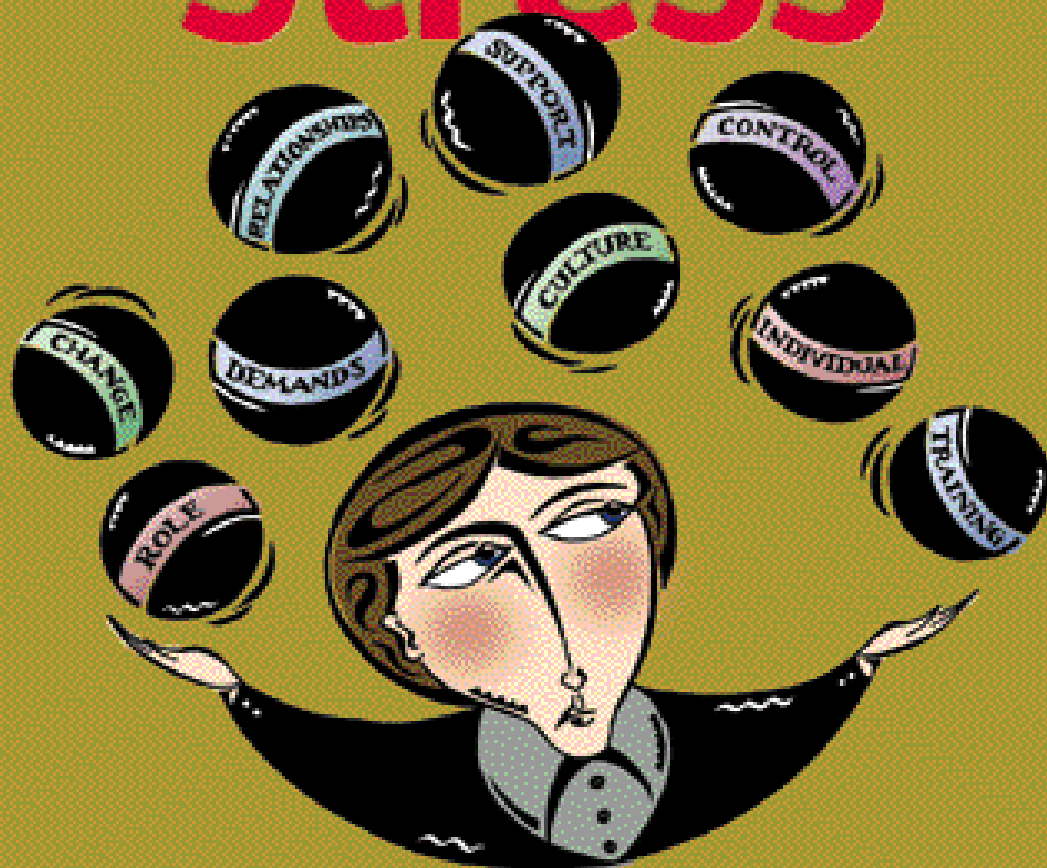


Work-related
stress



A short guide



This booklet answers some common questions about work-related stress. It explains what it is, and what you can do about it. The advice is intended specifically for managers of small firms, or organisations employing up to 50 staff. If you employ more than 50 people, you may find our more detailed guide, *Tackling work-related stress: A managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being*, more useful. The booklet does not introduce any concepts that are different from good management. Our belief is that plain good management can reduce work-related stress where it is already occurring, and can prevent it in the first place.





What is stress?



Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure. It isn't a disease. But if stress is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill health (eg depression, nervous breakdown, heart disease).



But stress can be a good thing, can't it?



No! Being under *pressure* often improves performance. It can be a good thing. But when demands and pressures become excessive, they lead to *stress*. And it's clear from the recognised symptoms of stress that it's actually *bad* for you.



As an employer, is it my concern?



