

This guide contains practical advice on avoiding and dealing with stress at work. It describes the nature of the problem and what the law requires. The guidance has been developed to help companies meet their responsibilities.

Definition

'Stress is the reaction that people have when they worry that they can't cope with the pressures or other types of demand placed upon them.'

Every manager and employee needs to understand the causes of stress, how to recognise it and what to do about it. By working together and using effective management techniques, you and your employees will be able to avoid most problems. This guide contains practical advice on the action you can take.

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The business case

Stress affects individual workers. Working time is lost, less work is done, therefore costs increase and overall performance suffers. In turn, workload on colleagues increases and this may cause stress for them too.

Personal performance may improve with pressure, up to a certain point. Beyond that point, continuous pressure leads to a fall in performance as the person is no longer able to cope. Signs of this are fatigue, poor judgement and bad decision making. In turn, this can lead to serious business problems.

By following this guidance, employers will be helping people to cope with stress in the workplace and elsewhere. This is beneficial to the business as well as to individuals.

Effective management of stress can: reduce absence; increase work quality and performance; reduce resistance to change; improve relationships with customers, colleagues and suppliers; and reduce staff turnover.

So, it contributes to good company performance and is a key part of a positive, proactive human resources policy.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates that millions of working days are lost in Britain due to stress, depression or anxiety, or a physical condition caused by work-related stress. The CBI has estimated that 100 million working days are lost each year due to mental health absences, accounting for about 53% of sickness absence. (Almost 190 million working days are lost in the UK each year, due to sickness.) The cost to UK industry alone is about £3.7 billion.

The legal case

All employers owe a legal duty of care to their employees. Under health and safety law, injury to mental health is treated in the same way as injury to physical health.

The legal duty to protect the health of workers, under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, applies equally to the control of stress caused or made worse by work. There have been several well-publicised, successful civil actions by employees for damages caused by stress at work. The number of actions is increasing.

To date, the civil actions have been successful because it has been possible for the claimant to prove 'foreseeability'. The watershed case—1994 'Walker v Northumberland County Council'—illustrates this point. Walker suffered a second nervous breakdown after returning to work in a similar environment with similar workload and responsibilities as before, despite medical advice to his employer that he should not have done so. It was established that there was a foreseeable risk of further injury. The 'summing up' clarified the application of health and safety law to circumstances that could lead to mental injury.

'It is clear law that an employer has a duty to provide his employee with a reasonably safe system of work and to take reasonable steps to protect him from risks which are reasonably foreseeable. Whereas the law on the extent of this duty has developed almost exclusively in cases involving physical injury to the employee as distinct from injury to his mental health, **there is no logical reason why psychiatric damage should be excluded from the scope of an employer's duty of care.**'

People with substantial and long-term mental impairment, which may have arisen or been made worse because of stress, are also protected under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

What is stress?

2

Stress is the reaction people have when they feel they cannot cope with the pressures or other demands placed upon them. These demands may arise from home or work. When the person no longer feels able to cope ill health may result.

Stress can have many different causes, and signs of stress can take different forms. Every manager and employee needs to understand how to recognise stress, how it arises and what to do about it.

How do you recognise stress?

3

3.1 What to look for in others

Some people show an acute reaction to stress. In others, the symptoms may appear over time, and may be mistaken for other health problems.

An immediate acute reaction is like panic, with anxiety, racing pulse, flushing, sweating, dry mouth or trembling. Severe sustained stress can cause headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, aching neck and shoulders, or skin rashes.

Look out for:

- poor performance at work, including uncharacteristic errors, memory lapses, indecisiveness
- withdrawal of interest or commitment - arriving late, leaving early
- aggressive behaviour, such as bullying or criticising others
- immature or emotional behaviour, such as crying, sulking or bad temper
- fixation - for example repeating arguments in meetings, refusing to listen to suggestions, insisting on using inadequate solutions.

See appendix B (page 15) for more details.

3.2 What to look for in yourself

Physical signs

- headaches
- tension
- indigestion
- breathlessness
- rashes
- frequent colds
- recurrence of previous illness

Mental signs

- inability to concentrate
- worrying
- mistakes
- muddled thinking
- persistent negative thinking

Behavioural signs

- unsociability
- restlessness
- lying
- reckless driving
- increased drinking or smoking

Emotional signs

- irritability
- tension
- moodiness
- alienation
- dissatisfaction

See appendix C (page 15) for a full list. Use as a self-awareness check-list for you and your staff.

