



Insights from the WS Research Group

# Work-Related Stress: *An EAP's Perspective*

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 **WARREN SHEPELL**  
*The EAP Professionals®*

# Executive Summary

Business leaders realize that stress and its consequences have real costs to the organization, and these costs are on the rise. They are looking to EAP providers such as Warren Shepell to provide information, expertise and resources on the types of stress that manifest in the workplace, and what they can do to support their employees, create healthier workplace environments and, ultimately, better control these costs.

The WS Research Group, comprised of Warren Shepell subject matter experts, has been formed to gather, analyze and provide commentary on organizational health trends that affect our clients, their employees and families.

Our first research report reviews Warren Shepell's 1999, 2000 and 2001 EAP cases specifically with respect to the frequency and severity of work-related issues. We find that:

- a. Workplace stress is the most frequently presented work-related issue, currently comprising about 40% of all work-related cases;
- b. In terms of their relative contributions to work-related issues, workplace stress is decreasing whereas work-related conflict and harassment are increasing; and
- c. the stress accompanying work-related issues is becoming more acute, with violence, work-related conflict, career and workplace stress all increasing based on EAP clients' self-reported stress levels at intake.

In absolute terms, work-related issues and the stress associated with them are rising along with all other sources of stress. While the proportion of clients presenting with work-related issues compared to all other issues remains stable at approximately 10%, the increases in stress severity and the rising frequency of workplace conflict and harassment present a source of concern for business leaders who face the costs and consequences of these issues in their organizations. The changing nature of work-related issues; the increasing stress caused by them – especially by conflict and harassment -- and the potential impact on the workplace provide a compelling rationale for businesses to take action.

# Abstract

A review of Warren Shepell's 1999, 2000 and 2001 EAP cases reveals that: a) workplace stress is the most frequently presented work-related issue, currently comprising about 40% of all work-related cases; b) in terms of their relative contributions to work-related issues, workplace stress is decreasing whereas work-related conflict and harassment are increasing; and c) the stress accompanying work-related issues is becoming more acute, with, violence, work-related conflict, career and workplace stress all increasing based on EAP clients' self-reported stress levels at intake. While the proportion of clients presenting with work-related issues compared to all other issues remains stable at approximately 10%, the increases in stress severity and the rising frequency of workplace conflict and harassment present a source of concern for business leaders who face the costs and consequences of these issues in their organizations.

# Introduction

Business leaders are struggling to decide the best course of action to take to better manage stress in the workplace. Most realize that stress and its consequences have real costs to the organization, and these costs are on the rise. Businesses are looking to EAP providers and other organizational health experts to provide information, expertise and resources on the types of stress that manifest in the workplace, and what they can do to support their employees, create healthier workplace environments and, ultimately, better control these costs.

By definition, EAPs are used by individuals who are experiencing some type of stress. The sources of stress that most commonly lead people to approach the EAP for help can be either personal or work-related. Stress may stem from marital or family relationships; mental health problems or addictions; feelings of anxiety or depression; child or elder care concerns; career, legal, financial or other worries; difficulties or conflict on the job, and many more issues that EAPs have been designed to help individuals identify, cope with and resolve. Although the sources of stress can be either personal or work-related (or sometimes, both), the effects are experienced both at home and at work.

This research briefing – the first in a series from the WS Research Group -- provides an in-depth look at one specific source of stress: that related to workplace issues. We reviewed work-related issues presented to the EAP to gain a more precise understanding of:

1. The incidence of work-related issues compared to non-work-related issues;
2. The types of work-related issues, and their relationship to each other;
3. The self-reported severity of stress associated with various work-related issues; and
4. Trends, changes or fluctuations in work-related issues and the respective stress levels experienced over a three-year period.

