BRITISH SAFETY COUNCIL

Managing Stress at Work

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A guide to tackling stress in the workplace

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Contents

Introduction

Ill health due to stress at work – such as anxiety – can have a devastating impact on the individual. And harmful levels of stress can also have an adverse effect on a business – for example, due to staff absence and high employee turnover.

However, organisations such as HSE say that stress at work can be prevented and reduced – for example, by setting realistic deadlines for workers.

British Safety Council has also launched various wellbeing-related services for organisations, including becoming a supporter of the Being Well Together Programme, which is the first holistic approach to health, safety and wellbeing. A coordinated, sustained and integrated set of interventions delivered as part of a holistic organisation-wide programme is the most effective in delivering both short and longer-term benefits. For further details see: www.beingwelltogether.org

This guide provides some tips on how to prevent and manage stress at work.

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Editor
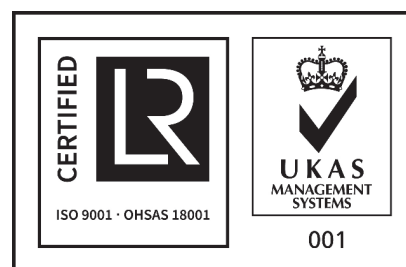
Managing Stress at Work

Work can be good for our mental health and wellbeing – for example, by providing a sense of identity and personal achievement. However, if employers fail to adequately address factors such as ensuring the demands of a job are achievable, employees can suffer work-related stress. In turn, this can have a damaging effect on their health, their work performance and their productivity.

Pressure is part of many types of work and most people benefit from a certain amount of pressure in their work as it helps to keep them motivated, boosts their energy and productivity levels and gives them a sense of ambition.

However, if the pressure individuals are under exceeds their ability to cope, they can suffer stress, which can damage both their physical and mental health.

For example, work-related stress can cause workers to feel physically and psychologically unwell, such as feeling distressed or tearful, having difficulty concentrating and suffering disturbed sleep. If the stress is prolonged and unmanageable, the psychological impact can cause mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, or make an existing mental health condition worse.

Research also suggests there are strong links between stress and physical ill health, such as heart disease, back pain, gastrointestinal disturbances and headaches. Stress can also lead to other behaviours that are harmful to health, such as skipping meals, drinking too much alcohol, misusing drugs and smoking.

As well as imposing human costs in terms of personal suffering and serious ill health for individual workers, work-related stress can have adverse effects on a business. For example, if workers are experiencing work-related stress, their performance at work can be affected – for example, by causing them to take longer to complete tasks and having difficulty concentrating or making decisions.

Indeed, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) says research has shown work-related stress can have an adverse effect on organisations in terms of staff performance and productivity; staff attendance levels; staff retention; and organisational image and reputation.

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Stress can cause mental health problems.

Some facts and numbers

17.9m

working days lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in Great Britain in 2019/20

828,000

workers reported suffering from work related stress, depression or anxiety (new or long-standing cases) in Great Britain in 2019/20

55%

of work-related ill health (new or long standing) self-reported by workers in Great Britain in 2019/20 was caused by work-related stress, depression or anxiety

21.6

working days lost on average for each case of work-related stress, depression or anxiety in Great Britain in 2019/20

Source: HSE 2019/20 annual statistics

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Employers must assess and control the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities.

HSE also warns that work-related stress can have an adverse impact on a business unit or team. For example, if an employee is forced to take sick leave for an extended period due to a stress-related illness this can have a detrimental impact on the workload and morale of the rest of the team.

However, HSE says that work-related stress can be tackled and managed by addressing key aspects of work design. This means, for example, ensuring that workloads are appropriate and there is adequate support for employees.

HSE adds that good management is often the key to managing the causes of work-related stress, and acting early on the signs of work-related stress can both reduce the impact of pressure on the affected individuals and make it easier to remove or reduce the causes of stress at work.

