Managing work-related stress and psychosocial risks E-guide

Psychosocial risks in the workplace can be successfully managed.

The information in this e-guide will help you understand more about stress and psychosocial risks and suggest some steps you may take to address them.

Use the menu on the left to navigate through the information, or you can start here with:

About the e-guide

Introduction to stress

About the e-guide

This e-guide has been developed as part of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) campaign on Managing Stress and Psychosocial Risks at Work. The content of this provides employers, especially those employing fewer than 50 workers, with a source of information on the following topics:

- What is and what can cause stress;

- How to manage stress;

- The legal position;

- The effects on businesses and workers.

In addition to these sections the e-guide also provides a glossary of terms and a page of resources. The resources provided include PDFs mentioned in the e-guide content, external links that require an internet connection and details on how the content can be shared with others.

If you would like more information on the EU-OSHA campaign on Managing Stress and Psychosocial Risks at Work the campaign guide or leaflet can be a good start.

This e-guide has been developed with the help of the Institute of Occupational Medicine

Introduction to stress and psychosocial risks

Two-thirds of all EU employers are exposed to work related risks which could cause illness. This has led to a fifth of all workers experiencing stress and mental health problems that they consider to be their most serious workplace health issue.

Stress can affect your business:

- Lost working days
- Low morale
- Reduced work performance

It can also affect individual workers:

- Work performance
- Physical and mental health and wellbeing
- Relationships

Work-related psychosocial risks can be successfully managed. The information in this e-guide will help you to understand more about stress and psychosocial risks and guide you in a good approach to take.

What is stress?

Stress is not being able to cope

People experience stress at work when they perceive that there is an imbalance between the demands made of them by their work and the physical and mental resources they have available to cope with those demands. Such resources can be as simple as having enough time to do all the work required or might involve being able to deal with an emotionally challenging role. Although the experience of stress is psychological, stress also affects people's physical health.

Stress is not the same as pressure

Some people use the word stress to relate to the demands and challenges they face, which we call pressure. Stress is different from pressure, which is a natural part of life. That pressure can come from many different sources (inside and outside work). It can take many forms, both self-generated (e.g. wanting to do a good job) and external (e.g. deadlines imposed by others). People work better with some (but not too much) pressure. The best level of demand at work varies between different people and also varies with the nature of what you are trying to do. We all need some pressure to work well, but some need more (or less) than others to work at their best.

Stress can happen when things get too much for you but it can also happen when there isn't enough to challenge you.

More details on stress - Different things to different people

Different things to different people

Stress is one of those words which everybody uses, but they often mean different things when they talk about it.

Here we will explain what we mean by stress, and show how this fits with other ways in which people talk about it.

Some people talk about being exposed to stress, as if stress is some form of demand or load – rather like the load on a steel girder. Others talk of suffering from stress as if it is an illness or response to those demands – which they might call 'stressors'. Neither is wrong, just different.

Preparing for action

When you are faced with physical demands, your body responds. If you have to run to catch a bus your heart rate and blood pressure will go up. You will start to breathe more quickly and deeply.

If it is a warm day your skin might flush as your body tries to lose the extra heat it is producing. Less obvious will be the release of chemical messengers (hormones) into your blood. This response dates back to when you were more likely to have to run away from a dangerous animal than run to catch a bus. If you are faced with mental demands, such as having to meet tight timescales at work, you might experience similar changes.

More details on stress – Activation and Demand

Activation

This response, which physiologists call 'activation', is potentially harmful because these hormones release the body's reserves (to fight or run away) but, when the challenge is mental, you don't 'use up' these reserves, as there is no physical activity. Some people refer to this as 'stress' or a 'stress reaction'. Again, this is not wrong, just different. But it is recognised that this is just a natural response to demands placed on the body.

'Activation' occurs as a response to any demands, whether you can cope with them or not. This is not the same as 'stress' as presented in this e-guide: 'stress' occurs when those demands are excessive and you find it difficult or are not able to cope with them.

Rate x complexity = Demand

As a rough guide, the rate at which you have to do a work task, combined with the complexity of that task, gives you the overall demand. When the work you do is simple and unchallenging then you may be able to carry it out very quickly, almost without thinking. Such tasks are often performed better when carried out at a high rate. A more complicated task requires more concentration and effort, and is often performed better without other tasks to distract you. Too little demand, or too much demand, and task performance gets worse. We call this demand 'pressure' not stress.

So, it is true to say that we all need some pressure at work – and that some people prefer or need a high level of pressure at work to perform at their best. For example, some people feel that they work better when they have a tight deadline while others prefer to get their work done well in advance.

More details on stress – Coping with stress

Stress is when you find it hard to cope

Both activation and pressure are called stress by some people, but neither are what we are talking about in this e-guide as work-related stress. Stress is not activation – although the situations which lead to activation can result in stress. Stress is not pressure – although the level of pressure or demand placed on a person in the workplace can lead to stress. Instead, we experience stress at work when we feel that there is an imbalance between the demands or pressures placed on us and the resources we have available to cope with those demands.

Work-related-stress is not an illness.

Although people talk of 'suffering from stress' what they really mean is that they are suffering from the effects of stress. As described in this e-guide, these effects can affect how we feel, think, or behave. Some people might feel depressed or anxious about not being able to cope. Others might find it hard to concentrate or think straight. Some might always feel tired. Despite this, they are unable to relax or sleep properly – making them feel even more tired. Others will become withdrawn or less talkative.

More details on stress - Stress can make you ill

Stress can make you ill

Although stress is not an illness it can make us ill because it changes how the body works. In some people these changes can weaken the defence mechanisms of the body. This makes them more at risk of infections or other illnesses, or they just feel 'run down'. It might take longer to recover from less serious illnesses such as colds or viruses, or cuts and bruises might take longer to heal. Stress can reduce the rate at which wounds heal.

Stress doesn't affect everybody in the same way. This is part of natural variability and is not unusual – nor is it a sign of some form of 'weakness' on your part. If people are exposed to noise at work, not everybody's hearing will be affected. We don't 'blame' those who are affected for having weak ears. Similarly, we should not blame those who find it hard to cope with work demands.

More details on stress - Stress not just due to work

Stress can be caused by other factors

Stress might not just be caused by psychosocial risk factors at work. If you are going through problems at home it can make it harder for you to cope at work, as problems don't disappear when we get there. Again, this overlap between work and home factors is not unusual. Just because a person might be exposed to loud noise at a disco, or get a bad back moving furniture, doesn't mean that employers don't have to attend to loud noise or manual handling risks at work.

Some people might start drinking alcohol or taking other drugs to help them 'relax'. Although this might provide some short-term relief, it does not solve the problem and can lead to dependency or other adverse effects on physical or mental health.

So, stress at work is not activation or pressure and is not something that we need. It is something which we experience when things are not right, and we should do something about it.

What is the legal position?

The position in the UK

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), employers in the UK have a duty under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999) to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities.

Also, under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) employers have a duty to take measures to control that risk.

The Regulations also impose duties on employees to comply with protective measures introduced by their employer.

Although not covered by Health and Safety legislation the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 also extends into the workplace.

The position in the EU

The EU Framework Directive (89/391) creates a legal obligation on employers to protect their workers by avoiding, evaluating and combating risks to their safety and health (without mentioning specific risks). This includes the psychosocial risks in the workplace which can cause or contribute to stress or mental health problems. The Directive also includes a general duty on workers to comply with protective measures determined by their employer.

There are also joint EU 'Framework Agreements' agreed by unions and employers, presenting common positions on how to deal with work-related stress and harassment and violence at work.

Stress risk factors at work.

The factors at work which can create a risk of stress and other health problems are well-known. They are referred to as psychosocial risks. Some other guides to work-related-stress or psychosocial risk assessment might present them slightly differently or use a slightly different emphasis but, in general terms they can be summarised as:

- Excessive demands
    Excessive demands or conflicts in the working environment.
- Lack of personal control
    Having inadequate say over how work is done
- Inadequate support
    Having inadequate support from managers or co-workers
- Poor relationships (including harassment)
    Being subjected to unacceptable behaviours - including harassment or violence
- Role conflict or lack of clarity
    Not understanding roles and responsibilities
- Poor management of change
    Not being involved and informed in organisational changes
- Violence from third parties
    Verbal or physical violence, or the threat of violence.

These factors can act together. For example, it is recognised that a person is more likely to experience stress due to high demands when they have little control over how they meet those demands.

