

Stress at Work

What is stress?

Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them. There is a clear distinction between pressure, which can create a 'buzz' and be a motivating factor, and stress, which can occur when this pressure becomes excessive.

The well-being of all employees is essential to both their physical and mental health. Whilst pressures outside of work can affect health and well-being, an employer should be suitably controlling the factors within work that may affect the health of employees by promoting a good, supportive working climate and environment, and a culture of openness, where employees concerned about their well-being can access appropriate support.

Poor well-being, usually a result of excessive stress, is most commonly associated with the effects of unreasonable pressures of work. Whilst this is most often seen as workload related there are other factors that can cause stress, such as:

- task-related factors - the task being physically or mentally beyond the individual's capacity, information overload, repetitive or boring tasks
- interpersonal factors - day-to-day interaction with people, abuse and harassment
- role ambiguity - the individual has no clear idea of what is expected of them
- role conflict - opposing demands are made on an individual by different people
- little or no recognition for work done
- personal threat - threat to personal safety or fear of redundancy or dismissal
- environmental factors: noise, heat, lighting or cleanliness.

Indicators of Stress

Many of the outward signs of stress should be readily noticeable, although the indications will vary considerably between individuals. Stress triggers a number of changes in the body's processes. These changes are often complex and involve a number of 'levels' such as:

- emotional - fatigue, anxiety, poor motivation in general
- cognitive - making mistakes, having accidents
- behavioural - deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness, absenteeism, excessive smoking, excessive drinking, overeating
- physiological - increased complaints regarding health such as headaches, dizziness and general aches and pains.

It is important to realise that stress can cause long-term health effects. Stress, when prolonged or particularly intense, may lead to increased health problems including physical effects, such as:

- high blood pressure
- heart disease
- ulcers
- thyroid disorders
- gastrointestinal disturbances
- psychological effects, such as anxiety and depression
- other behaviours, like skipping meals, drinking too much alcohol and excessive smoking.

Stress can also have consequences at work. It can lead to:

- an increase in sickness absence, which can result in workloads being shared among the remaining staff and possibly causing them stress
- reduced staff morale
- reduced staff performance
- staff seeking alternative employment giving organisations the expense of recruiting, inducting, and training replacement staff.

What does an employer need to do?

Responsibilities

How to identify the hazards underlying work-related stress

There are several different ways to identify, in broad terms, how big a problem work-related stress is in an organisation and where the source may be. These could be qualitative or quantitative methods.

Qualitative methods

- carrying out performance appraisals which offer an opportunity to have a one-to-one discussion about work and to explore whether people in a team are experiencing excessive pressure at work
- holding informal talks with staff to try to find out the mood of individuals or a team
- holding focus groups made up of around 8-10 people, led by a facilitator, in a one-off discussion on a particular topic
- inviting employees to a 'return-to-work' interview with their line manager following sickness absence.

Quantitative methods

These include collecting hard information that will be useful for an assessment, including the following:

- sickness/absence data - high levels of sickness absence may be an indicator of specific work related problems such as increased levels of work-related stress
- productivity data - where productivity data indicates lower than expected performance, it is worthwhile examining the reasons, through discussions with employees

- turnover - if a particular area has a higher rate of staff turnover than others, this may point to a hidden problem with work-related stress. Exit interviews are a useful way of finding out why the person has decided to leave and if work-related stress was a factor
- using a questionnaire - distributing a questionnaire can be a method of finding out the scale of the problem. This could be completed anonymously via an organisation's intranet.

Carry out Risk Assessment using the results of:

- personal observation
- task analysis
- experience gained through real incidents.

Please refer to separate guidance note on risk assessment.

Record the Significant Findings of the Assessment

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require a risk assessment to be undertaken and if the employer employs five or more employees, they must record the significant findings of the assessment, including details of any group of employees identified as being especially at risk. The findings of the assessment should be available to all employees.

A separate checklist is available and can be useful if you are trying to identify if you have stress issues in your workplace.

Review the Assessment at Appropriate Intervals

Risk assessments should be reviewed whenever there is reason to believe that they are no longer valid, and employees or their representatives should be involved in the process. The assessment should also be revised if there are any future events that could affect employees, for example, a change in senior management, a merger or the threat of redundancies. In addition to this, if there are changes in a person's domestic life they should be considered, to see how they may affect the risk assessment – but only if the person has volunteered the information.

Employers' Policies on Work-related Stress

Employers with five or more employees are required to implement a written health-and-safety policy. This should include policy on work-related stress, aiming to prevent work-related stress and outline the commitment from the top of an organisation, and the arrangements which have been put in place to prevent undue stress. In the event of complaints of work-related stress, there should also be arrangements in place for investigation. The prevention of work-related stress should be foremost, as prevention is generally better than cure.

The policy should also identify the appointed competent persons who will carry out the stress risk assessments and manage any stress-related issues.

As with all policies and procedures, it will need to be reviewed from time to time to ensure it remains valid and useful.

An example policy is available as a separate guidance note.

