

How to tackle work-related causes of stress and encourage team members to seek help at the earliest opportunity.

In 2016/17 over 526,000 people in the UK reported that work-related stress was making them ill. This amounts to nearly 12.5 million working days lost due to work-related stress, depression and anxiety.

Yet many employees are reluctant to talk about stress at work. There is still a stigma attached to stress and people still think they will be seen as weak if they admit they are struggling. But stress is not a weakness, and can affect anyone at any level of an organisation.

### **What is stress?**

Stress is defined as the 'adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'.

Most employees benefit from a certain amount of pressure in their work. It can keep them motivated and give a sense of ambition. However, when there is too much pressure placed on them, they can become overloaded. Stress can affect the health of staff, reduce their productivity and lead to performance issues.

Stress is not an illness, but the psychological impact can lead to conditions such as anxiety and depression. Stress, anxiety and depression can also increase the risk of conditions like heart disease, back pain, gastrointestinal illnesses or skin conditions.

### **Causes of stress**

There can be a variety of causes of stress. For example, financial problems, difficulties in personal relationships or moving house can all cause stress. Work can also cause stress.

Six primary causes of work-related stress can be:

1. The demands of the job - staff can become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do.
2. Amount of control over work - staff can feel disaffected and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work.
3. Support from managers and colleagues - levels of sickness absence often rise if staff feel they cannot talk to managers about issues troubling them.
4. Relationships at work - a failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying.
5. How a role fits within the organisation - staff will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them and/or understand how their work fits into the objectives of the organisation.
6. Change and how it is managed - change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to huge uncertainty and insecurity.

### **Why we should try to reduce the causes of stress at work**

Firstly, reducing work-related stress can be hugely beneficial to us:

- Making staff healthier and happier at work.
- Improving performance and making staff more productive.
- Reducing absence levels.
- Reducing workplace disputes.
- Making the organisation more attractive to job seekers.

Secondly, we have a legal obligation to ensure the health, safety and welfare of our employees. As part of this, we must conduct risk assessments for work-related stress and take actions to prevent staff from experiencing a stress-related illness because of their work.

### **Taking steps to reduce work-related stress**

If a risk assessment identifies areas where the organisation is performing poorly, we should work with staff to agree realistic and practical ways to tackle it.

Any existing consultation and/or negotiating arrangements should be followed so that staff and/or their representatives can contribute their views.

We should then develop an action plan that includes:

- What the problem is.
- How it was identified.
- The proposed solution/s.
- Actions to be taken to achieve the solution/s.
- Dates by which each action should be achieved.
- How staff will be kept informed on progress.
- A date to review the plan and see if it has achieved its aim.

Once solutions have been implemented, the review should check that agreed actions have been done and evaluate how effective these have been. The views of staff, and data collected on employee turnover, sickness absence and productivity can help compare the organisation against how it was before the action plan was implemented.

We will then need to consider what, if any, further action is needed.

### **Spotting when staff may be experiencing stress**

While identifying work-related risks and taking preventative measures should help minimise stress for most staff, it may still affect some team members due to issues inside or outside of the workplace. Managers should be prepared to help and support a team member experiencing stress.

Although training on stress can be very useful, a manager should not be expected to be an expert.

It is important to never make assumptions, but signs that a team member may be stressed include:

- Changes in the person's usual behaviour, mood or how they interact with colleagues
- Changes in the standard of their work or focus on tasks

- Appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn and reduced interest in tasks they previously enjoyed
- Changes in appetite and/or increase in smoking and drinking alcohol
- An increase in sickness absences and/or turning up late to work.

### **Talking to a team member who may be experiencing stress**

We should encourage staff to talk to their manager if they think they are becoming unwell. Creating a working environment that proactively supports staff who become unwell will make it easier for staff to tell their manager if they are experiencing stress.

If a team member does approach their manager to advise they are experiencing stress, the manager should:

- Move the conversation to a private space, where they will not be disturbed (if not already somewhere appropriate).
- Thank the team member for coming to them and letting them know.
- Be patient and allow them as much time as they need to talk about it.
- Remain focused on what they say.
- Be open minded.
- Try to identify what the cause is.
- Think about potential solutions.

If the cause of stress relates to their relationship with their manager, or other team members, it may be beneficial to involve Human Resources or a more senior manager and allow the team member to have a companion (such as a work colleague or trade union representative) at any meetings.

### **Supporting a team member experiencing stress**

Where it is possible to identify a work-related problem, a manager (in discussion with the team member) should consider what support or changes would rectify the situation. They could be temporary or permanent.

Usually small, simple changes to working arrangements or responsibilities will help ease pressures affecting the team member.

It may take a number of informal meetings with the team member to agree the best way forward. Some changes may also require authorisation from senior management or HR. A manager should explain if they believe a potential change may require authorisation and when an answer should be received.

If authorisation is refused, a manager should clearly explain the reasons why this was not practicable and try to find an alternative solution.

If changes are agreed and made, a manager should also agree with the team member what their work colleagues will be told.

Even if the cause of stress may not be work-related, changes to the team member's working arrangements may help reduce some of the pressure they are experiencing. For example, temporarily changing their working hours may reduce stress caused by caring responsibilities for an ill-relative.

## Monitoring the situation

A manager should regularly check on how a team member experiencing stress is feeling and whether any changes in place are still needed and/or working as required. This could be through planned one-to-one meetings or through informal chats in the workplace.

Even once the team member is able to resume their normal working arrangements, their manager should continue to monitor their health and offer support where necessary.

## Managing Stress (Skill Boosters video)

This film will give a better understanding of:

- the impact of employee stress
- key triggers for stress in the workplace
- how to spot the warning signs that someone may be suffering from stress
- practical steps to take to reduce stress and support good mental health
- employers' legal obligations with regards to employees' mental health
- how good management, open communication and healthy working relationships are key to our psychological well-being at work.

Skill Boosters offer a wide variety of short films and courses on challenges in the workplace. Videos can be requested in order to enhance presentations or to help support, inspire and raise awareness, please visit [Video-based training courses with Skill Boosters](#) for a full list of available resources.

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## Support available

[Counselling and advice](#) through our Employment Assistance Provider (EAP), who provide an independent and completely confidential counselling service.

Blue Light Champions - a team of experienced officers and staff there to help you and your staff to handle with stress and mental health issues.

Mindfulness Champions - a team of officers and staff trained to help you and your staff use techniques aimed and reducing stress.

Staff Support Networks - In addition to the Police Federation and our staff associations, we have a range of staff support networks.