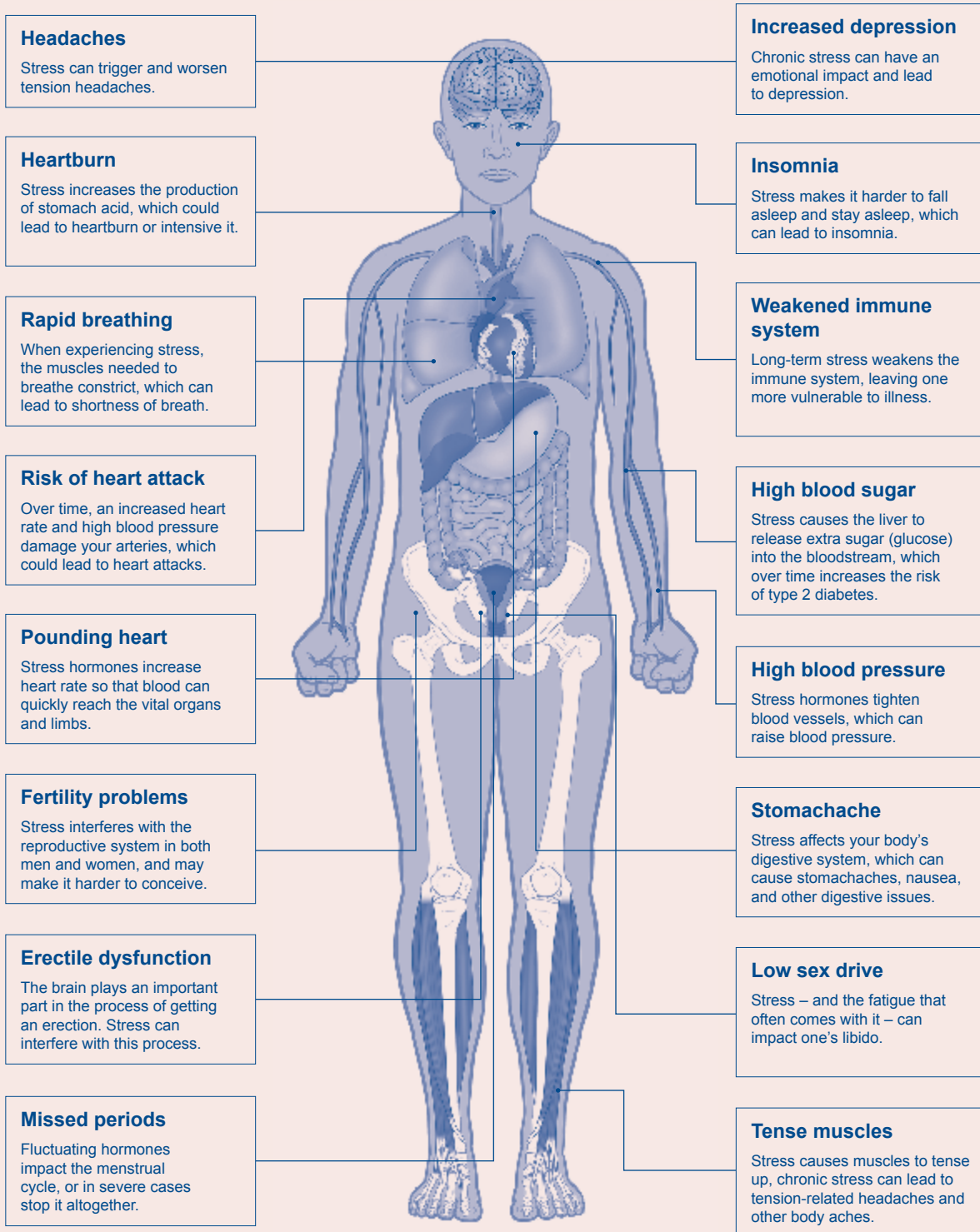
The body reacts to stressors in a way that helps it cope with a situation in the short run. The body prepares to act quickly. It uses its resources to prepare for immediate action, and slows down non-essential functions.