Many employers have reported improvements in productivity, retention of staff and a reduction in sickness absence after tackling work-related stress. HSE adds that preventing and reducing work-related stress can also boost employee morale and create a more engaged workforce.

As a result, there is a clear moral and business case for employers to take appropriate steps to eliminate or reduce the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities.

This guide provides some basic advice on preventing and tackling the causes of work-related stress. It is based on guidance from HSE. However, more detailed guidance on both preventing

stress at work and managing and supporting workers' mental health is available from advice organisations such as Acas, Business in the Community (BITC), the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the Mental Health at Work website and Mind.

This guide is only a basic introduction on how to reduce stress at work and employers should refer to more detailed guidance and/or seek expert advice where necessary. An important first step could be talking to us about British Safety Council wellbeing services, including becoming a supporter of Being Well Together.

What is work-related stress?

In simple terms, employees feel stress when they can't cope with pressures and other issues. For example, employees can experience work-related stress if they have demands placed on them that they find difficult to cope with. A common example would be a worker becoming stressed because they feel they don't have the skills or time to meet a tight deadline.

HSE defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them".

If the pressure that a person is under exceeds their ability to cope – particularly if the pressure lasts for a long time – the stress can become unmanageable. Unmanageable stress can cause physical, psychological and behavioural symptoms such as anxiety, fatigue and changes to sleeping patterns. Although stress is

not an illness itself, if the pressures on the individual persist and are prolonged, the psychological impact can lead to or aggravate mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. Stress is also linked to physical ill health, such as heart disease and back pain.

As well as being caused by work factors, such as excessive and persistent pressure, stress can also be caused by events or experiences in a person's personal or home life. Common examples include bereavement, divorce, financial problems and responsibilities in caring for a partner or family member. Stress can also be caused by a combination of both work and personal stress – for example, when someone's caring responsibilities outside work combine with pressure at work to create unmanageable stress.

Work-related stress can also aggravate a pre-existing mental health problem that an employee was otherwise successfully managing without it negatively affecting their work.

Stress can affect people differently, and what stresses one person may not affect another. Factors such as skills, experience and age may all affect whether an employee can cope with varying levels and amounts of stress.

The HSE says there are six main areas that can lead to work-related stress if they are not managed properly. These are:
- **Demands** – for example, employees can become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do
- **Control** – for example, employees can feel disaffected and perform poorly if

they have no say over how and when they do their work
- **Support** – for example, levels of sickness absence often rise if staff feel they cannot talk to managers about issues troubling them
- **Relationships** – for example, a failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying
- **Role** – for example, staff may feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them and/or don't understand how their work fits into the objectives of the organisation
- **Change** – for example, if change is not managed effectively it can lead to uncertainty and insecurity.

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, employers are required to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from their work activities.

If there is a risk of stress-related ill health arising from the work, the employer is then required under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to take steps to remove or reduce the risk, as far as is reasonably practicable.

Signs and symptoms of stress

In many cases there will be signs or indications that individual employees or groups of workers are experiencing stress at work. Therefore, managers should look out for signs of stress in teams and employees and think about whether the stress could be linked to work problems.

HSE says that acting early to spot the signs of work-related stress can reduce the impact of pressure on the affected employees and make it easier to remove or reduce the causes of stress at work.

Signs of stress in a team include:
- Arguments
- Higher staff turnover
- More reports of stress
- More sickness absence
- Decreased performance
- More compliant and grievances.

Meanwhile, signs of stress in individual employees might include:
- A change in the way a person acts, such as taking more time off work, turning up late for work or being more nervous
- A change in the way someone thinks or feels, such as mood swings; being withdrawn; a loss of motivation, commitment and confidence; and increased emotional reactions, including being more tearful, sensitive or aggressive.

Other signs of stress among individuals include:
- A change in how the worker interacts with others
- Changes in the standard of their work or their focus on tasks
- Appearing tired or having less interest in tasks they previously enjoyed
- Changes in the person's appetite and/or an increase in smoking and drinking alcohol.