Yes. It's your duty in law to make sure that your employees aren't made ill by their work. And stress *can* make your employees ill. Also, action to reduce stress can be very cost-effective. The costs of stress to your organisation may show up as high staff turnover, an increase in sickness absence, reduced work performance, poor timekeeping and more customer complaints. Stress in one person can also lead to stress in staff who have to cover for their colleague. Also, employers who don't take stress seriously may leave themselves open to compensation claims from employees who have suffered ill health from work-related stress. Fortunately, reducing stress need not cost you a lot of money.




Under health and safety law, what must I do about stress?



Where stress caused or made worse by work could lead to ill health, you must assess the risk. A risk assessment for stress involves:

- looking for pressures at work that could cause high and long-lasting levels of stress;
- deciding who might be harmed by these; and
- deciding whether you are doing enough to prevent that harm.



If necessary, you must then take reasonable steps to deal with those pressures. You must review the assessment whenever you think that it may no longer be valid. You should make sure that you involve your employees – including Trade Union safety representatives where they have been appointed – at every stage of the assessment process.

Q

Isn't stress also caused by problems outside work? Are you saying I have to do something about that?

A

You're not under a legal duty to prevent ill health caused by stress due to problems outside work, eg financial or domestic worries. But non-work problems can make it difficult for people to cope with the pressures of work, and their performance at work might suffer. So being understanding to staff in this position would be in your interests.

Q

Are some people more likely to suffer from stress than others?

A

We're all vulnerable to stress, depending on the pressure we're under at any given time: even people who are usually very hardy. As an employer, you're responsible for making sure that work doesn't make your employees ill. If you notice that someone is particularly vulnerable because of their circumstances, look at how their work is organised. See if there are ways to relieve the pressures so that they do not become excessive. However, unless you know otherwise, you could assume that all your employees are mentally capable of withstanding reasonable pressure from work.

Q

How do I recognise stress in a particular person?

A

Many of the outward signs of stress in individuals should be noticeable to managers and colleagues. Look in particular for changes in a person's mood or behaviour, such as deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness, absenteeism or reduced performance. Those suffering from stress may also smoke or drink alcohol more than usual or even turn to drugs. They might also complain about their health: for example they may get frequent headaches.



How do I find out if stress could be a problem for my firm or organisation?



First, take informal soundings to get some idea of what problems there might be: for example, see if your staff are disillusioned with their work. This may show up as an increase in absenteeism (especially frequent short spells of sickness), lateness, disciplinary problems or staff turnover, or a reduction in output or quality of product or service. There may, of course, be other reasons for these symptoms, but if they could be related to stress at work, get your staff to tell you about it by:

- talking and listening to them. You could base the discussion on the sort of pressures mentioned in the middle of this booklet;
- asking them to describe the three 'best' and the three 'worst' aspects of their job, and whether any of these put them under uncomfortable pressure.

You can use the information you collect to identify common and persistent pressures, and who might be harmed by them.

Several off-the-shelf questionnaires do the same kind of thing. These can be helpful but tend to be lengthy and may not ask the type of questions that are relevant to your organisation. Also, interpreting the findings may require specialist knowledge.

Remember to:

- respect the confidentiality of your staff;
- tell your staff what you plan to do with any information you collect;
- involve them, as much as possible, in subsequent decisions;
- involve safety representatives, if you have them, in your plans and decisions;
- if you employ five or more staff, record the important findings from your risk assessment, for example by writing them down;
- check from time to time that the situation hasn't changed.



If I do find out that stress is, or could be, a problem, what can I do about it?



There's no single best way of tackling work-related stress. What you do will depend on your working practices and the causes of the problem. But only providing training or help (or both) for sufferers won't be enough – it won't tackle the source of the problem! The boxes in the middle of this booklet show some of the pressures at work that might be relevant to smaller organisations, along with some suggestions about what to do.