Employee Responsibilities

Individual employees have a clear responsibility to themselves and others to minimise excessive pressures and demands by behaving responsibly, acting reasonably and reporting any concerns regarding stress to their line managers. Managers cannot be expected to act on problems they are not made aware of.

Employees must:

- raise issues of concern or lack of training, with their line manager or human resources
- accept opportunities for counseling when recommended
- be meaningfully involved in the risk assessment process
- approach their human resources department for advice on stress related issues
- ensure, as far as they are able, that they are supportive of all colleagues
- report cases of bullying or harassment.

Managerial Responsibility

Managers have a critical role in managing employee well-being and minimising issues. Once problems are identified, managers should be prepared to discuss related issues with employees, and seek to develop individual action plans where reasonable and appropriate. These plans should not be open-ended, but be time-limited and reviewed at agreed stages.

Whilst managers have day-to-day responsibility, it is only likely to be successful in an organisation in which the policies and procedures are present, respected and properly resourced to enable the control of stress to be suitably – and not excessively – implemented to ensure effective and efficient contribution to the employee well being.

The means by which managers can contribute to the control of stress will include the following:

- conduct stress risks assessments and implement recommendations from them within their jurisdiction
- offer support to an employee who is experiencing stress either inside or outside work, e.g. bereavement or separation, and facilitate support from elsewhere as necessary
- be aware of the training and development needs of employees, especially when an employee is taking on a new or changed role
- maintain good communication at all times, particularly where there are organisational and procedural changes and this should be 'face-to-face' communication
- monitor and review workloads to ensure that they do not become excessive and that people are not overloaded
- manage poor performance and attendance effectively in order to prevent unnecessary pressures on colleagues
- monitor working hours and overtime to ensure that employees are not overworking and monitor holidays to ensure that employees are taking their full entitlement
- ensure that bullying and harassment is not tolerated
- encourage open discussion at team meetings and adopt an 'open door' policy, which will encourage approachability and will assist in identifying problems at an early stage, allowing early intervention.

Seven Risk Factors for Work-Related Stress, starting with 'culture'

These seven risk factors are inter-related and so the HSE recommends thinking of the issue of 'job design' as a whole, instead of taking action on one element at a time:

Factor 1 - Culture

An organisation has a positive culture for work-related health when:

- stress and health issues are treated seriously and the organisation responds positively to any concerns
- there is good, open, communication between employees, and between employees and management
- staff are consulted and, where possible, able to participate in decisions that may affect them
- staff are supported emotionally and practically
- staff 'buy into' their work
- problems are recognised and solved promptly
- working long hours is not encouraged
- staff are not encouraged to take work home.

The way these issues are managed can influence how committed employees feel towards the organisation and how committed they feel the organisation is to their welfare. It can also affect how willing employees are to talk about matters that are causing them genuine concern.

Factor 2 - Demands

Demands placed on individual are often the main cause of work-related stress. Demands can include a person being overloaded or under-loaded with work, or be expected to carry out tasks, which are above, or below their capability.

Employees faced with work overload may try to cope by working excessive hours, which may lead to health problems and problems outside work. Employees may also take work home, which can be detrimental to their family and social life. On the other hand, it is important to remember that most staff need to have a certain amount of challenge and pressure to keep them interested in the work and motivated. Job under-load, associated with repetitive, routine, boring and under stimulating work can lead to the employee feeling dissatisfied and under-utilised. The key is to strike the right balance through discussion with all those involved in the work.

Aspects of the physical environment that can affect employees include noise, vibration, temperature, ventilation, humidity, lighting and hygiene. The psychosocial environment needs to be considered too including the exposure of staff to violence.

The HSE suggests the following ideas to help employers manage the demands placed on their employees:

- ensure there are sufficient resources to do the work
- if people are under-loaded, think about giving them more responsibility, but make sure they have been adequately trained
- strike a balance between ensuring that employees are interested and busy, but not under-loaded, overloaded, or confused about the job
- train staff so they are able to do their jobs

- encourage staff to talk to someone if they feel they cannot cope
- talk to employees regularly about what needs to be done to enable understanding about the challenges teams are facing and any pressures they are under.

Factor 3 - Control

Control is the amount of say an individual has in how their work is carried out. The HSE suggests:

- giving more control to staff by enabling them to plan their own work, make decisions about how that work should be completed and how problems should be tackled
- enriching jobs by ensuring that staff are able to use various skills to get tasks completed, and that staff can understand how their work fits in with the wider aims of the organisation
- only monitoring employees' output if it is essential - instead regular meetings with staff could be arranged to see how things are going
- creating a supportive environment - staff need to know that managers will support them, even if things go wrong or if they find that they are unable to cope with added pressures.

Factor 4 - Relationships

The term 'relationships' describes the way people interact with other people at work for business purposes. Other people can be important sources of support, but they can also be sources of stress. At work, relationships with bosses, peers and subordinates can dramatically affect the way people feel at the end of the day.

There are two particular aspects of relationships that can lead to work-related stress and they are bullying and harassment. They are two forms of behaviour that are unacceptable in organisations and almost inevitably generate stress and can lead to stress-related illnesses.