Therefore, if work-related stress could be a problem, the employer must assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from the work activities and take all reasonably

Free guidance:
HSE offers guidance on managing work-related stress.

Talking Toolkit
Preventing work-related stress
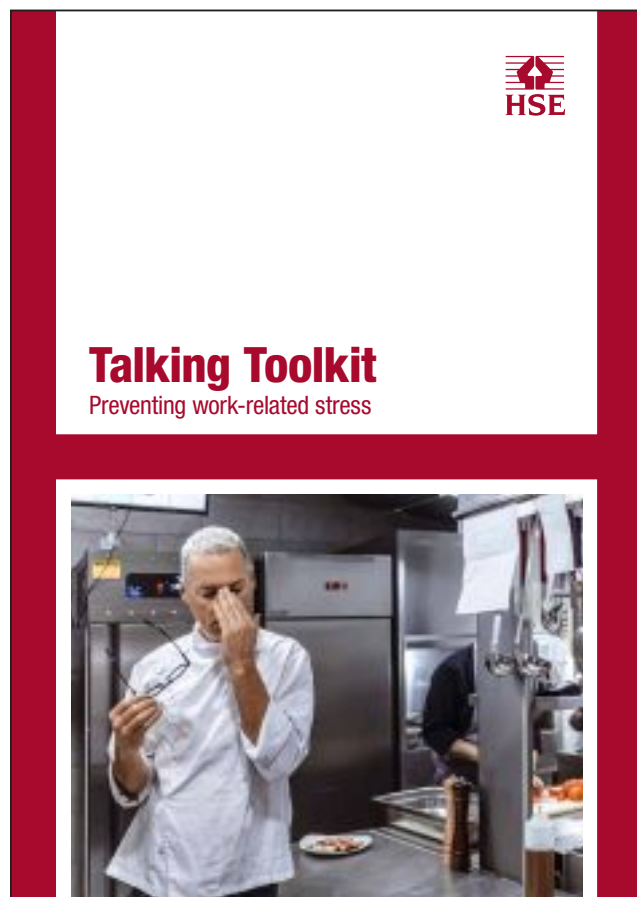
See:
hse.gov.uk/stress

practicable measures to prevent or sufficiently reduce the risk to employees' health and safety.

Management Standards

HSE says that, in general, an effective approach to assessing the risk of stress-related ill heath at work and deciding on ways of removing or controlling the problem could include:

- Measuring the current situation (for example, using staff surveys or other techniques)
- Working in partnership with employees and their representatives to make practical improvements
- Agreeing and sharing an action plan with employees and their representatives
- Regularly reviewing the situation to ensure that it continues to improve.

To help employers eliminate or control the risk of ill health from work-related stress, HSE has developed a set of Management Standards.

The standards provide an organisational framework for employers and employees to work together to identify and then eliminate or reduce the risk of harmful stress at work.

The standards are designed to help employers identify the underlying causes – or potential causes – of work-related stress. They also set out a step-by-step process for employers and employees – or employee representatives – to work together to identify the most effective ways of removing or reducing the risk of harmful stress by improving aspects of the work design.

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The standards are designed to help employers prepare for and conduct an appropriate risk assessment on the causes and extent of work-related stress; decide how well they are managing the risk of stress; and produce an action plan to both prevent stress and manage its root causes.

The standards cover six key areas of work design which, if not properly managed, can cause work-related stress. The six areas are:

- **Demands** – this includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment
- **Control** – how much say people have over the way they do their work
- **Support** – this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues
- **Relationships** – this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- **Role** – whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that employees do not have conflicting roles
- **Change** – how organisational change (large and small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

For each standard, there are statements about good management and work practices that employers should be implementing and achieving to effectively eliminate or reduce the causes of harmful stress at work. There are also statements of 'what should be happening' or 'states to be achieved'

explaining good practice for managing the causes of work-related stress and advice on how to achieve them.