Risk factors at work: Excessive demands

Not being able to cope with the demands of the job

Some people can manage very demanding jobs in which a lot of challenges and pressures are placed on them. However, these demands can cause stress if a person feels that they are unable to cope or that they do not have enough control over these. This could be due to many factors including their skills and abilities not being matched to the job. Not having enough demands can be as much a problem as too many (under-qualified and over-qualified); high work load; demands to be constantly available for work (see 'work-life balance'); high emotional pressure; deadlines not being achievable within the time available; or feelings that their concerns about such factors are not being recognised or addressed within the workplace.

Making things worse

Poor work planning or communication can exacerbate these demands as can frequent delays, deadlines or interruptions.

Poor or difficult working conditions can also make things worse, such as finding it hard to concentrate in a noisy office.

Not admitting to problems

It is important to recognise that some people will find it difficult to admit to having problems because of too many demands, perhaps seeing it as a sign of weakness or inadequacy. For this reason, it is a good idea to carefully monitor and manage work demands and resources.

Risk factors at work: Lack of personal control

Being in control is good

The level of control that a person has over the way in which they work can affect the extent to which they experience stress. This often reflects a balance between the amount of control they have – and the amount of control that others exert over what they do.

Where a person expects and is given control and influence over how they plan and do their work then this helps them to cope with the challenges placed before them.

Not having control is bad

If a person doesn't have the control they expect, if others determine the pace or the way in which they work, then this can add to feelings of stress.

Not having control over other hazards can also contribute to feelings of stress. For example, a poor attitude to safety within an organisation can cause stress to a person unable to influence this, especially if they feel their own safety is at risk.

A lack of flexibility in work demands and requirements can also contribute to stress and prevent a person from developing and using new skills.

Risk factors at work: Having inadequate support

A lack of support and encouragement from others in the workplace can cause stress. It can arise through inadequate information and resources being provided by the organisation for a worker to carry out their job, or through an apparent failure of others to recognise the demands and requirements they face – or the work that they are doing.

Support and positive feedback, both from co-workers and from those managing them, can help people to cope. With support people are more likely to be able to cope with high levels of pressure or demand. This can take the form of social support or of direct support to do the job.

Risk factors at work: Unacceptable behaviours

Poor relationships

Although differences in opinion are normal in a working environment, relationships at work can cause stress when people experience discrimination, unresolved conflict with others, or encounter unacceptable behaviour of a physical or mental nature.

Sometimes a worker can feel that they are not being fairly treated compared to their colleagues or that their concerns about work factors (such as safety issues) are not being taken seriously, leading to conflict.

Harassment

Also known as bullying, mobbing, or psychological violence, harassment is widely recognised as a psychosocial risk in the work place. It refers to repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee, or group of employees, aimed at victimising, humiliating, undermining or threatening those targeted. Harassment, can involve both verbal and physical attacks, as well as more subtle acts such as social isolation. It includes sexual harassment, covering any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Sometimes one individual is responsible for the harassment. On other occasions, a poor psychosocial working environment fosters the type of attitude and behaviour which allows harassment to develop. In such cases, other workers might be more likely to become involved and joining in the harassing behaviour.

A worker may be subjected to the risk of violence or harassment from fellow workers or from members of the public they encounter in the course of their work

Risk factors at work: Harassment

Claims from workers regarding harassment should always be taken seriously. Sometimes a person can feel stressed because they think that their problems and concerns are not being dealt with. Even if others do not see their behaviour as harassment it is the perception of the affected individual which must be addressed.

As well as actually reducing the risk, providing training and guidance to workers on how to tackle difficult situations can also help to make such situations less stressful. It is important therefore to have policies and procedures in place to address such behaviour, allowing it to be reported and dealt with.

EU unions and employers have published an agreement on harassment and violence at work.

Risk factors at work: Not understanding roles and responsibilities

Work-related stress often arises when there is a lack of clarity about the different roles and responsibilities people have, or where those roles and responsibilities result in conflict. For example, a person who has a number of responsibilities might find that these sometimes conflict, with co-workers, managers or others (e.g. customers) imposing different demands on them which they find hard to resolve or cope with. Alternatively, a person might be asked to do things that they don't see as part of their job (or that they see as someone else's job). This can be because others are unclear what their job actually is, or because nobody knows who should carry out the task in question.

Another potential source of stress is when a person feels that their role is incompatible with their skills and abilities, either feeling stressed because they are given roles beyond their capabilities – or when asked to take on responsibilities that they feel demeaning or unchallenging.

It is important to ensure that all involved are clear on their roles and those of others working with them.

Risk factors at work: Not being involved and informed in organisational changes

Especially if managed and communicated badly, change within an organisation can lead to uncertainty and doubt, which in turn can make people feel stressed. In some ways, the uncertainty of not knowing about the future can be worse than the knowledge itself.

Knowledge of redundancy (for example) can allow a person to begin to plan and move forward while not knowing just leaves the uncertainty.

Where possible, involving and consulting workers on changes (or at least keeping them informed and aware) can help to reduce the risk of stress.

Risk factors at work: Violence from third parties

Violence covers insults, threats or physical aggression and is a potentially serious occupational hazard. The situations in which violence might occur can be predicted. They centre on risk factors such as working with the public, handling money, and working alone.

Measures to reduce such risks (e.g. through the design of workplaces and jobs) will serve to reduce the perceived threat of such violence, as well as reducing the actual risk.

Stress risk factors outside work.

An employer has no control over the life of their workers away from work. However, it is important to be aware of non-work factors as they can reduce a worker's performance at work. Although not under any legal duty to do so, an employer can sometimes help, even if only by lending a sympathetic ear. Others might be able to provide more positive help, perhaps with short-term changes to work demands or commitments. Some employers have helped their workers to find support or counselling to help get them working effectively.

The demands of life all compete for attention. People can cope with a lot of demands at work; or can manage at work when there are a lot of demands at home. Sometimes it can all get too much. It is important to understand the many different ways in which the demands at work and home can contribute to stress. The final cause or trigger might be quite trivial – and might be at work or home – but the effects on both can be far-reaching.

- **Work-life balance**

  Juggling work and home demands

- **Major life events**

  Marriage, pregnancy and childcare, divorce, moving home

- **Personal and social issues**

  Lifestyle issues, alcohol and drugs, living conditions

- **Relationships**

  Conflict, harassment, lack of support

- **Finance**

  Debt or money worries

- **Illness/Bereavement**

  Caring responsibilities, personal illness, loss of family member or friend

Risk factors outside work: Work-life balance

Juggling work and home demands

Work-life balance can be seen as either a work or a non-work issue. Difficulties can arise where work demands intrude into life out of work but the effects of this are often felt in the non-work environment. Achieving a suitable balance between work and life, including both the domestic setting as well as general life in the community, is important. Juggling the various demands and requirements arising can be challenging, potentially leading to conflicts of time, commitment and support.

Life outside work

This is important, not just because of the relationships that go with it, but also because of the much needed opportunities to switch off and relax from the challenges of work.

Risk factors outside work: Major life events

Marriage, pregnancy and childcare, divorce, moving home

Major life events are not just negative events such as divorce, illness or bereavement. Positive activities such as planning a wedding can make many demands on those involved.

Events such as moving home, or childbirth, even when planned, can also add to the demands vying for a person's attention, making planning and organising difficult.

Risk factors outside work: Lifestyle issues, alcohol and drugs, living conditions

Sometimes a person might use smoking, alcohol or drug taking as a way of helping them to 'switch off' and cope with stress. At other times, the use of alcohol or drugs is part of the cause, especially when it starts to affect how well a person can function.

Discovering that a family member or close friend has a drug or alcohol problem can also create demands as a person tries to help.

Crowded or sub-standard housing, for example, among migrant or transient workers will also create demands.

Risk factors outside work: Conflict, harassment, lack of support

Relationships and friendships outside work can contribute to the experience of stress at work. Violence and harassment are not just problems at work.

Sometimes the demands of others can lead to feelings of a lack of support, or of conflicts between different demands.

At other times however, the support and understanding of those around you away from work can help you to cope with the demands of your job.

Risk factors outside work: Finance – debt or money worries

Financial worries such as taking out a mortgage, rising debts, facing redundancy or general money concerns can be stressful and cause anxiety. As with other demands, a lack of control over their finances can add to a person's stress.

Risk factors outside work: Illness/Bereavement

Caring responsibilities, personal illness, loss of family member or friend

Personal illness, or the illness of someone close, especially if they have a caring responsibility, can cause stress. The role of being a carer requires changes in daily routines and family dynamics.