4.1

Stress can have many different causes or *stressors*, both at work and outside it. Some people cope well, others less well, with the same stressors, depending on personality and circumstances. Stressors at home may well affect those at work, and the other way round.

4.2 When does pressure turn to stress?

Pressure is not necessarily the same as stress. The right amount of pressure stimulates us to succeed, and success gives us satisfaction. Problems arise when pressure is too great, goes on for too long, or comes from too many directions at once. Some people may feel they are losing control; and this leads to stress.

4.3 Stress factors at work

People may feel unhappy about:

- the type of work they do — too boring or too difficult, too much responsibility or too little, never meeting the public or constantly facing their complaints
- the people they work with - their boss or their colleagues
- pay and conditions
- lack of support or communication within the organisation — feeling isolated or ill-informed
- an ill defined role or conflicting priorities
- the system of control, rules and rewards — rigid, lax or inconsistent
- failing to do something well enough
- career prospects
 - frustration
 - insecurity
 - limited promotion
 - over-promotion
 - lack of recognition
 - insufficient training

4.4 How to improve things

Factors that increase job satisfaction and reduce stress include:

- challenge
- success
- recognition
- rewards
- responsibility and control
- working with compatible people
- belonging to a worthwhile organisation
- having a clear role, objectives and priorities

In the legal framework of health and safety, stressors can be a workplace hazard and should be managed and controlled in the same way as other hazards, through risk assessment. However, this is difficult to do. Stressors can be hard to spot, and their effects are not always easy to predict.

The first step is to find out what you are dealing with, through risk assessment. Then you can plan how to tackle the problem using the principles of good management practice.

5.1 The main steps in carrying out a risk assessment are:

- identify the hazards, in this case the stressors
- evaluate the risk associated with the hazards
- decide on appropriate control strategies in line with good management practice — to reduce stress or exposure to it, or to improve people's ability to cope with it
- monitor the effectiveness of the controls
- review and, where necessary, reassess the risks

Risk assessment is part of everyday life and health and safety management. You should always be on the look-out for hazards. You must be ready to modify work practices to avoid or reduce risks — and to modify it again after checking how effective your measures have been.

By doing a risk assessment, you will be raising awareness of the issue throughout the business. Remember, because the assessment is about how people feel about stressors, it may be more difficult to reach firm conclusions.

5.2

Good management practice means taking the initiative, rather than waiting for a problem to arise. The three basic elements of this approach are:

■ Increase awareness and understanding

make sure managers and supervisors recognise signs of stress and know what to do about them

■ Avoid and minimise stress

review job design, organisation and management style
review contact and communication with people
encourage personal development and provide support

■ Help people to cope

build up their coping skills
tell them about sources of help
make sure they have access to these sources

5.3 Monitor and review

Monitoring the way your strategies are working, reviewing their success and re-appraising risks should be a continuing process.

Take special care during critical periods for the company — such as redundancies, restructuring, change of ownership or relocation — when staff are likely to feel worried about their role or prospects.

5.4 Communication

Communication is important at all levels. Make sure that supervisors feel they can communicate easily and effectively with the employees, so that they are able to pick up any problems that might be causing stress at home or at work.

5.6

The most important part of managing health risks at work is to ensure you have **effective controls**.

Identifying hazards and assessing risks are not enough — you must make sure your controls work. Many of these controls are described in the table of good practice (page 9).

5.5 Who in particular is at risk?

Personality and circumstances combine to make certain people more vulnerable to stress. Are those with a previous history of mental illness at greater risk? Not necessarily. In fact their experience may make them better able to cope in the future. However, as you cannot be sure how anyone will react, you should take particular care over someone who has already suffered illness through stress.

Stress risk assessment

1

Identify the hazard ('stressors')

Consider the list of stressors in appendix A (page 13).

Do any of them exist in your workplace? If so, list them below:

2

Assess the risk

How do the stressors you've identified from appendix A apply to individuals, groups or their work environment?

Which are the most significant stressors?

Who might be at risk? Who is *most* at risk?

What is the likelihood of harm occurring?

Are individuals showing any signs of stress, or changes in behaviour listed in appendix B (page 15)?

Are you (or are you aware of anyone else) experiencing any of the symptoms listed in appendix C (page 16)?

Ask for professional advice to help assess the risk.

3

Establish adequate control

What controls are already in place?

Consider the table of management good practice (section 6).