For example, the 'demands' standard – which covers areas such as workload, work patterns and the work environment – states that, to successfully prevent and control this particular cause of stress at work, employees must indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs.

Therefore, to meet the 'demand' standard, the employer should ensure that the organisation meets the associated 'what should be happening' or 'states to be achieved'. For 'demands', this means that ensuring that:

- Employees are provided with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work
- People's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands
- Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees
- Employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

The general idea is that, having identified and assessed the causes and extent of stress at work, the employer can decide if there are any gaps between their current performance in managing stress and the 'states to be achieved' for each of the standards.

The employer should then work with their managers, employees and/or the employee representatives to improve the six key areas of work design so they prevent the root causes of work-related stress.

HSE has published guidance for employers on how to follow the

Management Standards approach.

Its workbook, *Tackling work-related stress using the management standards approach*, explains how employers can use information such as sickness absence data, staff surveys and direct feedback from employees to identify whether work-related stress is a problem and who could be affected by it. The booklet also gives ideas on how to tackle the key causes of stress.

HSE has also published a *Talking Toolkit* designed to help managers to have simple conversations with employees to identify any causes of work-related stress. The conversations are also designed to help managers and employees jointly develop ideas for preventing or reducing stress at work. See its website for details.

The guidance on the Management Standards also explains how employers, managers, employees and/or employee representatives should work in partnership to decide on practical ways to eliminate or adequately control the causes of work-related stress.

In fact, employers should remember they have a legal obligation to consult their employees – or the employee representatives – on anything in the workplace that could substantially affect employees' health and safety. The duty includes consulting employees on the introduction of any measures or changes that could substantially affect employees' health and safety and taking account of what employees say before making any health and safety decisions.

In its guidance on implementing the Management Standards approach, HSE therefore says employers, managers and employees should work together to identify the causes of stress, develop solutions and monitor the effectiveness of any steps taken to reduce stress at work. HSE says employees and their representatives, such as trade union or health and safety representatives, are often the ones closest to the health and safety hazards and are therefore usually well placed to suggest improvements to eliminate or reduce the risk of stress.

HSE says that, when assessing the risk of employees experiencing stress, employers should generally focus on organisational issues that have the potential to impact on groups and large numbers of employees, rather than individual employees.

However, employers should also have measures in place and take appropriate steps to help and support individual employees who are experiencing stress or a mental health problem.

HSE also reminds employers who decide to follow the Management Standards approach that the six key areas of the standards do not always act on their own but often combine, overlap or interact.

Therefore, it says that employers should consider 'the job' as a whole and avoid taking action on just one element of the work design and management practices at a time. This is because a holistic approach is likely to be most effective in reducing the risk of work-related stress.

Once the employer has taken action to eliminate or control the risk of work-

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related stress, they should monitor the situation to see if the measures taken are having the desired effect. Ways of achieving this include asking employees if the actions are eliminating or reducing stress at work; conducting follow-up staff surveys on the extent and causes of stress at work; and analysing sickness absence and staff turnover data to check for improvements in these areas.

HSE says employers should be focusing on preventing and managing the root causes of work-related stress on a continuous basis, rather than trying to reactively deal with problems after they occur and employees are already being exposed to excessive pressure at work.

If the employer has five or more employees, they are required to record the findings of their risk assessment for work-related stress, including details of the significant risks and the action that will be taken to manage the risks.

However, even if the employer has fewer than five employees, HSE says it is generally useful to record the findings of the stress risk assessment so it can be reviewed if anything changes.

The Management Standards framework is designed to be useful to all organisations, whatever the size. However, employers are free to adopt other approaches, providing they adequately assess and eliminate or control the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities.

HSE has a checklist on its website to help employers decide if their approach to assessing the risks from work-related stress is suitable and sufficient.

Tackling stress

Employers can take a variety of measures to prevent or control the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities. The nature of the appropriate control measures will depend on a variety of factors, and further advice on controlling stress at work is available from organisations such as Acas, BITC, CIPD and Mind.