# Overview / Methodology

Warren Shepell Consultants Corp. (WSSC) identifies 32 distinct categories of psychosocial issues that may be presented to the EAP. Of these, six can be identified as primarily work-related. The six work-related categories and their definitions are:

1. **Work-related conflict:** altercations or confrontations with customers or co-workers in a work environment.
2. **Work performance issues:** concerns arising from one's ability to achieve the performance expectations or requirements of the job, or issues arising from feedback/evaluation that indicates one's performance is not meeting the expectations or requirements of the job.
3. **Career:** general concerns about one's current vocation, vocational choice, career path, or a desire to change or enhance one's current work.
4. **Workplace violence:** actual or threatened physical, verbal or emotional aggression or assault by customers, co-workers, managers/supervisors or others in the workplace.
5. **Harassment:** behaviour intended to intimidate or belittle, perpetrated by customers, co-workers or those in a position of authority, based on any of the prohibited grounds of discrimination as outlined in the Human Rights Code.
6. **Workplace stress:** negative thoughts, feelings or behaviour arising from situational stressors in the workplace; may manifest as anxiety, depression or

other feelings of physical or psychological discomfort, difficulty coping with workload, meeting deadlines or relating to others, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and/or physical symptoms such as gastro-intestinal upset, headaches, feelings of fatigue, insomnia, etc.

We tabulated the incidence of each of these work-related issues in 1999, 2000 and 2001 by measuring their frequency as presenting problems to the EAP (n=11,159 out of a total case volume of 114,684).

The six work-related categories were combined into an index called "Work-Related Issues" (WRI) for comparison purposes. We looked at the percentage contribution that each work-related issue made to the overall WRI index in 1999, 2000 and 2001. We also looked at the percentage contribution the WRI made to overall case volume in each year. This enabled us to determine changes in relative contribution to the WRI of each of the six aspects of work-related issues, changes in work-related issues as a proportion of overall case load, and any notable increases or decreases in incidence.

Finally, we reviewed the self-reported levels of stress associated with each work-related presenting category and the overall WRI. This gave us a measure of the severity of stress being experienced relative to the specific type of work-related issue that caused it, and allowed us to determine trends.

# Results / Key Findings

## Work-Related Issues Relative to Other Presenting Categories

Two of the six categories of work-related issues are among the top eight most commonly-presented issues to the EAP, with “Stress – Workplace” ranked as number six and “Work-Related Conflict” ranked as number eight.

Presenting Issue	
1	Marital / Relationship
2	“Other” (individual declines to declare their issue at Intake)
3	Child-Related Issues
4	Stress – Personal
5	Depression – Symptoms
6	Stress – Workplace
7	Separation (divorce)
8	Work-Related Conflict

## Work-Related Issues as a Proportion of Overall Case Volume

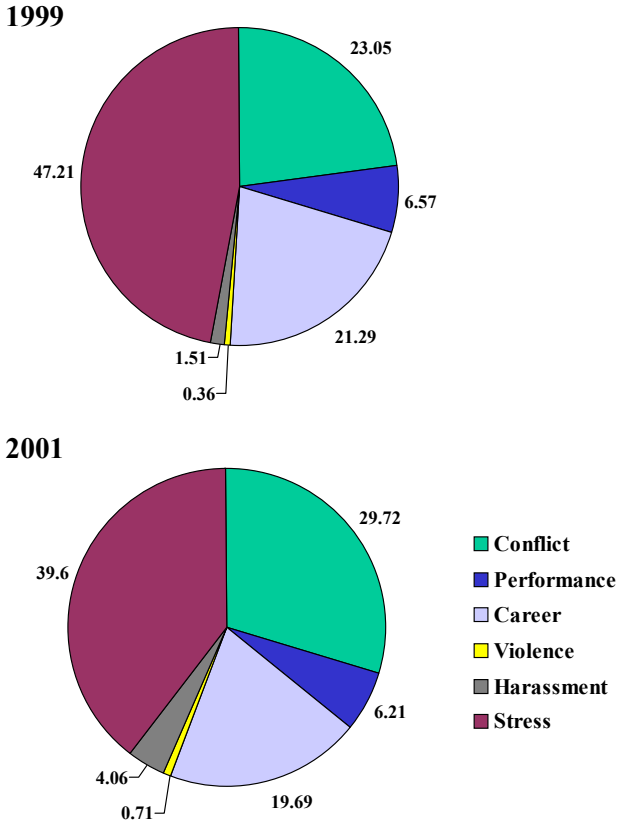
As a proportion of overall case volume, work-related issues (measured as the total contribution of WRI to overall case volume) represented 10.12% of all issues in 1999; 9.99% in 2000 and 9.22% in 2001. Note that this does not represent a statistically significant decline, as a result of the large increase in overall cases seen by the EAP between 1999 and 2001. In other words, in absolute terms, work-related issues are on the rise along with all other sources of stress, however they are remaining stable as a proportion of the total volume of cases across all categories.