Ask:

1 Which of the factors in the table are relevant to you?

2 Is the advice in the table being carried out in practice?

Where appropriate, organise the work to reduce the hazard and the risk, taking into account the following categories:

- Building corporate awareness and understanding
- Job design
- Structure of organisation and resources
- Management style
- Individual capability
- Access point for help

4

Monitor your controls

Are your control measures satisfactory?

5

Review

Plan to review the assessment from time to time, or when circumstances change.

The chart (page 7) will guide you through the risk assessment process. The table below outlines measures you can take to control and manage stress. These measures are in line with good management practice, as shown in column 3 (Establish adequate controls) of the risk assessment chart.

You may use the table as a checklist to assess your current practice in stress management, and as a guide to developing future strategies. Compare what you do now with the points listed in the table.

Building corporate awareness and managerial understanding

Awareness and understanding

Improve the level of awareness of stress:

- its symptoms
- its causes

Ensure that supervisors and managers:

- are able to recognise problems of stress in the workplace
- take some responsibility for dealing with it

To help them, use:

- training seminars
- booklets, leaflets and so on

Consider using stress indicators¹ to see whether there are symptoms of stress in the organisation, such as: high absenteeism; high staff turnover; poor time-keeping; poor productivity and performance; poor motivation; low morale; increase in complaints; increase in accidents, incidents, and ill-health reports.

¹Occupational stress indicators are questionnaires or systematic interviews that provide a structured analysis of a job and ask about problems outside work. They are useful to provide a baseline once an organisation has become aware of stress issues. However, they can be of limited value and may not be useful as a 'first step' when developing a strategy for stress at work.

Avoiding and minimising stress

Job Design

Incorporate:

- clear objectives
- flexibility and variety
- well managed schedules
- adequate control of hazards

Job enrichment allows:

- greater scope for personal achievement
- recognition
- more challenging or responsible work

Job rotation:

Rotate employees around different tasks to

- increase variety and interest
- provide new challenges
- help to alleviate monotony

Ergonomics:

- Good ergonomic design of work stations suits the task to the worker

Structure of the organisation and resources

Methods for planning and directing work:

- Ensure that your performance and production targets are:
 - reasonable
 - stretching
 - 'SMART²'.
- Avoid overload or lack of challenge

Resourcing:

If you now have fewer employees doing the same amount of work, or increased demand without additional workers, consider:

- Changing work practices
- Enabling people to work more 'smartly'.

This may be through introducing new technology, or re-appraising with everyone what work they do and how they do it.

² 'SMART': specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-based

Avoiding and minimising stress continued...

Management style

Employee involvement:

- Ensure good communications with employees
- Involve employees in planning and organising their own job.

Team work:

- Operate in teams
- Vary tasks
- Let individuals do tasks from beginning to end.

Training:

- Use careful selection procedures for new or significantly restructured jobs
- Ensure that staff have the skills and knowledge and the confidence required
- Provide training for managers - for example, on:
 - stress awareness and recognition
 - managing pressure
 - counselling skills
 - managing change in their department
 - assertiveness
 - managing conflict

Helping the individual to cope

Individual capability

Remember that:

- individual capability varies
- a positive management style supports coping strategies
- people and groups who may be at risk from stress may benefit from learning coping skills

Coping skills involve:

- appropriate assertiveness
- time management
- knowing when to ask for help
- avoiding blaming others or negative behaviour
- social support from husband, wife or partner, friends, colleagues and boss
- appropriate lifestyle: exercise; sensible eating; relaxation and hobbies.

Helping the individual to cope continued...

Access point for help

- Provide contacts for employees, both inside and outside the company, in times of crisis
- Provide access to expert and confidential help through an independent agency; for example, confidential help and advice lines covering:
 - legal issues
 - domestic issues
 - financial issues
 - health issues.