Possible measures suggested by HSE for each of the six Management Standards include the following.

Demands

- Ensure that sufficient resources are available for staff to do their jobs – for example, time and equipment
- Set realistic deadlines
- Hold regular meetings, both with individuals and teams, to discuss their workloads and any anticipated challenges
- Allow regular breaks, especially when the work is complex or emotionally demanding
- Provide training to help staff prioritise, or information on how they can seek help if they have conflicting priorities.
- Consider changes to start and finish times to help employees cope with pressures outside work, such as childcare and commuting
- Design jobs that provide stimulation and opportunities for workers to use their skills to keep staff motivated and interested in their work
- Consider implementing personal development and training plans, where employees think about the skills they

would like to develop and the ideas are then discussed with management

- Take steps to improve the physical environment, such as reducing unwanted distractions, disturbance and noise levels
- Assess other inherent risks posed by the work – such as physical and verbal abuse and musculoskeletal disorders – and take steps to deal with them, as they may be stressful and add to the problems
- Provide training to help employees deal with and defuse difficult situations, such as difficult phone calls or aggressive customers
- Don't allocate more work to a person or team unless they have the resources to cope with it
- Don't allow workers to 'cope' by working longer hours, starting earlier, finishing later taking work home or working through breaks and lunch
- Don't contact staff by phone or email (even when they have equipment provided by the employer) outside of working hours or when they are on leave or otherwise 'off duty'.

Control

- Agree systems that enable employees to have a say over the way their work is organised and undertaken – for example, through project meetings, one-to-ones and performance reviews
- Where possible, allow employees some control over the pace of their work – for example, when breaks can be taken
- Allow and encourage staff to participate in decision-making, especially where it affects them

- Hold regular discussion forums during the planning stage of projects to talk about the anticipated output and methods of working
- Talk about the skills people have and if they believe they are able to use these to good effect
- Don't monitor employees' movements in detail, including breaks.

Support

- Hold regular one-to-one and team meetings to talk about any emerging issues or pressures
- Include work-related stress and emerging pressures as a standing item for meetings with employees and/or performance reviews
- Find examples of how people would like to – or have – received good support from managers or colleagues and consider if these can be adopted across the entire business or a business unit
- Ask how employees would like to access managerial support – for example, via an 'open door' policy and/or agreed times when managers are available to discuss emerging issues or pressures
- Talk about ways the organisation can provide support if someone is experiencing problems outside work
- Deal sensitively with staff experiencing problems outside work
- Share information with employees on the areas of support available, such as the human resources department, employee assistance programmes, occupational health team, trained counsellors and external organisations

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- Offer access to counsellors
- Provide flexibility in work schedules, where possible
- Allow phased return to work after long-term sickness absence.

Relationships

- Promote positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness
- Have an agreement with employees and senior leaders on which behaviours are unacceptable and ensure all staff are aware of them
- Have a written policy and procedures for preventing and dealing with unacceptable behaviour and establish procedures for employees to report such behaviour
- Regularly communicate the policies and procedures on preventing and dealing with unacceptable behaviour and handling staff grievances to employees and ensure they are understood
- Implement procedures to prevent, or quickly resolve, conflict at work and communicate them to all staff
- Have a confidential system for people to report unacceptable behaviour
- Encourage good communication and provide training to help staff develop effective communications skills, such as listening skills and assertiveness
- Discuss the ways individuals work together and how they can build positive relationships
- Identify ways to celebrate success – for example, informal staff lunches
- Encourage and provide opportunities for employees to socialise together

- Provide support for staff who work in isolation, such as lone workers or those in separate locations.

