

Stress as a Trade Union Issue



Dr Neil Thompson, independent writer, educator, adviser and a SWU Ambassador shares his expertise

Stress is unfortunately one of those topics that is commonly misunderstood and oversimplified. One aspect of this is the tendency to individualise stress and to see it as the sign of a weak or inadequate individual - captured by the 'if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen' cliché. According to this view, if you are struggling to cope with the combination of your work and home pressures, there must be something wrong with you.

Of course, this view is dangerously inaccurate and oppressive. Everyone has a limit to how much pressure they can withstand and, of course, much will depend on the extent and quality of the support we receive. Stress, when it arises, is indeed telling us that there is something wrong, but not necessarily with the individual. This is what makes it a trade union issue.

Stress is covered by the health and safety legislation which seeks to protect people from undue hazards at work. An employing organisation that allows workplace pressures to rise above a safe level and/or fail to provide adequate support is potentially in breach of their health and safety duties. The legislation is in place to reinforce the idea that people should not be harmed by their work, which is why stress comes within its ambit.

The modern workplace in general and the social work world in particular tend to be highly pressurised places, and so it is essential that proper support systems are in place. In my experience, the support on offer varies enormously. Some employing organisations seem to do a great job of creating and sustaining a positive and empowering working environment, while others leave a lot to be desired (to put it mildly). Trade unions therefore have a role to play in trying to ensure that adequate support is provided and to assist

and protect members when the level of support is insufficient. SWU, of course, to its credit, has been very active in this regard.

The part I have played in this has been to produce *The Managing Stress Practice Manual*. This is not a textbook, but a practical hands-on guide to rising to the pressures we face. It places stress in its wider organisational context and argues against the view that stress is a matter of individual failing. Of course, there is already a huge literature on stress available, but much of it has a narrow individualistic focus that has the potential to do more harm than good - for example, by making people who are experiencing stress feel guilty for doing so and come to assume that it is all their own fault. This very often leads to people who need support not asking for it, as they feel ashamed that they are letting themselves down, rather than angry that their employers are not providing sufficient protection, despite their legal responsibility to do so.

*Dr Neil Thompson is a longstanding supporter of SWU and of trade unionism's role in promoting social justice. He kindly allows SWU members access to his online learning community and his range of e-learning courses at half price. Contact the SWU office for details. His latest book, *The Managing Stress Practice Manual* is available via Amazon or from: <https://www.avenuemediasolutions.com/product-category/books-training-resources/>*