Dealing with illness or bereavement can be stressful as people try to cope with and accept the illness or loss. This can lead to increased feelings of sadness or anger which can have implications for mental health.

Other demands, for example in arranging the funeral together with house-clearing or other activities together with any financial implications can also contribute to stress.

How will I notice the effect on my workers?

Stress is not an illness but you may notice changes in how your workers think, feel or behave at work. It is important to recognise these signs early as they may, if prolonged, lead to physical and mental ill health. For example, worry about problems at work can result in a worker having difficulties in sleeping. If these go on over a long time they can leave someone 'run down' and can lead to illness.

Reactions can include:

Emotional
A worker might show emotional changes such as:
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Low mood
- Becoming withdrawn
- Fatigue
- Relationship problems with colleagues

Cognitive
You might notice that a worker is:
- Finding it hard to concentrate
- Having difficulty in remembering
- Having difficulty learning new things
- Having difficulty making decisions
- Displaying negative thinking

Behavioural
Stress can change the way people behave. Some effects can seem trivial, others quite serious. You might notice someone:
- Adopting nervous habits such as nail-biting
- Increasing unhealthy coping strategies such as alcohol, tobacco or other drugs
- Becoming more withdrawn
- Becoming clumsy or negligent (including self-neglect)
- Showing poor timekeeping
- Becoming violent or aggressive

Physical and mental ill-health

Prolonged exposure can lead to physical and mental ill health. It can also reduce natural immunity and make someone more susceptible to other health problems. You might notice them:
- Coming to work when unwell
- Taking longer and/or more frequent absences from work

Effect on my workers: People change

People suffering from stress often change.

You may become aware of changes in the people that work for you, in the way that they think, feel or behave. It is important that you recognise these changes early and discuss their causes as soon as possible so that action can be taken to support the worker if it is appropriate.

The effects of work-related stress on other people can be seen in a number of different ways. Some reactions may appear but not necessarily all the things listed below.

Emotional

The types of reactions where people find it hard to cope with work issues can include emotional responses. If someone is feeling stressed they might be more likely to have problems within their relationships and friendships. You might notice workers becoming more irritable or more anxious. They might become withdrawn, start having relationship problems with co-workers, or seeming depressed a lot of the time.

Someone might seem constantly tired. Worrying about problems at work can cause difficulties in sleeping through not being able to fall asleep, or waking through the night (or early in the morning) and not being able to get back to sleep. This will result in increased fatigue. Other people may sleep more when they are stressed, finding it harder to wake up in the mornings and stay awake during the day.

Some people become increasingly tearful, starting to cry over seemingly trivial things.

Cognitive

Further reactions are described as cognitive reactions. A person's cognitive functioning is altered when they are stressed.

You might notice that a person is not doing their job as well as they usually do. They may seem to have difficulty in concentrating, making decisions, or remembering information. They may also have difficulty learning new information.

Effect on my workers: Changes in behaviour

Behavioural

Stress can also change how people behave, making some people more withdrawn and quiet or others more aggressive and/or violent. You might notice that, in trying to cope with stress, your workers are, for example, increasing their smoking or alcohol use. Signals may therefore include someone taking more smoking breaks or a smell of alcohol.

Some might start to take less care than usual over their appearance. They might also seem to take less care over their work so that the quality is less good or they might start cutting corners or taking risks to get the job done more quickly.

A change in timekeeping, such as coming in late to work can be a further sign of problems.

Coming to work when unwell

One of the other signals that may become noticeable is people coming to work when they are not well enough to do so. This is called presenteeism and may be as a result of feeling pressured to come to work despite feeling ill. This loss of function might also make them more liable to make costly mistakes or have an accident. This pressure may be down to a number of different factors such as feelings of job insecurity, time pressures or workload, or a sense of loyalty to others; these can be managed within the workplace.

Some people genuinely choose to come to work despite feeling unwell. However, if there are suggestions that they are coming unwillingly because of a sense of pressure – or a feeling of 'duty' to their co-workers not to let them down (perhaps because of the level of work demands they are experiencing) then this should be addressed as a possible warning signal as, if unchecked, it can escalate into more serious illness and absence.

Effect on my workers: Increased absence

Increased absence from work

Long-term exposure to stress can contribute to serious health problems which can impact on the whole body. The evidence for it actually causing the problems is unclear – but it can certainly make things worse. It can contribute to heart problems through high blood pressure, therefore increasing the risk of heart attacks. It can suppress the immune system making the person more susceptible to illness. Some musculoskeletal and reproductive system problems can also be stress-related. These health problems make things worse by adding to the stress that the person was experiencing before becoming ill.

You might therefore find that absence from work may also be a factor in individuals suffering from stress. This can include increased lengths or frequency of sickness absence, or periods of unexplained absence. Keeping good sickness absence records can help you to identify any potential problems and help to solve them.

What is the effect on my business?

Your business can be affected in a number of different ways including increased staff costs and decreases in output.

About half of workplace absences can be linked to stress
- Sickness absence due to stress related ill health
- Ill health indirectly due to stress (or exacerbated by it)
- Sickness absence as a way of coping with stress
- Sickness absence due to poor engagement / low morale

Reduced performance at work due to stress costs twice that of absence
- Not working as effectively
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty in decision making
- Fatigue
- Poor timekeeping

Stress at work can lead to five times more accidents
- Poor concentration
- Risk taking behaviour
- Time pressure
- Lack of communication

About a fifth of staff turnover is related to stress at work
- Poor engagement/low morale
- Excessive demands
- Control issues
- Conflicts and relationships
- Poor change management
- General work environment

Absences caused by stress last much longer than those caused by other factors
- For example, data from one MS suggests that, on average, an absence due to stress lasts more than 40% longer than absence due to a musculoskeletal problem.

Effect on my business: Reduced performance and presenteeism

Stress reduces work performance

Studies have estimated that reduced performance at work due to stress costs twice that of absence.

The symptoms of stress (such as poor concentration, difficulty making decisions, negative thinking, and fatigue), have a negative impact on the performance of workers. This is likely to happen long before the stress symptoms affect health enough for a worker to be absent from work.

People come to work unwell

It has been suggested that only about a third of the cost of stress is actual absence. When workers are unwell they may still come to work. This is known as 'presenteeism', defined as 'the loss in productivity that occurs when employees come to work but function at less than full capacity because of ill health'.

There can be a number of reasons for this. For example, the worker may not be willing to let down their co-workers or the organisation they work for; they may fear losing their job; or they might be worried about any loss of income

Effect on my business: Increased absence and accidents

Sickness absence

According to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), studies suggest that about half of workplace absences can be linked to stress.

Stress-related absence may include:

- Ill health directly caused by stress;
- Ill health indirectly due to stress, (where a worker has an underlying health condition, stress may make an existing condition worse);
- Taking time off because the worker feels they need some time away from work (because pressure at work is too great for them to cope with being at work);
- Poor engagement / low morale, where a worker takes time off due to dissatisfaction with their job.

Increased accidents

Stress at work can lead to five times more accidents.

Fatigue, poor concentration, risk-taking behaviour, lack of communication and temptation to take 'short cuts' due to time pressures at work can lead to increased accidents. For example, a study of Spanish workplaces found fatigue was the fifth highest cause of work accidents.

In the Netherlands, a clear link has been established between work pressure and accidents at work. Workers who stated that they 'always work under pressure', were about five times more likely to have an accident than those who 'never' undertook such work.

Effect on my business: Increased staff turnover

Increased staff turnover

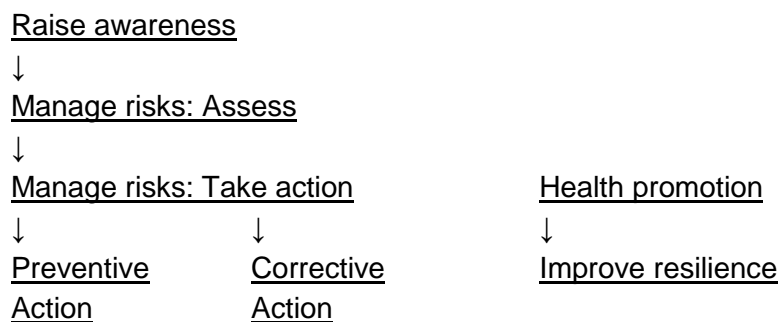About a fifth of staff turnover is related to stress at work.

