

Stress: A Health and Safety Issue

DEFINITION AND NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Work-related stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as: *“The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work. There is a clear distinction between pressure which can be a motivating factor, and stress, which can occur when this pressure becomes excessive” (HSE 2021).*

The TUC Safety reps survey of 2020/21 put workplace stress (COVID 19 aside) as a main workplace issue at 70% from those surveyed. Stress is seen as being the **‘first concern of safety reps in the by 85 percent in health services,’** In 2020, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that two fifths of public sector organisations reported that stress-related absence (most commonly caused by heavy workloads) had increased over the last 12 months. With 70% (exactly the same as the TUC safety reps survey) stating it is the most common cause of long term absence.

Stress can be shown in a person in different ways and this can include **physical symptoms, changes in behaviour and emotions.** There are occasions where these signs of stress can develop into health conditions including depression and anxiety, heart disease and irritable bowel syndrome.

Some of the **Physical symptoms** as listed by the HSE of stress are:

- palpitations
- raised blood pressure
- tightness of chest/chest pains
- headaches
- abdominal cramps/nausea
- sleep disturbance/tiredness
- aching/tense muscles
- neck/backache

Behavioural symptoms are:

- becoming withdrawn and not wanting to socialise
- increased alcohol, nicotine, or drug intake
- under-eating or over-eating
- becoming accident prone
- becoming impatient, aggressive, or compulsive
- working longer hours – not taking breaks
- no longer having time for leisure activities

Emotional symptoms include:

- irritability
- anger
- negative thoughts
- restlessness
- increased anxiety
- increased alertness
- unnecessary guilt
- panic
- mood swings
- being tearful
- loss of motivation

Employers have a **duty of care to staff and to undertake risk assessments**, to follow the **HSE management standards** around stress and should have a strong workplace policy in relation to this. The Health and Safety Executive has numerous health sector related toolkits on stress that [can be found here](#).

EFFECTIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Organisations need to ensure all employees are aware that it takes the management of workplace stress seriously. A keyway of achieving this is to effectively implement a workplace stress policy. Not only will this help to assure employees that managers take the issue seriously, but it also provides an effective tool to identify, assess and tackle possible causes of stress in the workplace. The policy needs to be under constant and active implementation.

Checklist: What to include in the policy

To make a strong statement and to have an effective process to identify, assess and manage stress in the workplace, policies need to reflect the following:

- **Statement of intent**
Include a statement at the beginning of the policy making a commitment to preventing, managing and reducing the causes of stress.
- **Context**
Ensure the policy reflects the legal implications of why organisations have to manage stress in the workplace.
 - While there is no specific legislation on stress, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require all employees to be protected from risk and harm and for employers to assess the risks of workplace hazards. As stress can cause harm to individuals, stating the statutory requirements of organisations contextualises the need to have an effective stress at work policy.
 - National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines on promoting mental wellbeing at work also provide context for work on stress and should be implemented by NHS organisations (NICE 2009).
- **Definitions**
Define 'stress' as this is key to understanding what it is and how it can occur. Citing HSE's six management standards is key to understanding how stress can manifest and where it can be controlled in order to prevent it from causing harm.
- **Process for identifying stress**
The employer should identify an effective way for identifying where stress is likely to occur.
 - This could be through an annual audit, or through sporadic audits which could be targeted at specific departments, for instance who have been involved in critical incidents or significant change.
 - One way of doing this is through using the HSE Indicator tool. This is an online audit tool comprising 35 questions. Alternatively, organisations can devise their own, shorter questionnaire which targets the particular area of risk they wish to identify.

Whatever process is used to assess the risks of stress, including who could be harmed and how, organisations should ensure the process meets the [HSE's equivalence test](#).

○ **Identifying priorities**

Ensure that once the data has been collected, it can be assessed and prioritised to identify where the greatest risk exists.

- If the HSE Indicator Tool is used, data can be downloaded into the HSE analysis tool to produce a report.
- The policy should state the process for implementing action and ensuring progress on priorities. Procedures should be put in place to monitor and review the effectiveness of the policy.

○ **Available resources**

The employer should make reference to what internal and external support is available to staff who suffer from stress on an individual basis

○ **Responsibilities**

A policy should make reference to who is responsible within the organisation for implementing and supporting the policy:

- chief executive to reference the need for top-level support for ensuring policy practice is embedded within the organisation
- senior manager and line manager responsibilities – to implement at departmental level
- human resources – usually as the lead for the policy and to monitor effectiveness
- health and safety team – to support implementation of policy
- occupational health – to support implementation of policy
- safety representatives – to act in a collegiate way and escalate concerns
- employees – to act in a way which ensures their behaviours do not cause stress within others
- management – ensure that NHS staff are being advised alongside policies on safe working and are able to take adequate rest periods to avoid burnout

○ **Cross reference to policies which already exist**

Management should ensure that the policy references other policies, such as the prevention of bullying and harassment or flexible working policies and practices. Stress is not in itself a single condition caused by a single factor.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

A key requirement of managing stress is for management to consult with safety representatives:

- Trade union safety representatives can work in partnership with employers to support improvements in staff health, safety, and wellbeing. Partnership in health and safety (H&S) should go further than this, for example, H&S policy should, wherever possible, be agreed with safety representatives as part of formal arrangements at an H&S committee.
- Safety representatives offer access to valuable insight and research from their own main trade unions and through contact and networking with colleagues from other trusts and

staff side organisations. They can support organisations in delivering best practice in the provision of stress management in the workplace and carry out workplace assessments and audits to identify potential risks of stress.

- Working in partnership with staff side representatives increases the trust between management and individuals that the organisation takes the issue of stress management in the workplace seriously and is committed to having a positive approach to it.

Stress

The law on Health and safety at work is quite clear: the employer must remove or reduce the hazards that make workers ill. Stress is a workplace hazard and employers have a legal duty to reduce the risk to works 'so far as is reasonable practicable'. Employers have to use either the Stress Management Standards (SMS) or something at least as effective, or else face prosecution.

Whilst there is no specific law dealing with stress, a number of laws do apply that are referenced. These are:

- SRSC Regulations 1977-Chapter 2, with reference to safety reps' rights and consultation
- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974- Chapter 9- Dealing with the general duties of employers and employees under sections 2-9. Generally, the employer has a duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of employees and this includes mental as well as physical health.
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regs 1999-Chapter 34
- Disability Discrimination Act-Chapter 12
- Civil Law, which places a duty of care upon employers to their employees-Chapter 40.

The risk assessment duty in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations is the starting point for the regulations of work-related stress.

The risk assessment process, which is the same as for any other risk:

Step 1: Identify the hazards, referring to the Management Standards.

Step 2: Identify those at risk and how they are at risk.

Step 3: Evaluate the risk and take action.

Step 4: Record your findings and develop an action plan.

Step 5: Monitor the action plan and review its effectiveness.