Work-related stress: what is the problem?

"Tackling work-related stress in the EU"
Brussels, 2 July 2009

http://osha.europa.eu

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➢ **Objective** (Art. 2)**:**

- **In order to improve the working environment, (…) the aim of the Agency shall be to provide the Community bodies, the Member States, the social partners and those involved in the field with the technical, scientific and economic information of use in the field of safety and health at work.**

➢ **A practical purpose**

➢ **Tripartite**

➢ **Information and networks**

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5 things we know about stress

EU-OSHA publications:

- **Research overview 2002 (European Week)**
- **Emerging psychosocial risks 2008**
- **Violence & harassment 2009**
- **...**

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➢ **"Spice of life or kiss of death"?**

➢ **Talking about 'eustress' is playing with words**

- ▪ **"stress": not the occasional, short-term pressure that enhances performance, but the frequent, chronic stress that damages health**

➢ **Broad consensus on a definition: the imbalance between perceived demands and resources to cope with them**

➢ **"Perceived" does not mean that "it's all in the mind"**

- ▪ **but that the person's own assessment of the situation is a crucial mediator to any psychological or physiological harm**

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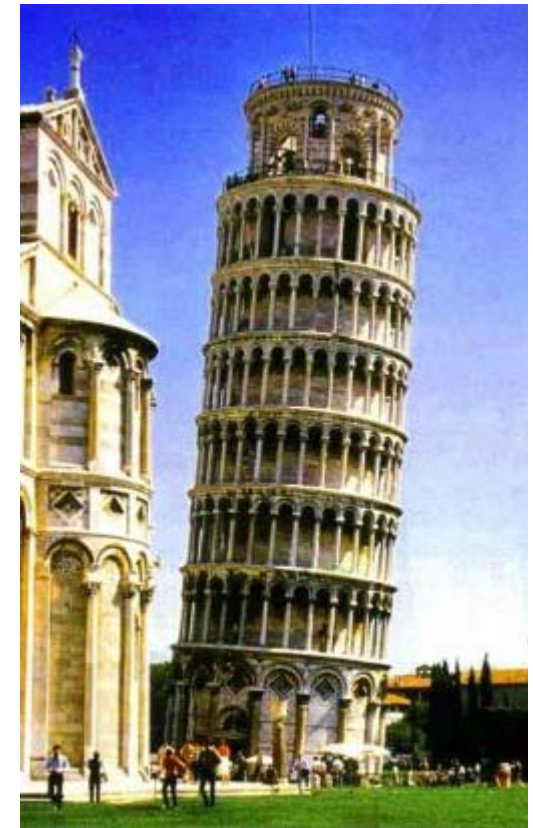
The usual suspects:

➢ **Context to work**
  - **Organisational culture and function**
  - **Role in organisation**
  - **Career development**
  - **Decision latitude / Control**
  - **Interpersonal relationships at work**
  - **Home-work interface (*gender dimension*)**

➢ **Content of work**
  - **Work environment and work equipment**
  - **Task design**
  - **Workload / workpace**
  - **Work schedule**

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> **Personality factors** ('individual differences')**? Cross-over: working life *vs.* private life issues? 20:80? 50:50?**

> **Yes, but:**

- **Although the intervention may need to be different, the damage to the organisation is the same**
- **The moral & legal obligation (and good business sense) to assess <u>well-known</u> workplace risk factors remains**

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➢ **Individual: multifactorial diseases → difficult to find large effect sizes for stress, but:**

- ▪ **reasonably good epidemiological evidence for several ill-health problems (e.g., CVD), and both physical and mental health (gastrointestinal, cardiovascular and respiratory systems; immune and endocrine systems; anxiety, depression)**
- ▪ **Interaction with MSDs (the other *big* OSH problem)**

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➢ **Organisation (and society at large):**

- ▪ **increased sick leave, accidents / near-misses, turnover & 'intention to quit', industrial relations difficulties, presenteeism**

- ▪ **decrease in job satisfaction, quality, productivity, creativity, innovation** (basis on which the EU can compete with BRIC)**. Customer care, patient care, passenger safety, quality of teaching...???**