When workers have negative work experiences such as low job satisfaction, conflict, excessive pressure, low morale, or job insecurity they are more likely to leave their current employment and seek opportunities elsewhere. This can result in a significant loss of valuable knowledge and experience as well as a loss of investment in training and development and additional recruitment costs. Particularly in very small businesses it can also make it harder for you to deliver goods or services on time.

In a major European survey of workers, 19% cited stress of the job as a key reason for staff turnover. In addition, 19% cited level of workload, 16% cited lack of support from line managers and 14% cited number of working hours as being key reasons for this turnover.

What can I do to help my business and workers?

Reducing psychosocial risks at work is good for the business – as well as good for the workers. A good approach to reducing these risks and managing the risk of stress at work is likely to involve a combination of measures.

As with all hazards in the workplace, the reduction of risks should take priority and is a legal obligation. However, there are other things which you can also do which, although not obligatory, are part of good management practice. These help maintain a good psychosocial working environment with healthy, effective workers.

Raise awareness
↓
Manage risks: Assess
↓
Manage risks: Take action   Health promotion
↓   ↓   ↓
Preventive   Corrective   Improve resilience
Action   Action

What to do: raise awareness in the workplace

Because not everybody has a good understanding what psychosocial risks are, and why they have to be managed at work, it is important to start by raising awareness amongst everybody and gain their commitment to the active prevention and management of psychosocial risks in the workplace.

Depending on the size of your business, not everything suggested will be relevant – or exactly how you go about things might differ. For example, if you only have a few workers, formal meetings and policy documents might not be necessary. It can still be useful to write things down, so that everybody is clear what has been discussed and agreed and, if necessary, you can show others what you have done. Three key pointers can be identified:

- Ensure there is a common understanding about stress;
- Secure commitment to manage stress from all involved;
- Develop and make workers aware of a stress policy.

Raising awareness in the workplace: Ensure a common understanding

Ensure a common understanding

Stress is a term that is regularly used yet isn't always well understood. It is therefore important to start by ensuring there is a common understanding about stress:
- what it is;
- what its symptoms of are;
- what its long term health impacts are;
- what can cause it;
- what steps the organisation and individual workers can take to reduce it.

Ensuring this common understanding among all workers will provide a strong foundation for managing stress in your workplace.

Choose the right approach

Remember that, depending on the size of your business, not everything suggested will be relevant. Although exactly how you go about things might differ from the ideas below, the principles are the same: make sure that everybody understands that:
- psychosocial risks in the workplace can be just as important as physical hazards;
- employers have a duty to manage such risk;
- stress is bad for health and business;
- all need to work together to do something about it.

Raising awareness in the workplace: Get the message across

Get the message across

In particular, because many people find psychosocial risks harder to understand than, for example, risks from noise or chemicals in the workplace, it is important to gain recognition and acceptance that addressing such risks is a legal obligation – as well as being good for business. Use leaflets, short courses, informal talks, or just chat with your workers to get your message across.

Whatever measures you choose you need to ensure that everybody has a clear understanding of:
- what stress is (and what it isn't);
- recognised causes;
- the possible effect on workers of events away from work;
- the importance of workers seeking advice at an early stage.

Encourage openness

Once you have a system in place for raising concerns it is important to encourage workers to raise concerns about themselves and others. What is a cause of stress for one worker will not necessarily be a cause of stress for another. It is important for everybody to be clear that workers can raise any concerns they have (and who they should raise them with), with confidence that these concerns will be listened to and addressed (where possible).

As well as informally encouraging workers to do this it can be good practice sometimes to ask workers if they have any concerns, perhaps during chats or more formal reviews if you hold them. Alternatively you might choose to hold short meetings where training in stress awareness could be combined with getting feedback on problems.

Raising awareness in the workplace: Gain commitment

Gain commitment

It is vitally important that there is commitment from all involved to effectively manage stress, particularly business owners and managers.

In order to secure this commitment and to demonstrate this to all workers it is important to:

- Recognise that psychosocial risks can affect the health and safety of workers and should be reduced or managed.

- Understand the impact that stress and other ill-health arising from these risks can have on your business. The symptoms of stress can be a significant burden to small businesses through reduced performance, increase absence, increased accidents and causing workers to leave the organisation due to ill health or dissatisfaction. In many cases the actions you could take are just good business.

- Understand the business benefits. Taking steps to reduce stress can bring significant business benefits. Depending on the nature of your business these might include improved performance; reduced absence; greater commitment and engagement of workers; improved safety performance; or fewer workers leaving the organisation.

- To ensure commitment from all involved (managers, workers, unions) it is important to demonstrate this commitment through strong leadership, starting with a clear policy outlining the steps you will take.

Raising awareness in the workplace: Develop a policy

Develop and make workers aware of a stress policy

A policy should outline the steps you will take and to clarify roles and responsibilities associated with implementing these steps. In a company with very few workers it might not be appropriate to have a written policy but it is important that all existing (and new) staff are aware of what is planned. A written document might be the best way to do this.

In developing such a policy it is important to ensure:

- That all workers (or, in larger companies, their representatives) have the opportunity to be involved throughout the development of the policy and in discussing and implementing the steps to be taken.

- That the steps to be taken are evidence-based and clear, the four steps described in this e-guide are: raising awareness; managing risks (assessing and taking preventive and corrective action), and health promotion to improve general health and build personal resilience.

- Roles and responsibilities under the policy, together with the steps to be taken in implementing it are clear. This often includes a description of the roles of Business owner / Managers, Line Managers, Workers and those with responsibility for Health and Safety and Human Resources (who may have additional responsibilities in implementing the steps).

- Provision for regular monitoring and review of both possible risks of stress and of the steps in place to manage them.

What to do: Manage risks: Assess

The process of managing the psychosocial risks leading to stress in the workplace involves the same basic principles and processes as for other workplace hazards and risks. The first step therefore is that of identifying hazards and assessing the extent of any risk arising.

This e-guide provides help in identifying factors in the workplace which can cause or contribute to stress at work. However, some form of structured risk assessment is usually helpful.

Including workers and their representatives every stage in the process is crucial to success. As well as involving them in raising awareness and assessing risks, it is a good idea to continue to involve workers when developing solutions and priorities for action. Make sure you keep a record of what you find out in your assessment.

Manage risks: Be ready for change

Be ready for change

Once you have raised awareness and gained commitment to addressing psychosocial risks and, through this, managing stress within your organisation, risk assessment is the next procedure to be carried out. Remember that, before carrying out a risk assessment for the psychosocial risk factors which can lead to stress and other problems with mental health and well-being, you and your workers have to be ready for change and willing to work together to improve the psychosocial working environment and reduce the risk of stress and related ill-health.

Some of the approaches and material mentioned in the raising awareness section of this e-guide could help with this. There are clear messages that need to be delivered which include the recognition that psychosocial risks are a legitimate health and safety problem and that everyone has responsibility for tackling them and, through this, reducing the risk of workplace stress or mental ill-health.

Manage risks: Assess risks

Assessing psychosocial risks

This guide will outline the basic requirements for the risk assessment process. It will not take you through this process in detail as other guides are available to help you do this.

Before carrying out a psychosocial risk assessment in your workplace it might be helpful to look at risk assessments for other hazards which you have already carried out. These can be helpful in providing a foundation to build from and developing assessment tools for stress. The systematic approach you adopted would usually be the same for psychosocial risks.

Those carrying out risk assessments need to an understanding of the main psychosocial risk factors for stress and how the effects of these might become apparent.

Even if you don't use anything formal in making your assessment, some form of structured risk assessment can be helpful.

Watch out for those most at risk

In carrying out the risk assessment you are also trying to find out if anybody is at particular risk, or is already being affected by stress or poor mental health. If you keep them, formal sickness absence records might be helpful. If not, talk to workers about any risks they are aware of, or if they or any co-workers are being affected.

Observing the work in progress and identifying areas where work is not progressing as usual, or asking a worker to describe their work and any problems associated with it might also help you to see what is going on in your business and to identify any problems. Don't forget that conditions and risks can change. There may be particular times of the year that workers are under more pressure or experience extra demands which might cause them problems.

Manage risks: Record risks

Keep records and repeat when necessary

If you make regular risk assessments for other workplace hazards, a psychosocial risk assessment can be an additional tool. It is important to keep records of the assessment and the risks identified.

The risk assessment process should not be seen as something that only happens once but as a continuing process which needs to be reviewed, either at specific time periods or when something in the workplace changes.