Control

Problems that can lead to stress

- lack of control over work activities

What management can do

- give 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

Relationships

Problems that can lead to stress

- poor relationships with others
- bullying, racial or sexual harassment

What management can do

- provide training in interpersonal skills
- set up effective systems to prevent bullying and harassment (ie, a policy, agreed grievance procedure and proper investigation of complaints)

Change

Problems that can lead to stress

- uncertainty about what is happening
- fears about job security

What management can do

- ensure good communication with staff
- provide effective support for staff throughout the process

Role

Problems that can lead to stress

- staff feeling that the job requires them to behave in conflicting ways at the same time
- confusion about how everyone fits in

What management can do

- talk to people regularly to make sure that everyone is clear about what their job requires them to do
- make sure that everyone has clearly defined objectives and responsibilities linked to business objectives, and training on how everyone fits in

Support and the individual

Problems that can lead to stress

- lack of support from managers and co-workers
- not being able to balance the demands of work and life outside work

What management can do

- support and encourage staff, even when things go wrong
- encourage a healthy work-life balance
- see if there is scope for flexible work schedules (eg flexible working hours, working from home)
- take into account that everyone is different, and try to allocate work so that everyone is working in the way that helps them work best



Remember to:

- involve your staff and their representatives – they are certain to have good ideas you could use;
- follow up any changes you make to ensure that they're having the effect you intended;
- review what you've done when you make major changes in your workplace (eg organisational change, new equipment, work systems or processes) to make sure that stress hasn't increased;
- lead by example – as a manager, you can communicate powerful signals about the importance of avoiding stress.



But why would employees want to tell me about their stress?



You're right. Employees may be reluctant to admit they are feeling stressed by work. This is because being stressed can be seen as a sign of weakness. You can help by making it easier for your staff to discuss stress. Reassure them that the information they give you will be treated in confidence.



What can I do to prevent stress from becoming a problem?



Most of the 'things to do' boil down to good management. They're ongoing processes that need to be built into the way your organisation is run.

- Show that you take stress seriously, and be understanding towards people who admit to being under too much pressure.
- Encourage managers to have an open and understanding attitude to what people say to them about the pressures of their work, and to look for signs of stress in their staff.
- Ensure that staff have the skills, training and resources they need, so that they know what to do, are confident that they can do it and receive credit for it.
- If possible, provide some scope for varying working conditions and flexibility, and for people to influence the way their jobs are done. This will increase their interest and sense of ownership.
- Ensure that people are treated fairly and consistently and that bullying and harassment aren't tolerated.
- Ensure good two-way communication, especially at times of change. Don't be afraid to listen.

Ask yourself whether you do these things. If you don't, or are unsure whether you do, take another look at the suggestions on 'what management can do' in the boxes in the middle of the booklet.



What should I do if an employee complains about being stressed?



First, listen to them! If the stress is work-related:

- try to address the source(s);
- involve the employee in decisions;
- if necessary, encourage them to seek further help through their doctor;
- if you are not their line manager, ensure that he or she treats the employee with understanding and maintains confidentiality.

Where you can't control the work-related sources of stress, it may be appropriate to move the employee if you can. If a period of sick leave is recommended, keep in touch with the employee and their doctor. Remember that they may be able to return to work to do part of their job, work reduced hours or do a different job, before they are ready to return to their old one. Try to be flexible!

Don't be tempted to think that firing someone provides an easy way out! If you don't act reasonably in dismissing an employee, they could claim unfair dismissal.

Finally, bear in mind that if one of your employees is suffering from work-related stress, they may represent the tip of an iceberg. Find out whether others are also experiencing stress at work.



Should I be providing stress management training?



Stress management training comes in various forms. It usually teaches people to cope better with the pressures they may come across. Because it focuses on the individual, it tends not to tackle the causes of stress at work. However, it can be useful as part of a 'bigger plan' to tackle work-related stress.



Should I be providing a professional counselling service or an Employee Assistance Programme?



