

Resilience and well-being

a guide for members

The logo for UNISON, featuring the word "UNISON" in a bold, sans-serif font with a stylized wave graphic above the letters "I" and "O". Below the name is the tagline "the public service union" in a smaller, italicized font.
UNISON
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Introduction

Some employers are trying to change the way we look at health and safety. They want the focus to shift away from what managers should be doing to manage health and safety in the workplace, towards finding reasons to blame employees when something goes wrong. UNISON is very clear that this approach is not good health and safety management.

Good health and safety management means checking for things that could cause harm at work, and either removing them or making them less dangerous. Resilience and well-being are just two ways in which employers may try to shirk these responsibilities.

What the law says

By law, employers must identify and remove or avoid hazards which may harm their employees. So for example, if a box is a trip hazard, it should be removed.

Where it is not reasonably practicable to avoid or remove a hazard, then the employer must take steps to minimise the chance of someone being harmed as far as is reasonably practicable. This applies to all hazards including stress, but how it is done depends on the circumstances.

“Reasonably practicable” means that the more likely it is that harm will occur - and the more serious that harm could be - the more an employer is expected to do to avoid or minimise the danger.

Employers should make these decisions through a process called risk assessment. UNISON has produced information on risk assessments for members and a guide for safety reps which explains risk assessment in more detail, see below for details.

Resilience

What does it mean?

Some employers, and others, now talk about making workers more “resilient”. What they mean is allegedly making individuals better able to withstand stress, instead of trying to make work healthier.

However, making workers more “resilient” does not necessarily comply with what is required by law. This is because employers must remove the danger of, or minimise the chance of, harm from work-related stress and other hazards. Just making people better able to cope with them is not sufficient.

The “science” behind resilience is based on research that showed when faced with a particular problem, a small group of individuals normally overcome or cope with it. However, this means that the larger group normally fails or gets harmed.

Is it ever useful?

Employers might rightfully help workers to develop coping mechanisms, strategies, or resilience in some stressful areas such as social work, nursing, or policing. This is so that employees are able to deal with distressing situations or post traumatic stress from types of work where this might be expected. Some examples are work involving road traffic accidents, the death of patients, or child sex abuse cases.

However, it is not right to expect to be able to train staff to cope with the stress and ill-health symptoms caused by ever increasing amounts of work. This is because being over-worked is not an essential or natural characteristic of a job.

Employers could take a different “resilient” approach. They could put in place measures to prevent or minimise the chance of any work related pressure becoming so overwhelming that it causes stress and makes employees ill. This could involve training employees and managers on how to prioritise work and giving them the authority to drop some work if necessary. This is also “resilience”, but it is making the workplace and processes resilient to excessive demands and pressures, rather than just expecting employees to cope.

What next?

If you have concerns about resilience or stress, speak with your UNISON safety rep. *Stress at Work – a guide for UNISON safety reps* (stock number 1725) can be downloaded or ordered from the UNISON online catalogue at unison.org.uk/onlinecatalogue

Well-Being

What does it mean?

Well-being has become a bit of a buzzword but what does it actually mean? It can refer to being comfortable, healthy, or happy - but it is also used to mean the absence of physical or mental illness.

Employer supported well-being programmes often aim to help staff deal or cope with a particular problem, such as stress using things like “mindfulness training” or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

Some initiatives provide for perks such as discounted massages, yoga, or gym membership. Others focus on getting your five fruit and vegetables per day, or encourage staff to become more active or healthy in other ways, such as giving up smoking or drinking less.

Is it ever useful?

When properly delivered and appropriate, “mindfulness training” or CBT may help a person already suffering from stress related depression or anxiety by helping them “think differently”. Encouragement to exercise more and eat better may help to get you healthier and may also help to deal with the symptoms once you are already stressed.

However, with managing stress, the key focus should be for employers to prevent staff getting stressed in the first place by removing or minimising the cause of harm. While other health advice may be helpful, it should not be at the cost of employers ignoring serious work-related hazards.

Employers should focus on the major causes of harm at work as this is where they have control, are responsible, and have a legal duty. You will know what the hazards are for your workplace, and it’s probably not whether Freda has had her apple today!

The TUC guide, Work and Well-Being, a trade union resource (available at tuc.org.uk) explains that it is too simplistic just to tell people what to do and expect them to make improvements. Drinking and smoking may be the way they cope with stressful or boring jobs, they may feel too tired to exercise at the end of a long or rushed day at work and there may not be any healthy options for food when at work.

So employers should ensure that the work and workplace promote this by providing stimulating work, by preventing or minimising work-related stress and by ensuring that there are healthy options to eat in the canteen, particularly for those who work outside normal working hours.

What next?

If you have concerns about your employer's well-being programme or proposals, speak with your UNISON safety rep. Stress at Work – a guide for UNISON safety reps (stock number 1725) can be downloaded or ordered from the UNISON online catalogue unison.org.uk/onlinecatalogue and the TUC guide, Work and Well-Being, a trade union resource is available from tuc.org.uk.

Work with us

Workplace health and safety is far better in workplaces where employers consult with trade union safety reps. Our members and reps have lots of experience and knowledge about what works well and what doesn't. Employers must legally consult with UNISON safety reps and, through them, UNISON members.

Whether it is resilience training, well-being initiatives, or something else affecting employees' health and safety, make sure your UNISON branch is consulted. Speak to your safety rep if you have any concerns about these or any other health and safety issues.

When it comes to health and safety, UNISON's message to employers is "Don't harm us, don't blame us, work with us!"



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