However, if this happens chronically, it can cause serious health issues, as illustrated in the infographic on the next page. For example:

- Your liver produces extra blood sugar (glucose) to give you a boost of energy when reacting to a stressor. When this condition is chronic, it increases your risk of developing Type 2 diabetes.³
- Your muscles tense up to be ready for action. If this condition is frequent, tight muscles can cause symptoms such as: headaches, pain in the neck, shoulders, or back, and other body aches.
- Stress stimulates the immune system in the short run, but over time, stress hormones weaken the immune system, which makes you more likely to get sick, and increases the time it takes you to recover from an illness. Stress may also lead to other health issues such as autoimmune diseases.⁴

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This graphic is based on "The Effects of Stress on Your Body" Infographic.³

Identifying and Prioritizing Workplace Stressors

It can be helpful to think about stress as the body's way of telling us that something needs to be adjusted. It's important to identify the stress factors and their causes so that they can be reduced or modified. One way to do that is to make a list of what may be causing the stress and related conditions. Common workplace stressors include:

- Workplace hazards
- Workload
- Work pace
- High work demands
- Long hours
- Insufficient hours
- Insufficient breaks
- Unpredictability of scheduling
- Lack of control
- Job insecurity
- Discrimination
- Racism
- Harassment
- Not having the tools or resources to solve problems
- Not being able to speak up or do anything about the problems
- Not being able to advance
- Lack of work/life balance
- Being monitored by computers or algorithms



What Solutions Can Address Workplace Stress?

As with any workplace hazard, the most effective solution is to eliminate the stressor and/or work to change the conditions that cause the stress. But we know that many of the sources of stress might be beyond the capacity of an individual or workplace group to change (e.g., societal issues like poverty, racism, etc.). The trick is to identify the conditions and behaviors in the workplace you think you can change, and develop a plan to work collectively towards that change. For the things that you can't change, or will take a very long time to change, identify ways that you can cope with, adjust or deal with the stress.

There are several recent examples of proposed policies and laws aimed at reducing factors that contribute to workplace stress. These include expanding paid family leave in Washington, DC⁵,

predictable scheduling laws in San Francisco⁶, and a bill that aims to reduce the workweek from 40 hours to 32 hours, effectively increasing the hourly wage of workers as overtime would begin after 32 hours of work.⁷

Here are five broad solutions to reduce workplace stress:

1. Ensure reasonable and predictable hours, shifts and schedules that allow work/life balance.
2. Eliminate workplace harassment and promote justice and fairness.
3. Ensure a living wage and job security (32-hour workweek legislation).
4. Create a more supportive work environment.
5. Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs and perhaps make it easier to join a union.⁸



Building Individual Resilience

All of the policy level solutions discussed will likely be long-term solutions for addressing workplace stress. As you are working with your coworkers to achieve the necessary structural change, it can also be helpful to have some individual coping strategies. Without building resilience, stress can take over and drain energy that could otherwise be channeled into making change.

Stress and resilience are often talked about together. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity. Resilience is like a muscle that can be strengthened.

We can think of these individual techniques somewhat like Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)—we should recognize their importance but not default to them. It puts all of the responsibility on the worker and that can contribute to overlooking other important issues in the work environment. We want to make sure we're pushing for higher level solutions in the hierarchy of controls that are working to remove the hazard, like decreasing the workload or providing paid family leave.

Research has shown that there is a range of things people can do to build resilience and feel better. One aspect of building resilience is cultivating gratitude for the things in your life that you feel good about, like your family or friends.



Cultivating gratitude can include:

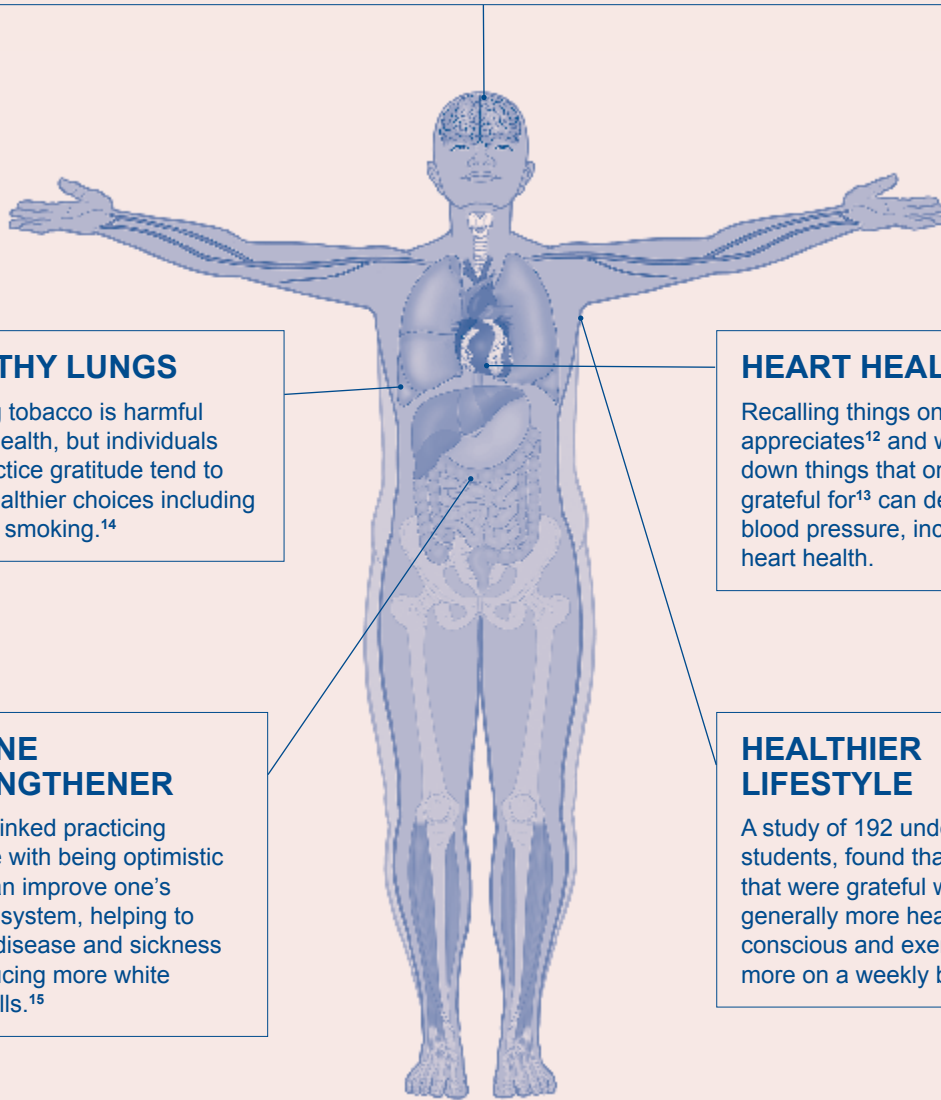
- Recalling things one is grateful for to decrease blood pressure and heart rate variability which is good for your heart
- A study of people with sleep disorders showed that making nightly lists of things one is grateful for can improve sleep⁹

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FEEL CALMER

Cultivating gratitude can reduce stress hormones, such as cortisol, by up to 23%.¹⁰

In one study of 400 people, writing down things one is grateful for on a nightly basis was shown to improve the sleep of participants. This included 40% of individuals who were suffering from sleep disorders.¹¹



HEALTHY LUNGS

Smoking tobacco is harmful to lung health, but individuals who practice gratitude tend to make healthier choices including avoiding smoking.¹⁴

HEART HEALTHY

Recalling things one appreciates¹² and writing down things that one feels grateful for¹³ can decrease blood pressure, increasing heart health.

IMMUNE STRENGTHENER

A study linked practicing gratitude with being optimistic which can improve one's immune system, helping to fight off disease and sickness by producing more white blood cells.¹⁵

HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE

A study of 192 undergraduate students, found that those that were grateful were generally more health conscious and exercised 36% more on a weekly basis.¹⁶

This graphic is based on "How Gratitude Affects The Human Body" Infographic.¹⁷

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Ask yourself:

1. **Can I shift my focus?** Gratitude shifts brain chemistry and helps us to think more clearly and creatively. This graphic about gratitude shows that it can have a protective impact on different parts of the body.
2. **What can I change?** Take a small action step—it doesn't matter how big or small the action is, our brain will start to relax if we do something rather than just feeling stuck inside the stress. It's important to not skip over shifting your focus. If we make a decision when we're stuck in stress, we're likely to not make the best decision.

Keep in mind that working with other people for a goal that is bigger than yourself is an effective way to build your resilience which will help you cope with your stress. In other words, the process of organizing for change itself builds resilience.

Again, it is important to take care of yourself while the focus is on removing the stressors themselves. In summary, identify what is causing the job stress, work together with your coworkers and union, if you have one, to create solutions that address the stressor and take care of yourself throughout the whole process.



To download this and other LOHP factsheets, visit: <https://lohp.berkeley.edu/training/sash/>. This factsheet was developed by the UC Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP). These materials are part of the School Action for Safety and Health (SASH) administered by the Commission on Health and Safety & Workers' Compensation in the California Department of Industrial Relations.

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