Manage risks: Take action: Discuss what to do

When information has been collected on the risks in the workplace, share this information with workers and discuss the risks. This allows a check with the workforce on the nature and source of these risks and helps you to prioritise them for action. These discussions can also help in developing solutions to manage these risks and agreeing a way forward.

From the discussions, develop an action plan to manage risks. This can help you to set priorities and achievable goals and demonstrate that you are serious about stress. Engaging with your workers in finalising the action plan will help bring everyone to the same level of understanding.

Keeping a record of risk assessments, action plans and agreed priorities is important in both guiding the process of risk assessment and sharing the priorities with all workers. At a later stage you can use this record to compare against previous risk assessments and to find out if changes have had a positive impact. They can also help you to provide evidence of the steps you have taken should that be necessary.

Monitoring and reviewing progress against the action plan helps you to identify if progress has been made or if the action taken has been effective. It is important to ask workers as part of this. You don't need to set up a special group for this, just make sure that it is raised from time to time at team meetings or other times when you talk to your workers. This can also provide an opportunity to consider any further steps that can be taken to reduce stress in other areas.

Actions taken to address organisational risks are usually more effective than those addressed at individuals.

Manage risks: Take action: Prepare for action

When the action plan is ready, it is now time to take action. Think about the measures that you are taking, the resources allocated (time and/or expenses), who does what and when, and the planned completion date of specific actions. Determine a date to review the impact of actions. Again, involving the workers in this process is important.

It is difficult to tell you exactly what to do as it is dependent on the specific nature of the risks identified and on the size, organisation and management of your company. There are many guides available to help you with this process following on from the risk assessment.

Actions can involve both Preventive Action – taking steps to avoid risks arising; and Corrective Action – having measures in place to deal with problems if they occur.

Prepare for action: Preventive Action

As mentioned earlier, employers have a legal duty to manage risks to the health and safety of their workers. Managing the risks from psychosocial factors is part of this. Taking another look at the potential psychosocial risk factors at work can help. Which you need to focus on will depend on your risk assessment.

- Excessive demands
- Lack of personal control
- Inadequate support
- Poor relationships (including harassment)
- Role conflict or lack of clarity
- Poor management of change
- Third-party violence

Although in many cases, dealing with these is mainly a matter of improving how work is managed, some of the risk factors are not easily reduced or removed. There can be particular problems when, for example, your work involves dealing with members of the public or with others whose behaviour and actions is not in your control. In such cases it is important to put measures in place to minimise the impact such behaviour can have – by supporting the worker affected.

Prepare for action: Corrective Action

As with any risk to health and safety, dealing with psychosocial risks at source to prevent workers being affected is best. However, especially where it is not possible to control some risks it is important that you make provision for corrective action when problems arise. Early action relies heavily on raising awareness – encouraging workers to report and act on signs and symptoms they are experiencing themselves and to watch out for and act on signs and symptoms in others. Any such reports need to be treated in confidence and, especially in very small companies where everybody perhaps knows everybody else, must be handled with care and sensitivity.

Larger employers often have workers with special responsibility for personal matters and it can be good for even quite small companies to make some such provision.

It is helpful to have a plan of action for dealing with any reported problems which arise, such as a worker reporting stress-related symptoms or specific issues such as being harassed by a fellow worker. This should include:

- Encouraging early reporting;
- Responding promptly;
- Discussing issues on a confidential basis with the worker and others involved;
- Agreeing actions (see below);
- Taking action to address the sources of the problem as soon as possible;
- Documenting this plan of action;
- Documenting, monitoring and modifying action plans.

The next pages might help you to understand better what the issues are and give you some pointers to some of the things you need to look at for Preventive Action and Corrective Action.

Take action: Preventive Action: Excessive demands

Excessive demands

Although coping with a high workload is a common part of many jobs, take care to ensure than this is not unreasonable. If necessary, take measures to help those affected to cope with these demands. These might include not imposing unreasonable deadlines or not allowing them to be imposed by your clients by accepting unrealistic timescales. Actively managing work, with those affected, can be a useful way of minimising any negative effects. Managing client expectations can also help to keep the client happy and help secure further business.

Making unreasonable demands by asking workers to carry out tasks for which they are unsuited or unqualified can also be a source of risk. Working with those involved to provide additional support or training can offset any adverse impact this might have – and you will also end up with better trained and more capable workers as a result. Underuse of skills can also be a source of stress.

It is a useful idea to take a good look at how you allocate work, and how you manage the workload of your workers to avoid problems arising.

Take action: Preventive Action: Control and Support

Lack of personal control

Sometimes the level of demand is less important than allowing the individual worker to plan and organise their work. Giving them that flexibility, rather than imposing a plan on them, can make a big difference. Although the requirements of some jobs sometimes limit the extent to which this is possible, it is easy to end up imposing a highly regimented way of working, not out of need, but because it is easier to manage.

Some roles require very strict procedures to be followed and do not allow a lot of personal control over the way someone carries out their job. For example a surgeon carrying out an operation is required to follow strict procedures to ensure it is conducted safely.

Think about how much control you give your workers to plan and organise their work. Can they be flexible, or is there only one way of doing things – yours?

Inadequate support

Many of us sometimes have a lot of work to do, or face other demands or pressures. Not all of these are under our control – or of those around us, especially in jobs where we have to deal with the general public. The support we get at such times, from our managers or co-workers can make a big difference to our ability to cope. For example, the idea that 'the customer is always right' is fine in theory but, if it is handled in such a way that belittles or undermines the worker dealing with them, then you might have a satisfied customer – but at a cost to the worker.

Do you provide a supportive and helpful workplace where co-workers are understanding and sympathetic – or is it every man (or woman) for themselves?

Take action: Preventive Action: Relationships and Violence

Poor relationships (including harassment)

The support from managers and colleagues is just part of the complex relationships which can arise whenever any group of people get together. Think about when you meet up with a group of friends. The difference is that we can choose our friends – so if we don't like the way one of them behaves we have a solution. We don't usually get to choose who we work with and stopping working with them is not always an option.

Making fun of someone might seem a little harmless fun, but sometimes it can go too far and become seen as harassment. A person's dignity, professional capability, private life, physical features, race, gender or sexual orientation can be the subject of harassment; aimed at victimising, humiliating, undermining or threatening the harassed person.

Do any of the issues mentioned above apply in your workplace? If a person feels they are being harassed, bullied, etc. is there someone they can turn to report this and to get help? Again, external help may be useful.

Where conflicts are reported it is usually best to try and resolve them quickly, as they can rapidly get worse if not.

Third party violence

Where there is a risk of violence (e.g. verbal aggression, physical attacks or sexual harassment) from members of the public (including sexual harassment), you must do what you can to educate the public that such behaviour is unacceptable.

Design work and workplaces to reduce any risk (e.g. panic buttons) and provide support to your workers so that, if workers are subjected to such behaviour, they know what to do to minimise the impact on their health. However, without isolating workers from the people they are meant to serve, such risks cannot be removed entirely.

Take action: Preventive Action: Roles and Change

Role conflict or lack of clarity

Do some workers have to answer to more than one person? Sometimes people find themselves being pulled in more than one direction at work. They might have some work to do for one person, but someone else is asking them to do something else. Both might be important, but the worker cannot do both at once and does not know which to do first.

It is a good idea to have clear 'lines of command' so that such conflicts do not arise but, if they do, the worker involved knows who to see to get it resolved.

Poor management of change

To some extent, change is part of everyday life. However, if change is suddenly imposed on you, or you have no idea what is happening (rather than you being involved in that change); this can add to the pressures and demands of work and become stressful. Informing and, where possible, involving your workers during times of change will help to reduce the risks.

Take action: Corrective Action: Be prepared, talk and make plans

Be prepared

As well as raising awareness and preventive action, early action to help those developing problems, to stop them from becoming serious, is important. Having made people aware of the signs and symptoms of stress in themselves and others, it is important to have a plan for when this happens.

Regardless of whether any stress is caused by work or non-work factors, early action is important. If a person is off work ill then they are not working for you whatever the cause of that illness.

It's good to talk

Talking helps, however, especially where personal problems are involved, this can be a difficult area as you need to ensure that anything you are told in confidence remains confidential. Also, the obvious person to talk to might be the cause of the problems. This can be another reason for having outside help at times like this.

Do you have the resources yourself for this – or do you need external help or advice? Some organisations offer a telephone service, which can help to keep the cost down.