A counselling service is usually paid for by employers. It provides counsellors to whom individuals can talk privately about their problems. An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) can provide various services (eg counselling, performance management, financial advice, legal assistance). You're not under any legal obligation to provide such services. Also, because these services must protect the confidentiality of the individual, the information they can give you may not help you tackle the causes of stress at work. On the other hand, like training, they can be useful as part of a 'bigger plan' to tackle work-related stress. So, consider carefully whether such services would fit your needs and provide value for money for your organisation.



Do I need external consultants to help me deal with this?



In most cases, complex and expensive risk management procedures aren't necessary to tackle stress. Ordinary good management and regard for people may well be as effective as a high profile approach that might be recommended by outside consultants. But if you're worried that stress is a major problem and you can't deal with it internally, you could think about taking on an external consultant to help you. Make sure you choose them with care! Sources of help are listed below.



Where can I get more information or help?



General advice is available from:

InfoLine, a confidential HSE phone service. Your calls will be charged at the national call rate. Tel: 08701 545500.

Your local HSE Inspector or the HSE Employment Medical Advisory Service (listed under 'Health and Safety Executive' in the phone book).

Your local authority inspector (listed under 'Local Authorities' in the phone book).

The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) can provide information and leaflets on employment rights and good management practices (listed under 'ACAS' in the phone book).

Chambers of Commerce can provide information and advice, consultancy services and training on a range of business-related issues, including health and safety. For details of your nearest Chamber, contact 020 7565 2000.

Employers' associations can sometimes provide advice on the problems that may lead to stress.

In March 2001, the Government launched a national campaign – *Mind Out for Mental Health* – to combat the stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health. *Working Minds* is the employer programme of the campaign. This part of the campaign works in partnership with employers to help improve workplace policy and practice on mental health. Visit www.mindout.net for more information.



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Advice on aspects of mental health is available from:

The Health Development Agency, Trevelyan House,
30 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 2HW (Tel: 020 7222 5300).

The Health Education Board for Scotland, Woodburn House,
Canaan Lane, Edinburgh EH10 4SG (Tel: 0131 536 5500).

The National Assembly for Wales, Health Promotion Division – HP3, Cathays
Park, Cardiff CF10 3NQ (Tel: 02920 825111).

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Information on Employee Assistance Programmes is available from:

EAPA (UK), Premier House, 85 High Street, Witney, Oxon, OX8 6LY
(Tel: 0800 783 7616).

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Advice on choosing external consultants is available from:

The British Psychological Society, St Andrews House,
48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR (Tel: 0116 254 9568).

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Also, you might like to refer to the following publications:

*Tackling work-related stress: A managers' guide to improving and maintaining
employee health and well-being* HSG218 HSE Books 2001 ISBN 0 7176 2050 6

Managing work-related stress: A guide for managers and teachers in schools
HSE Books 1998 ISBN 0 7176 1292 9 provides good general advice that isn't
just relevant to those working in schools.


*Mental well-being in the workplace: A resource pack for management training and
development* HSE Books 1998 ISBN 0 7176 1524 3

Essentials of health and safety at work HSE Books 1994 ISBN 0 7176 0716 X

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Our leaflets *Enforcement policy statement* (HSE Books 2002 HSC15) and *What
to expect when a health and safety inspector calls* (HSE Books 1998 HSC14), tell
you what to expect from us, and what you can do if you think we have not
treated you fairly.

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the references
listed in this publication, their future availability cannot be guaranteed.



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For information about health and safety ring HSE's InfoLine Tel: 08701 545500 Fax: 02920 859260 e-mail: hseinformationservices@natbrit.com or write to HSE Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG. You can also visit HSE's website: www.hse.gov.uk

This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

This leaflet is available in priced packs of 10 from HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 2112 X. Single free copies are also available from HSE Books.

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INDG281rev1 9/02 C1000

Printed and published by the Health and Safety Executive