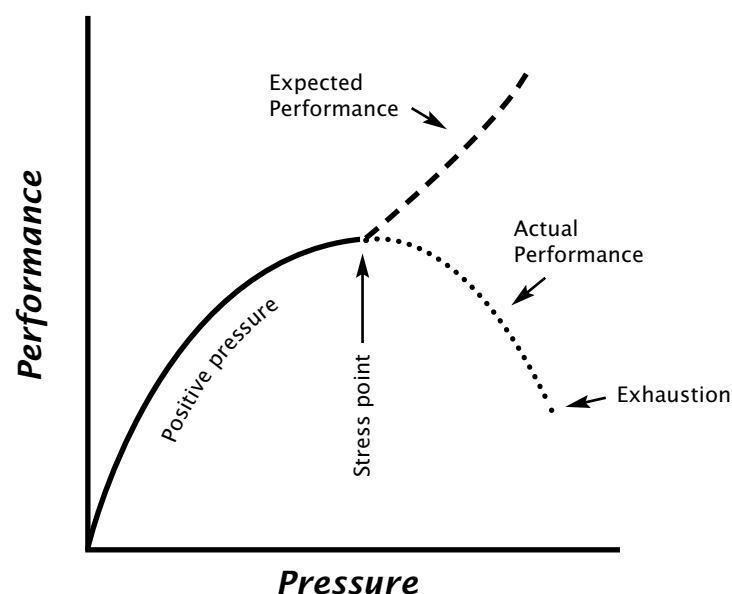
With these points of conflict, it is important to have some form of anonymous feedback to help measure their success.

At least provide a readily available list of local sources of advice and help, for example:

- local counselling services
- Benefits Agency
- Citizens Advice Bureau
- Samaritans
- Victim support.

Remember: For success — what you decide to do, you must do!

The Performance vs Pressure Curve



Sources of further information or help

Advice is available from:

Your regional EEF Association

INFOLINE, the HSE information phone service. Calls are charged at the national call rate. Tel: 0870 1545500

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

Advice on choosing external consultants is available from:
The British Psychological Society, St Andrews House, Leicester,
Leicestershire, LE1 7DR. (Tel: 0116 254 9568).

References:

Stress at Work: a guide for employers HS(G)116 (ISBN 0 7176 0733 X)

Help on work-related stress: a short guide IND(G)281

Mental well-being in the workplace. A resource pack for management training and development (ISBN 0 7176 1524 3)

Stress research and stress management: putting theory to work (HSE Contract Research Report 61), (ISBN 0 7176 0684 8) Professor Tom Cox

Managing occupational stress - a guide for managers and teachers in the schools sector, HSC Educational Services Advisory Committee 1990 (ISBN 0 7176 0540 X) also relevant to those outside schools

All the above available from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 6FS. Tel: 01787 881165 Fax: 01787 313995. Or order online at: www.hsebooks.co.uk

Managing Stress Managing Best Practice 18 (ISSN 1355-1515). The Industrial Society, Peter Runge House, 3 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW17 5DG
Tel: 020 7479 1000 Fax: 020 7479 1111

Organisational interventions for work stress: A risk management approach
Contract Research Report 286/2000 (ISBN 0 7176 1838 2)

Important note

This advice is intended to help companies manage stress in the workplace. The EEF is not responsible for any acts or omissions arising from its use.

Appendix A

Typical work-related stressors

A high proportion of employees' stress in the workplace arises from outside work. However, non-work and work-based stressors can act together and may sometimes lead to health problems such as mental illness.

The stressors listed below are not in any order of priority. This checklist will help you as a manager, to identify what may be an individual's stressors. Bear in mind that experiencing one or more stressors does not necessarily lead to the experience of stress. When specific workplace circumstances are examined it may become apparent that there is a range of individual responses to the same stressor.

NON-WORK

- personal stress events at home (such as divorce, bereavement)
- change in living conditions (such as moving house)
- social isolation (such as lack of friends)
- low level of support at home
- long-distance commuting
- ill health

Home and work issues

- conflicting demands of work and home
- family and schooling pressures
- problems caused by both partners following their careers

WORK-BASED

Management and style of organisation

- lack of clear company objectives and values
- poor communication or lack of information
- lack of consultation or involvement in change
- lack of management support

Role in the organisation

- unclear role in organisation
- conflicting lines of management
- conflicting objectives and priorities
- high level of responsibility for people

Career

- career uncertainty
- frustration of career ambitions
- over-promotion
- poor status or lack of recognition
- threat to job security
- insufficient training
- distant posting
- redundancy (or threat of redundancy)
- restructuring of role

Decision making or control

- low participation in decision making
- lack of control over work

Relationships at work

- social or physical isolation
- poor relationships with superiors
- interpersonal conflict
- all kinds of harassment (for example, sexual, racial or bullying behaviour)

Job and workplace design

- high uncertainty in work
- boring or repetitive work
- constant dealing with conflict and complaints, rather than the root of the problem
- significant risks to health or safety
- fear of technology or responsibility
- lack of competence

Workload or pace of work

- lack of control over pace of work
- sustained work overload or underload
- lack of prioritisation

Work schedule

- unpredictable peak loads
- inflexible or overburdensome work schedule
- unpredictable work hours
- unsocial work hours
- shift working
- excessive overtime

Source: Selected company internal guidance and guidance from Professor Tom Cox*
 (*Stress research and stress management: putting theory to work (HSE Contract Research Report 61).)