Make plans

Once you have a better idea of a person's problems which are contributing to their stress-related symptoms then you need to develop a plan for dealing with them – or helping the person to deal with them, especially if they are not work-related. Again, you might need help from other professionals to do this.

Where you do agree a plan it is a good idea to keep a record of any actions taken.

The following pages have some suggestions for Corrective Action

Corrective Action: Change work

- Looking into changing the nature of their work or reducing their workload;

Has their work changed – or are they having problems with work that they coped with in the past?

Work often changes round us – perhaps because of changes in technology. Perhaps an older person finds that their training is becoming out of date. This is particularly the case with developments in computers where a worker used to dealing with paper now finds themselves facing a screen instead. Not everybody finds work and workplaces which seem to always be changing easy to cope with, especially with new demands and different learning requirements constantly emerging.

One employer had a worker who went off sick, and it became apparent that he had been given new roles and responsibilities which he was not happy with and didn't feel able to meet properly. He had been happy and contented in his job previously and was good at it (which is why he had been given this new role). Before he went into his new role he didn't fully understand what it would involve and how it would change his job – but didn't feel he could easily ask to 'go back'. After a long period of illness (for him) and disruption to his employer's business, this is eventually what happened.

Sometimes if a worker is struggling because of changes at home where they were managing before then a temporary change to their job can help them 'get straight'.

Corrective Action: Training, Decision-making, and Roles

- Ensuring that the workers in question and others involved have appropriate training;

Training can be one way of helping people adjust to changes in ways of working. It is obviously needed for new technical roles, but when we give people supervisory or managerial roles we don't always recognise their need for training (or that a person who is technically good at their job might not be so good at supervising others doing that job).

- Involving them in decisions that affect them;

Not knowing what is happening can be a significance source of uncertainty and stress. It is a good idea to involve those affected – or at least to keep them informed. The participation of workers will also increase the chances of any such changes being successful.

- Clarifying their roles and responsibilities.

Sometimes 'who does what' is not clear, or conflicts can arise in the demands made on a worker, which adds to their stress and causes them problems. Working with them to clarify their roles and responsibilities can be of great benefit, not just to the individual concerned but also to the efficient and effective operation of your business.

Corrective Action: Involve others and provide support

- Involving others at work who might be seen to be adding to the problem, especially if harassment or violent behaviour is involved;

Interpersonal relationships can be difficult to handle and must be dealt with sensitively and, where necessary, confidentially. If however a person sees themselves as being harassed then this will be almost impossible to handle without the 'harasser' also being involved in some way. They might be reacting to being harassed or bullied themselves, or might not see their behaviour as harassment.

- Helping workers find support for non-work problems;

Although you might feel that it is nothing to do with you, your understanding and possible help can be greatly valued.

Corrective Action: Health promotion: Health and stress

Some psychosocial risks can't be avoided

To some extent, psychosocial risks are part of the uncertainties and challenges of all of our working life. Although we have a legal duty to manage such risks, that duty is limited to what it is possible or practicable to do. It is therefore likely that some risk will remain. Whatever we do, it is likely that we will reduce but not remove all such risks.

Sometimes it isn't possible for workers to reduce pressures outside work either, for example if a family member has a long term illness.

A healthier worker is less likely to feel stressed

Stress arising from psychosocial risks in the workplace can have many different effects on our health and wellbeing, both physical and mental. One way in which we can help to avoid such effects becoming serious is to help our workers become healthier. In this way, they are better able to withstand the otherwise harmful effects that stress can have. Providing people with guidance on a healthy lifestyle is not compulsory, but many employers have found that it can be beneficial to their business. Those who eat healthily, exercise regularly, don't smoke, and avoid drinking to excess are more likely to remain healthy and not be off sick.

Corrective Action: Health promotion: Mental health and Resilience

Psychological health is also important

As well as these more physical approaches to health and wellbeing, there can be some benefit in making efforts to improve psychosocial health through building something called resilience. It is not a requirement on employers, but it can make good business sense, especially where they have recognised that their workers are faced with demanding challenges as part of their work.

Resilience is the personal capacity to cope with adverse events and return to normal life, and the determination to see something through to its conclusion, even in the face of significant pressures to do something else or give up.

Those with high levels of personal resilience are often described as having a number of attributes including: Self-belief, Personal vision, Flexibility, Good time management / organisation, Good problem solving, Good emotional control, Good relationships, Positive approach to change. Many of these can be seen as counters to those factors shown to cause or contribute to stress at work and helping workers to build personal resilience means that they can cope better with these challenges. As with the more general issue of health promotion (sometimes called health improvement) this is more than what employers are legally required to do – but can provide benefits in terms of a more effective and efficient workforce.

Health promotion: Build resilience: Health and eating

It can be a good idea to help workers to improve their health and build personal resilience. As the Director of one SME in the services sector put it: "As an SME it is essential to our business success that our staff are able to work to the best of their potential at all times. The health, wellbeing and emotional resilience of our staff is therefore critical and as such it is at the heart of our business strategy – we take action, monitor and review it regularly as a business necessity".

It is however crucial to remember that measures aiming to promote health and help workers be more resilient must always be built on the improvements in the work environment. Managing stress at work must always start with assessing, eliminating or reducing work-related risk factors.

Improving health and wellbeing of workers:

Our physical health and our mental health fluctuate throughout our lifetime. If workers have good mental health they are better able to:

- Learn new things;
- Develop and sustain good relationships and end poor relationships;
- Better able to cope with change;
- Better able to manage their emotions.

During periods of high pressure workers are better able to cope if they have good levels of physical and mental health. You can help workers to improve both by encouraging them to adopt a healthy lifestyle and make sensible choices. Here are four areas you can influence through the workplace setting:

Healthy eating

A balanced diet is important and helps to protect against diseases such as heart disease, a range of cancers, and diabetes. It is also important for our mental health. You can:

- Encourage workers to maintain constant blood sugar levels by taking regular breaks and not missing meals, this is also better for performance.
- Encourage workers to make sensible choices about what they eat by raising awareness and providing healthy options (where this is relevant).
- Ensure there is a convenient supply of fresh drinking water. If you can, offer caffeine-free soft drinks as alternatives to tea and coffee.
- Provide fresh fruits for workers or instead of biscuits during meetings.

Health promotion: Build resilience: Physical Activity and Sensible drinking

Physical activity

Being physically active is important for good physical and mental health. Workers under high pressure may not exercise as much as they normally do because they are too busy or don't have the time or energy. This is when they need it most in order to cope with the pressures they are facing. Encourage workers to take regular exercise by raising awareness of the importance of physical activity. Consider setting up lunch time walking or jogging clubs, entering a company team in a charity run, playing sports together, or providing bike storage.

Sensible drinking

Too much alcohol can have an impact on physical and mental health. It can also make it difficult to maintain a healthy weight. Someone experiencing high levels of pressure may drink alcohol as a coping method as it can initially make them feel more relaxed. However, alcohol is a depressant, and can reduce concentration or the ability to sleep; or increase anxiousness, which may make the situation worse.

It is important to encourage a sensible approach to drinking alcohol. You can encourage this by raising awareness of the importance of sensible drinking by providing leaflets, talking to your workers or possibly considering information and awareness talks.

Smoking and drug-taking can also be used by some to help them cope and should be discouraged.

Health promotion: Build resilience: Breaks and relaxation

It is important to take regular breaks at work. Sometimes when under excessive pressure workers do not take breaks, but this doesn't mean they will get more work done. There is lots of evidence linking increased alertness and performance in an afternoon and taking a break at lunchtime (especially if this involves getting some fresh air). It is important to acknowledge the need for regular breaks (encouraging workers to take regular breaks in the working day) and the importance of taking a break from work (ensuring workers take annual leave).

It is also important to take time to relax and switch off from work. If workers do not find time to relax and recover each day they may find they will gradually become run-down and will not have the energy to do their job well and enjoy life. Some people find it easy to relax and switch off, although this may be difficult during periods of high pressure. Workplaces can raise awareness of the importance of relaxation and encourage workers to engage in hobbies and activities that may help.

Building emotional resilience of workers through good management

There are many ways in which resilience can be improved. It is sometimes useful (but not essential) to measure or assess initial personal resilience to help focus attention where it is most needed and develop a plan of action.

Some aspects of a good psychosocial working environment, ensured through effective management of psychosocial risks, will help to build resilience. For example, providing adequate support can reduce the risk of stress and also help to build the resilience of workers. Where a person feels under-used, providing opportunities for challenging and varied work can help match them better to their job.