## Trends Seen in Specific WRI Categories: Frequency/Proportion

### Workplace Stress

The “Workplace Stress” category was the largest contributor to the WRI in each year. Workplace stress has shown a steady decrease in terms of its overall contribution to WRI from a high of 47.2% in 1999 to a low of 39.6% in 2001 (see Table 1). This should not be interpreted as a decline in the overall incidence of workplace stress, but rather as a change in the relative proportion of workplace stress compared to other work-related issues.

Table 1: Work-Related Issues – Proportion of WRI



# Results / Key Findings

## Work-Related Conflict and Harassment

In particular, “Work-Related Conflict” and “Harassment” have risen significantly as contributors to WRI, as follows:

	1999	2000	2001
Work-Related Conflict	23.05*	32.98	29.72
Harassment	1.51	3.24	4.06

\* percentage contribution to WRI

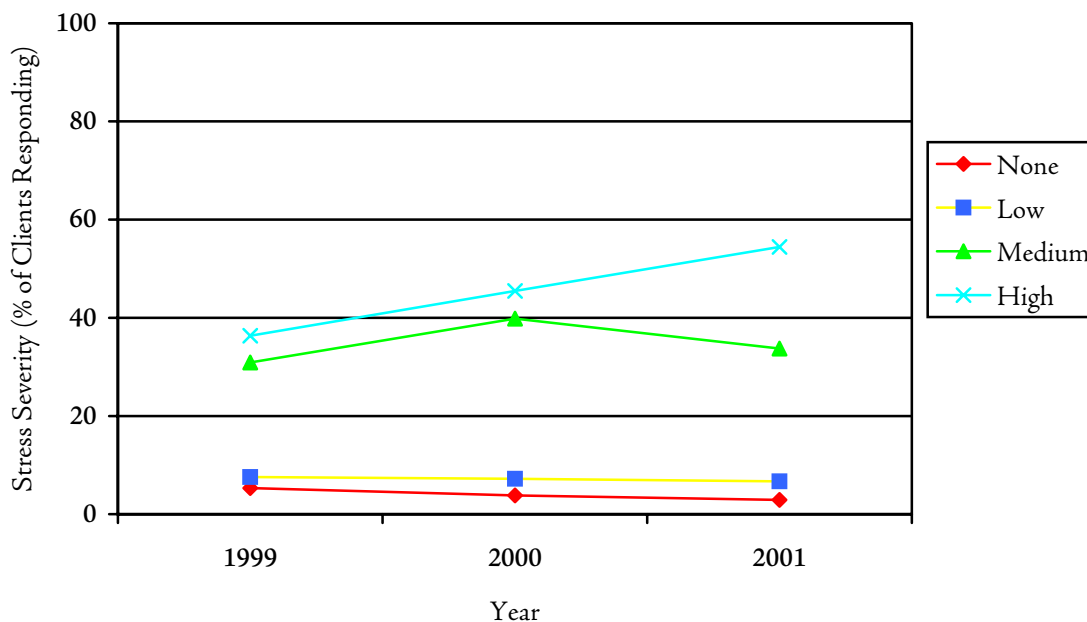
## Trends Seen in WRI Categories: Severity

### Overall

All EAP clients are asked by the Intake Counsellor during the first call to rate their level of stress as “none”, “low”, “moderate” or “high” in relation to the reason they are contacting the EAP. EAP clients rated their stress level most frequently as “high” for five of the six WRI categories, with stress associated with career issues being rated most often as “moderate.”

The WRI shows increases in the frequency of “high” ratings each year from 1999 to 2001, indicating that the stress being experienced as a result of the various work-related issues is becoming more acute, from 36.34% in 1999 to 45.5% in 2000 to 54.43% in 2001 (see Table 2).