- ▪ **a contributing factor to the occurrence of harassment or violence**

➢ **Economic cost: a 3rd consideration, after ethical and legal obligations.**

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- ➢ **Risk assessment**
- ➢ **Priority: prevention at source**
- ➢ **But let's be realistic:**
  - ▪ **it is harder to do than for other risks** (more tangible or better known: 'classic').
  - ▪ **there is no recipe book: *if X, do Y***
  - ▪ **use tools & examples**

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➢ **Also more controversial:**

➢ **Well-known risk factors include aspects of work organisation, which brings questions about the balance of power at the workplace** (cf. MSDs, too)

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- ➢ **At a general level: framework agreements**
- ➢ **At workplace level: management leadership + worker participation**
  - ▪ **Worker participation is key for a good quality, sustainable risk assessment, and <u>especially</u> for a psychosocial risk assessment**
- ➢ **Are 'soft measures' enough? Do we need more (or more specific) legislation? More (targeted) inspection?**

> **"You get more with a kind word and a gun than just a kind word"**
> **– Al Capone**

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> ## Stress prevention: what works and what doesn't? (and why it does / doesn't work)
>
>   - ### need for more & better intervention research
>   - ### need for more, and more user-friendly, tools

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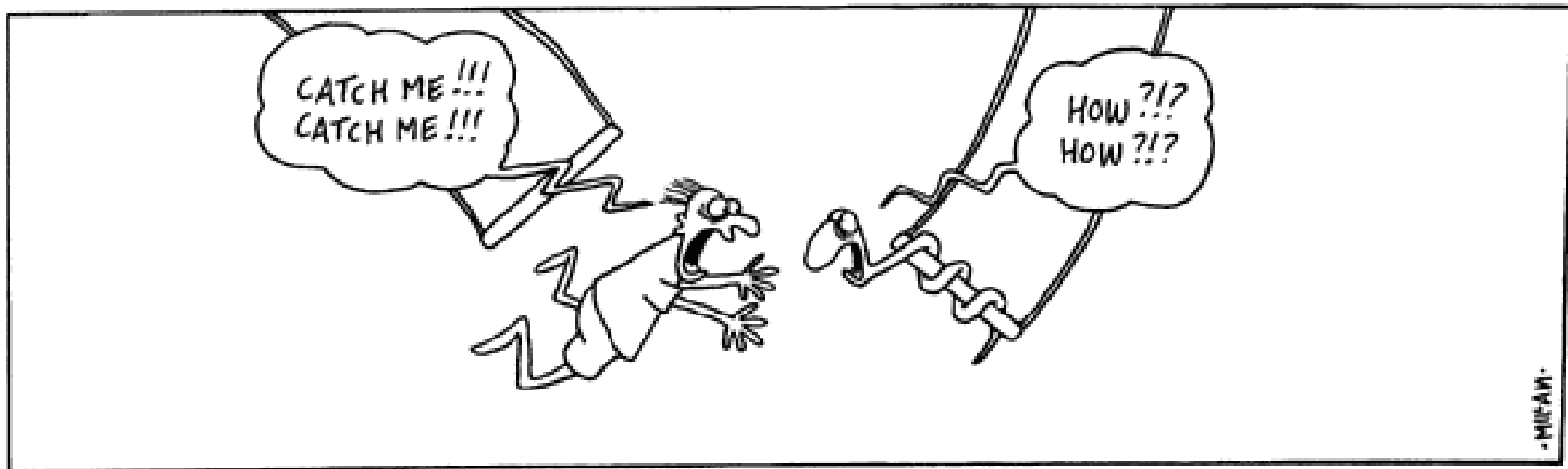
And things we <u>don't</u> know (enough about)

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- ➢ **To improve stress prevention, we need a better picture of**
  - ▪ **what are organisations currently doing to manage psychosocial risks?**
  - ▪ **why do they carry out prevention activities?** (drivers)
  - ▪ **why don't they?** (barriers)
  - ▪ **what do they need to improve their (stress) prevention?** (information & support needs)
- ➢ **ESENER**
  - ▪ **European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks**
  - ▪ **EU-27$^{+,}$ public and private sectors, $\geq$10 employees**
  - ▪ **Telephone interviews with managers and worker representatives**
  - ▪ **Fieldwork just finished: over 35,000 interviews**
  - ▪ **First results: November 2009, EU-OSHA Governing Board**

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Thank you for your attention

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