You can therefore help build personal resilience of your workers through effective risk management but also by encouraging them to adopt different approaches and thinking about things in a different way. In addition providing self-help (evidence-based) resources and training such as time management, assertiveness, and goal setting can also help.

Myths and Facts (Employers)

Why should employers be concerned about work-related stress?

Managing the psychosocial risks that can cause stress is a legal obligation. Also, the symptoms of stress can have a negative impact on the performance of your workers. There is a lot of evidence that stress is the biggest cause of work-related sickness absence. It can make it harder to keep good workers and your workers are likely to be less well-motivated. It therefore makes good business sense to be concerned about it.

As a small business employer, what can I do to avoid this problem?

As a first step, find suitable resources such as this e-guide and prepare yourself to deal with the topic. Then talk to your workers, make them aware of what stress is and what can cause it. Encourage them to report problems that they become aware of and seek their help in identifying what in your work is seen as adding to any stress, and what you can do together to manage any risks. Particularly in small businesses, some risks such as uncertainty over future work, might be unavoidable and it is a good idea to help your workers in making them more capable of coping with these challenges, so that they remain challenges and don't cause stress.

Why can this problem not be ignored?

Stress can make your workers ill – or can make the effect of other illnesses worse. Ignoring stress is bad for health. It can also have a negative effect on worker performance.

There is also a lot of evidence that stress is the biggest cause of work-related sickness absence. It can make it harder to keep good workers and your workers are likely to be less well-motivated. Ignoring stress can therefore affect your business.

Is it possible to measure psychosocial risks?

Yes. Not in the same way as you would use a noise meter, but there are tools which will help you assess the extent of psychosocial risks – or of the effects (such as stress) that these might be having on your workers. A risk assessment can help you do this.

How can an employer know that stress is related to work issues, and not personal life?

Some people can experience stress because of challenges in their personal life. However, in the same way as you can't be sure that noise-induced deafness wasn't caused by disco music, or back pain by gardening or moving furniture, you can't be absolutely certain that psychosocial factors at work haven't played a part unless you make sure that you are managing these.

In addition, if stress is impacting on a worker's ability to do his (or her) work then you need to try and do something about it – even if it is not caused by work. If problems away from work are the main issue perhaps you can help the person find advice or get help. As well as helping your worker this can also benefit you by getting a valued worker back to work quickly.

Is an employer responsible for workers' wellbeing?

The responsibility for workers' well-being is the duty of both the employer and worker. The employer is responsible to ensure that their workers don't get ill from the work that they do and workers have a responsibility to look after their own health and to bring any problems to the attention of their employer.

Stress is just an excuse

There are many problems or illnesses which cannot be seen or 'confirmed' through blood samples or other measurements, and stress is one of them. If you are managing stress-related risks properly it is more likely that any reasons for their stress are not from the workplace. Perhaps the worker needs support with a non-work problem?

Is stress a real illness?

Stress is not an illness itself, but it can result in illness or make existing problems worse.

Stress is caused by aspects that are far beyond employers' competencies

No. The most common causes of work-related stress are due to poor management practices and procedures.

An organisation is not a counselling clinic
An employer is not a psychiatrist

Both are true. But you are not being asked to treat a person suffering from stress related ill health, (in the same way as you would not be expected to treat a person with work-related asthma or other conditions). The advice is for you to manage your work, and your workers, in a way which does not put their health at risk and, if they do develop problems, to do what you can to avoid making those problems worse.

For example, if psychosocial risks are arising because workers are unclear about their roles and responsibilities then clarifying those roles can reduce the risk (and improve the efficiency of your workers at the same time).

Employers themselves are under great pressure and fighting for their companies to survive and workers to be paid

Many people see taking action to protect the health of their workers as a cost to the business – in both time and resources. However, there is a lot of evidence that, in the long run, such actions are of an overall benefit not a cost.

Spending time preventing and reducing stress can benefit the company through factors such as improved performance and decreased absence, therefore increasing the productivity and well-being of the workforce.

A company has no resources to deal with psychosocial risks

Not dealing with psychosocial risks can be a real cost to your business. The most common causes of work-related stress are due to poor management practices and procedures and improving those practices can both reduce risks and improve the management of your company. Often no special resources are required – just an understanding of the nature of the problem and possible causes, which you can get from this e-guide. The advice is for you to manage your work, and your workers, in a way which does not put their health at risk and, if they do develop problems, to do what you can to avoid making those problems worse, and provide help.

If you can't stand the heat – stay out of the kitchen

It is important to understand the difference between the pressures and demands of work, and stress. Clearly it is important for workers to be aware of the demands that will be made of them and, as long as these are reasonable, that should not be a problem.

However, to use the example given, there is a difference between recognising that cooking requires heat and so a certain amount of heat tolerance is to be expected and allowing the kitchen to get so hot that it places people at risk of heat-related illness.

It is important to recognise that what is stressful for one worker may not be stressful for others. This is why it is important for workers to raise any concerns they have to see if there are any steps that can be taken to reduce the risk. However, sometimes a worker might find the nature of the job they do particularly stressful.

For example, too emotionally demanding, isolating, target driven. In these circumstances, if it really is not possible to change the job, then it might be that the worker is not suited to the job they are doing and it might be in everyone's interest for them to consider an alternative.

We all need stress to keep us on our toes
We all need some stress
Workers need some stress to work effectively

We don't need stress, we need demands or pressure. Workers need some demands to work effectively, to keep them alert and motivated to do their job successfully (and some need more than others). Too much can reduce overall performance and, if the worker is unable to cope with the challenges they face, this can lead to stress-related ill health or further reductions in performance.

Why should a worker be encouraged to tell me about stress in them or others?

It is important that you reassure workers that they can come to you when they have issues they would like to discuss and reassure them that these discussions will be in confidence to encourage them to speak out. Clearly, they might want to speak to you if they feel that work factors are causing or contributing to their stress or that of a colleague. A person who is experiencing stress due to problems at home might feel that this is affecting their work.

It is a good idea to raise awareness of the problems that stress can bring, whether it is work or non-work-related and to encourage workers to speak out, before it gets too serious. Being affected by stress can be seen as a weakness and people can be reluctant to admit that they are having problems.

What should I do if a worker complains about being stressed?

First of all listen to them even if the main source of stress is outside of work as it can still have an impact on work performance. Try to identify the source(s) of the stress, so that you can have discussions on how best to reduce and manage these.

Myths and Facts (Workers)

How do I distinguish between work pressures and stress that is bad for my health?

You need some demands or pressure to work effectively, to keep you alert and motivated to do your job successfully. You might feel that you work well under pressure and prefer that to not having enough to do (some people find not enough pressure boring and stressful).

However, if you find that the level of pressure is making it hard for you to do your job properly, that you have to cut corners and take risks to get the job done, then that is not good. If things don't improve you might feel that you can no longer cope with the level of pressure – and that is when feelings of stress can arise.

Sometimes it is not a change in the work demands that leads to this, but increased demands or problems at home which take more of your time and attention and result in a sense of stress at work.

Is it my fault or a weakness that I experience work-related stress?

No. We are all different and we all have different levels of tolerance of the challenges that are placed on us – in the same way as some people are made ill by chemicals at work whilst others are not.

What are my responsibilities in terms of psychosocial risks at work?

As a worker you have a responsibility to look after your own health and to present yourself as fit for work. You also have a duty to be aware of possible risks to the health and safety of yourself and others in the workplace and to raise any concerns you may have with your employer.

Stress is possibly one of those risks and you should not regard it as any different to other risks at work such as faulty safety guards or extractor systems not working properly. Stress can decrease your concentration and affect decision-making, resulting, for example, in accidents at work.

Effective steps to reduce the risk of stress at work often involve making changes and you should also cooperate with your employer, working together to identify possible solutions and applying them to your work.

What is my employer responsible for?

In the same way as you have to play a part in safeguarding your own health and safety, your employer has similar duties not to expect you to perform work that can present avoidable risks to your health and safety. As part of those duties your employer is required to be aware of psychosocial risks at work and take steps to manage these to minimise any risk.

As with other risks to your health and safety, you and your employer need to work as a partnership, working together to identify possible solutions and applying them to your work.

Your employer is obviously not responsible for any stress caused outside work. However, it can be helpful for you to talk to your employer if you are experiencing stress from personal circumstances as they may be able to support you during difficult times and help you to continue to work if you are finding this difficult.

I thrive on stress

No, you might feel that you need some demands to keep you alert and well-motivated to do your job successfully, but that is pressure, not stress.