Table 2: Three-Year Trend in Stress Severity,



# Results / Key Findings

## Workplace Violence and Work-Related Conflict

The increase in severity seen in the WRI Index parallels increases in the reporting of high levels of stress in every category over the three-year period, with workplace violence and work-related conflict contributing the greatest increases (see Tables 3 and 4). Career issues are also noted to be rising in severity in the high category, although overall they are rated most frequently as causing “moderate” levels of stress.

Table 3: Stress Severity, Work-Related Conflict

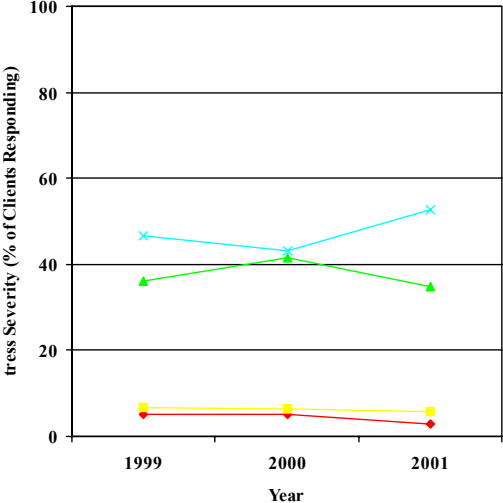
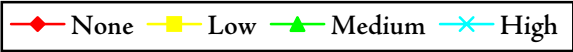
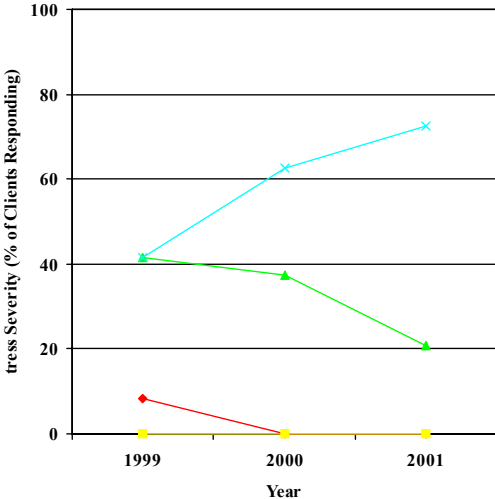


Table 4: Stress Severity, Workplace Violence



# Discussion

In absolute terms, work-related issues are on the rise along with all other sources of stress. Of even more concern, the severity of self-reported stress is increasing. Not only are work-related issues causing individuals high levels of stress, but this stress is growing more severe every year.

This is particularly true in two categories of work-related issues: workplace violence and work-related conflict. From our experience in EAP, we know these issues to be among those that have the greatest negative impact in a workplace: from serious personal consequences such as illness, injury or even death; to breakdowns in workplace relationships and teams, and negative effects on workplace morale, productivity and quality; through to potentially damaging effects on a company's corporate reputation and ability to conduct business in their marketplace. The rise in severity in career issues is also notable, and may be seen as a reflection of the challenges faced by employees attempting to manage their careers through highly turbulent and competitive times.

From our vantage point as an EAP provider, and based on our data review, there is ample evidence that organizations have significant cause for concern about work-related issues. The changing nature of these issues; the increasing stress caused by them and the potential impact on the workplace provide a compelling rationale to take action. In particular, workplace conflict and violence require swift and effective interventions that are both preventative and remedial in nature, to ameliorate their highly disruptive effects on workers and workplaces. Additional research is required to further quantify these findings, and to explore the interactive relationship between workplace and personal sources of stress and their effects.

# The WS Research Group

The WS Research Group, comprised of Warren Shepell subject matter experts, has been formed to gather, analyze and provide commentary on organizational health trends that affect our clients, their employees and families. Collecting and disseminating data about mental health issues, linking with some of the industry's highest profile research institutes and individual scholars, and drawing from our 24 years of expertise in the industry, the WS Research Group's mandate is to help our clients and the broader business community understand the intricacies and the impact of poor mental health, work/life imbalances and related issues in our workplaces and in our communities.

This data review was conducted by Jennifer Watson, Research Associate, with clinical review by Gerry Smith, VP Organizational Health and Fran Pilon, National Director, Clinical Operations, under the direction of Karen Seward, VP Research and Development.

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