Appendix B

What might stress look like?

Listed below are possible signs of stress that managers may recognise at an early stage. Remember the cause may be home, work, personal life or any combination of these.

Work performance

- inconsistent performance
- uncharacteristic errors
- indecisiveness
- signs of tiredness
- reckless driving
- making complaints
- irritability
- lapses in memory
- references to time pressure
- resistance to change
- lack of holiday planning and taking
- longer or excessive hours

Withdrawal

- arriving late
- leaving early
- extended lunches
- absenteeism or increase sickness absence
- resignation
- passiveness or lack of commitment

Aggressive behaviour

- malicious gossip
- criticism of others
- vandalism
- shouting
- bullying, harassment

Immature behaviour

- crying
- arguments
- personality clashes
- sulking
- temper
- emotional responses

Negative behaviour

- repetitive arguments at meetings
- belligerence
- refusal to listen to advice and suggestions
- using solutions known to be inadequate

What might stress feel like?

This list³ indicates possible signs and symptoms of stress which people may experience from any cause. Everyone needs to be aware of possible changes in themselves which may alone, or with other changes, indicate stress. You could give the following information to employees to raise their awareness of physical and emotional changes which may indicate they are at risk of, or actually suffering from, stress.

Our policy

As a company, we have a policy of managing stress in our business. The following information is intended as a self-awareness sheet. Please take some time to consider whether you have recently begun to experience any of the following conditions.

³ Based on selected internal guidance from Rolls Royce plc and BP Chemicals*
(*'Managing Stress' Managing Best Practice 18 The Industrial Society.)

Physical signs

- headaches
- crying
- tension
- tiredness, cannot relax
- indigestion
- palpitations
- breathlessness
- nausea (feeling sick)
- skin irritation or rashes
- susceptibility to allergies
- excessive sweating
- clenched fists or jaw
- fainting
- frequent colds, flu or other minor infections
- constipation or diarrhoea
- rapid weight gain or loss

Intellectual signs

- difficulty in making decisions
- memory lapses or errors
- inability to concentrate, easily distracted
- tunnel vision
- bad dreams or nightmares
- worrying
- muddled thinking
- making mistakes
- less intuitive
- less sensitive
- persistent negative thoughts
- impaired judgement
- short-term rather than long-term thinking
- hasty decisions

Appendix C continued

Emotional signs

- anger or irritability
- anxiety or insecurity, feeling nervous, apprehensive
- moodiness
- sensitivity to criticism
- more suspicious
- more gloomy, depressed
- more fussy
- feeling tense
- drained, no enthusiasm
- cynical, inappropriate humour
- alienated
- feeling of pointlessness
- loss of confidence
- less satisfaction in life
- no motivation
- reduced self-esteem
- job dissatisfaction

Behavioural changes

- unsociability
- restlessness
- loss of appetite or overeating
- disturbed sleep or insomnia
- drinking more alcohol
- smoking more
- taking more work home
- too busy to relax yourself
- not looking after yourself
- lying to cover up mistakes
- antisocial behaviour
- unable to unwind
- low productivity
- accident-prone
- reckless driving
- impaired speech, for example, stammering
- voice tremmor
- withdrawing from supportive relationships
- reduced sex drive

If you are experiencing one or more of these problems for a sustained period, it is important that you get support. You can talk about this in confidence to: your supervisor, manager, personnel or Human Resources Manager, our confidential counselling service (number) (if applicable); or your family doctor.

A professional service

The EEF provides its member companies with economic analysis and appropriate advisory services in employee relations; health, safety and environment; education and training and employment law.

Health, Safety and Environmental Advice

The EEF has a national network of some 40 qualified and experienced health, safety and environmental advisers who provide a practical, cost effective and reliable training and consultancy service.

This professional service is highly regarded by manufacturing and service industries alike. Most of the EEF's H,S&E services are available to non-members, although EEF members often receive help free, or at preferential rates.

The EEF not only provides quality training, advice and information, but also represents members' views on H,S&E issues to appropriate decision-makers in the Government and the EU. It has excellent links with the HSE, IOSH, CIEH, CBI, BSI, DTI and others.

Association activities are supported by the EEF's London office at Broadway House. Full addresses are listed on the back cover.



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