Although some pressure can be good, too much can reduce your overall performance and if any additional problems appear (at work or home), you may find yourself no longer able to cope with the level of pressure. This can lead to stress-related ill health or further reductions in your performance at work. It can also have a bad effect on your home life.

Who can get stress?

Anybody can be affected by stress. As with other risks to your health, such as noise or chemicals in the workplace, different people are affected to a different extent. Being affected doesn't indicate any weakness – in the same way as developing noise-induced hearing loss doesn't mean that you have weak ears.

Real men don't get stress

Gender has nothing to do with being affected by stress. Men might be less likely to admit to experiencing stress (or not being able to cope) because they see it as a weakness. This says more about their attitude than any extra resilience or mental strength.

This is a particularly important point because, if such men develop stress-related problems, they are more likely to see this as a failure or weakness on their part – and feel even worse as a result. They are also less likely to report that they are experiencing problems, until those problems become too bad to hide.

Why is it important for me to tell my employer about stress outside work?

There are a lot of reasons why it is a good idea. If you are suffering from a stressful home life this might make it harder for you to tolerate the pressures of your job – putting you more at risk of serious health problems if work and home stresses combine.
It is also possible that stress at home is having a bad effect on your performance at work. Your employer might think that you are not working so carefully and your work is becoming of a poorer quality. In some cases this might put your job at risk.

If your employer is aware that you are having serious problems he might not be able to help you directly (although he might know of sources of help) but he is more likely to understand and to help you during your difficulties (and help himself at the same time by improving your work).

Do I have to tell my employer if I'm feeling stressed?

It is a good idea, even if the stress is from factors outside work (see the FAQC: 'Why is it important for me to tell my employer about stress outside work?').

You do have a duty to yourself and your own health and safety. So if you feel that work factors are making you ill then it is important that you report this. Others might also be affected so you are helping them as well. Although your employer has a duty to be aware of possible risks they cannot always see everything so you are helping them do their job as well. If your employer is unaware of the difficulties their work is causing then they cannot be expected to put them right.

It will also help your employer to look after you, helping you improve your work situation and reducing your stress at work.

Can stress be cured?

Stress is not an illness, and so doesn't need a cure. However, stress can have effects on your body such as raising your blood pressure which can lead to other illnesses (or make them worse) and these might require treatment.

As with many other problems, catching (and dealing with them) early is usually best, before they become too serious. Common mental health problems, such as depression or anxiety are common health impacts of stress. Most workers who experience these health conditions recover fully once the causes are dealt with.

Isn't stress just part of any job?

Every job has some degree of pressure involved, however when this pressure becomes too much and the demands become too much for a worker to cope with then it can result in problems. Factors such as poor management practices or poor work organisation can increase this pressure and increase the possibility of stress-related problems. Different jobs will seem more or less stressful to different people depending in part on the individual and their resistance or resilience to stress factors.

I am feeling stressed at work, who should I talk to?

This will depend upon the arrangements in your own organisation. In a micro or very small business it might be your boss, or it could be your manager, or there might be a person who is responsible for personnel or health issues.

If you feel unable to approach your boss or manager is there another senior person you can speak to? If not, then talking to your co-workers might help. At the very least, sharing the problem can be helpful – and they might be able to provide more direct help. If your boss or manager is causing the problems it is unlikely to be just you who is affected and, if a group of you speak out, this can be more effective.

If none of these options are suitable then, if you feel that the stress is affecting your health speak to your doctor. They might not be able to change your work, but they will be better able to help you if they understand what is causing your problems.

Will conversations be confidential?

All conversations on personal health issues that you have with your manager should be confidential.

What will happen to me if I talk to someone about feeling stressed at work?

Many people find talking about their problems brings a sense of relief, even before any further action is taken. Sometimes this can be a co-worker rather than a manager or a person in authority, although the help that another worker can give will be limited. Whoever you speak to might be able to offer help and support directly, or they might look for help themselves – to help them help you.

Where factors to do with your job are part of the problem then your manager needs to begin to explore ways of reducing their effect on you. If non-work issues are the main problem then they might be able to guide you in finding others to help, or at least be more sympathetic if your problems are affecting your work.

Will it affect my job?

It might do. If work factors are contributing to your stress it is clearly important that you tell somebody at work so that they can hopefully work with you to remove or reduce those factors. In some cases, it might be necessary to make changes to your job to safeguard your health.

Drinking alcohol helps me relax, so how does it make stress worse?

In the short term drinking alcohol may help you unwind and feel relaxed. However, after drinking you can feel anxious or depressed, leading to you drinking more alcohol to make you feel better again. This can lead to you developing an increased need for alcohol resulting in dependency or addiction.

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

We are all different and we all have different levels of tolerance of the challenges that are placed on us – in the same way as some people are made ill by chemicals at work which others do not have a problem with. What causes stress for one person may not have the same effect on others. This will make some people more likely to suffer from stress than others, but should not be seen as a weakness. It is not easy to tell who will be affected, especially when non-work pressures are taken into account.

It is said to be a good idea to go back to work as soon as you can – is this right?

I am off work with stress and my employer wants me to come back to work quickly – is this a good idea?

There is evidence that, with any illness, the longer you stay off work the harder it becomes to go back. This is also the case with stress. You should not go back to work until you feel ready to do so, but you do not need to feel completely well before you do. However, if your stress is due to psychosocial risk factors at work then you should tell your employer so that they can try and change these before you return.

As an example, if you usually spend part of the time at work dealing with members of the public, but you find this part of your work particularly stressful, then your employer might be able to arrange for you to work in a supporting role where you do not have to do this.

Glossary

Activation

Physiological processes through which the body's resources (physical or mental) are brought to a state of readiness for action.

Burnout

A syndrome of emotional fatigue, alienation and reduced abilities. It is a potentially serious condition in which people suffer from a negative change in feelings, attitude and expectations. This is often followed by severe problems at the workplace as well as in the private context. Affected persons experience fatigue, tiredness and reduced work abilities.

Cognitive

Processes of understanding, reasoning, decision-making, learning, etc.

Corrective actions

Actions taken to reduce the adverse effects of psychosocial risks once they become apparent.

Demands

The loads (physical and mental) placed on the body.

Fatigue

A psychological state involving a sense of not having the energy to do anything, and a reluctance to continue with a task. Often experienced as a sense of sleepiness and an increasing difficulty to concentrate or pay attention

Harassment

Repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee, or group of employees, aimed at victimising, humiliating, undermining or threatening those targeted. It can involve both verbal and physical attacks, as well as more subtle acts such as social isolation.

Isolated periods of conflict are not harassment but, if the conflict is unresolved and repeated, or seems to be directed to undermining, or humiliating the person then it can become regarded as harassment.

Health promotion

Process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health.

Job insecurity

Perception of the threat of job loss or unemployment.

Managing psychosocial risks

Process involving: risk assessments; translating the information on risks into targeted actions; introducing and managing the risk reduction interventions; and evaluating the interventions and providing feedback for existing interventions as well as future action plans.

Physical and mental resources

The capabilities a person has to meet the demands placed on them.

Pressure

A sense of challenge arising from the demands a person is experiencing, relating to the balance between these demands and the resources the person has available to meet them.

Preventive actions

Actions taken to reduce psychosocial risks before they adversely affect the health or wellbeing of workers.

Psychosocial risk assessment

Assessment of the risks to health and wellbeing potentially arising from psychosocial risk factors (hazards) at work.

Psychosocial risks at work

Factors that may adversely affect workers' psychological response to their work and workplace conditions (including work organisation and management, and working relationships with supervisors and colleagues), causing them to feel stressed, depressed or anxious.

Psychosocial work environment

Psychological and social factors at work which combine to create an overall positive or negative experience. Thus positive factors such as good social interactions at work e.g. with colleagues or supervisors can combine with potentially negative factors such as very high work loads such that the overall effect is positive.

Resilience

An individual's ability to cope with stress and adversity.

Sexual harassment

Any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct or behaviour of a sexual nature.

Stress

A state experienced by a person when they perceive that there is an imbalance between the demands made of them and a worker's capacity to cope with those demands.

It should not be confused with a high level of work demands, or a sense of pressure to get things done (some pressure is usually helpful), but arises when someone feels unable to meet those demands or withstand the pressures they are under.

Third party violence

Insults, threats or physical aggression from a person or people other than work colleagues such as clients, customers, patients, service users, pupils or parents, or other members of the public.