The HSE's ideas on how to manage relationships include:

- working in partnership with staff to ensure that bullying and harassment never emerge as an issue and by having disciplinary and grievance procedures in place, to deal with instances of unacceptable behaviour
- consulting with staff and trade unions to draw up effective policies to reduce or eliminate harassment and bullying
- communicating the policies and making it clear that senior management fully supports them
- communicating the consequences of breaching the policies
- creating a culture where members of the team trust each other and can be themselves while they are at work
- encouraging staff to recognise the individual contributions of other team members and the benefits of the whole team pulling together.

Factor 5 - Change

Many organisations have undergone significant change in order to take into account new technology, competition and changing market conditions. Such radical change will be a continuing feature of life in business and public administration.

Often the response of organisations has included restructuring, downsizing and adopting entirely new ways of working. Poor management of change can lead to any individual in the organisation feeling anxious about their employment status, and reporting work-related stress.

The HSE suggests when managing change, employers should:

- explain what the organisation wants to achieve and why it is essential that the change take place - explain the timetable for action and what the first steps are going to be. Talk about what the change will mean in terms of day-to-day activity and discuss whether there are any new training needs
- communicate new developments quickly to avoid the spread of rumours in the organisation. If the organisation is planning a major change, staff are likely to be discussing job security, whether they will need to relocate, and whether their terms and conditions will change
- encourage face-to-face communication so that people have the opportunity to ask questions and say what they feel
- have an 'open door' policy where staff can talk about their concerns or any suggestions they have for improving the way the change is managed
- give staff the opportunity to comment and ask questions before, during, and after the change
- involve staff in discussions about how jobs might be developed and changed and in generating ways of solving problems
- support staff during a change
- help staff who are to be made redundant by the change by giving them the skills they need to find a new job; e.g., by helping them to write a CV and prepare for interviews
- after the change, think about revising work objectives to avoid role conflict and role ambiguity
- revise the risk assessment to see if any changes - e.g., a decrease in staff numbers - have resulted in increased hazards to staff.

Factor 6 - Role

Stress levels can be reduced by ensuring that a person's role in the organisation is clearly defined and understood, and that the expectations placed on them do not conflict.

The HSE suggests employers:

- make sure staff have a clearly defined role; e.g., through a personal work plan which enables them to understand exactly their roles and responsibilities
- encourage staff to talk to someone at an early stage if they are not clear about priorities or the nature of the task to be undertaken
- talk to all staff regularly to make sure that they are completely clear about their current job, what it entails, what is expected of them and what they can expect in return
- make sure that new members of staff receive a comprehensive induction to the organisation
- if the organisation has gone through change, check with members of staff to make sure they understand their new roles and are comfortable with them.

Factor 7 - Support, training and factors unique to the individual

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 state that every employer should provide adequate health-and-safety training. Staff must be competent, feel comfortable doing their jobs and should receive adequate training to provide them with the knowledge and skills they need.

The way staff are supported is the key to reducing, or moderating, work-related stress. The way that support is provided can vary from offering help in times of crisis, through to informally congratulating a member of the team for 'a job well done'.

Individual differences must be considered, for example, some members of a team may thrive on working to tight deadlines, and others may like to plan their work so that they know what they have to do and when. These differences should be managed by talking to staff as a team - in order to allocate the work in a way that suits all team members.

The HSE suggest the following stress prevention ideas:

- give support and encouragement to staff, even when things go wrong
- listen to staff and agree a course of action for tackling any problems - it is important for staff to feel that the contribution they make at work is valued
- involve staff - they need to 'do their bit' to identify problems and work towards agreed solutions; encourage staff to share their concerns about work-related stress at an early stage
- provide staff with suitable and sufficient training to do their jobs
- give new staff a proper induction into the organisation
- take into account that people's skills and the way they approach work will differ
- value diversity - don't discriminate against people on grounds of age, race, sex or disability or other irrelevant reasons
- encourage a healthy work-life balance
- encourage staff to take their annual leave entitlement and their meal breaks.

Overview - Key Action Steps

- Employers should have a positive management culture based on communication and training. This should ensure employees understand and enable them to carry out their duties with the minimum amount of stress.
- Job structure should be well defined and includes a variety of duties. Employees should be appropriately qualified and experienced in order for them to fulfil their duties.
- Workloads should be regularly monitored so that targets are achievable and are not seen to be unreasonable.
- Work schedules should be flexible and well planned.
- Staff participation is important and employees should be invited to contribute their ideas.
- Employees should be encouraged to socialise and interact with each other in order to foster good working relationships.
- Provision of stress counselling services which allow employees to discuss
- Stressful work situations in confidence can be beneficial in reducing stress.

Further Information and References

The HSE Stress website has a number of useful pages of information, available at:
www.hse.gov.uk/stress/

Details of the HSE's Management Standards can be found at:
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>

Other sources of information are available at:

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work: <http://osha.europa.eu/en>

TUC: http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/index.cfm?mins=37

Directgov: <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Employment/HealthAndSafetyAtWork/index.htm>

Business Link:
<http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/detail?type=RESOURCES&itemId=1074428207>

NHS Employers: <http://www.nhsemployers.org/practice/practice-233.cfm>