Role

- Give all employees a thorough induction into the organisation and its policies and procedures, including details of where to get support or who to speak to about stress
- Provide clear job descriptions and work objectives for all staff
- Define work structures clearly so that all team members know who is doing what, and why
- Hold regular one-to-one meetings to ensure individuals are clear about their role and what is planned for the coming months
- Agree specific standards of performance for jobs and individual tasks and review them regularly
- Hold team meetings to enable members to clarify their role and discuss any role conflict
- Don't make changes to the scope of someone's job, or their responsibilities, without making sure the individual knows what is required of them and accepts it.

Change

- Provide employees with timely information to help them to understand the reasons for proposed changes
- Ensure there is adequate employee consultation on proposed changes and provide opportunities for employees to influence the proposals

- Ensure employees have access to relevant support during changes
- Consult employees early and throughout the change process
- Provide a system for employees to comment and ask questions before, during and after the change
- Explain the timescale of any changes
- Ensure employees are made aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs, and, if necessary, are given training to support any changes to their jobs
- Review how the change will impact on departmental and individual workplans and ensure the objectives remain clear and the workloads are appropriately distributed
- Have agreed methods of communication about proposed changes – such as meetings, letters and email – and agree the frequency of the communication.

Manager behaviour

HSE says line managers can play a vital role in identifying and managing stress at work. This is because they are likely to see the problems causing the stress first hand and are often in a good position to notice changes in staff behaviour that may indicate a stress-related problem. They are also often the first point of contact when someone is feeling stressed.

Employers should therefore consider training managers to spot the early signs of stress and how to support staff suffering from stress. This might include taking action to tackle the causes of stress and encouraging the worker to seek support from someone like the company's occupational health team or their family doctor.

HSE adds that a manager's own behaviour and management style can add to the stress their staff may be experiencing. Indeed, the behaviour of managers is often highlighted as a major factor by employees suffering work-related stress. As a result, HSE says it is a good idea to provide training for all managers and supervisors on the good management practices that will help prevent stress among their teams.

The *People managers' guide to mental health* from CIPD and Mind also says good line management can be crucial in supporting mental wellbeing, spotting early signs of distress and initiating early intervention. In contrast, it says poor line management may exacerbate or even cause mental health issues through an unhelpful approach or behaviour.

The CIPD/Mind guide adds research has shown that the core management behaviours needed by line managers to prevent and mitigate the effect of stress at work (and support employee engagement and health and wellbeing), include being open, fair and consistent; handling conflicts and problems; building and sustaining relationships; and supporting staff development. For the full guide see: www.mind.org.uk/workplace

HSE says it is important that managers consider whether their management style is preventing and reducing stress or in fact causing or adding to it.

HSE, CIPD and Investors in People have designed a simple tool that allows

managers to assess whether they currently have the behaviours identified as effective for preventing and reducing stress at work. The tool also provides tips on how managers can improve their effectiveness in preventing stress in their teams.

The tool is at:
hse.gov.uk/stress/mcit.htm

Helping employees suffering from stress

Despite an employer's best efforts to control the causes of work-related stress, employees may still experience stress at levels that have a negative impact on their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

In its guidance on the Management Standards HSE says it is therefore essential that employers establish ways for employees to raise their concerns about work-related stress.

HSE says channels that could be established to enable employees to raise concerns about work-related stress (and any mental health difficulties they may be experiencing), could include:

- Creating an environment where employees are encouraged to talk, both formally and informally, to their manager or another person in their management chain
- Reminding employees they can speak to trade union representatives, health and safety representatives or human resources personnel
- Encouraging employees to talk to someone in the organisation or seek advice from occupational health advisors or their GP if they are becoming stressed due to pressures either at work or in their personal lives, or if they become concerned about their mental health
- Introducing mentoring and other forms of co-worker support
- Providing employee assistance (counselling) services.

HSE says if an employee reports they are under excessive pressure and feeling stressed, and something at work is causing the problem, the employer must rectify the situation and limit the harm to the individual as quickly as possible. The employer should then conduct a wider appraisal of the working conditions in the relevant area and ensure the risk of work stress is being adequately controlled.

HSE says if an employee's complaint involves relationship issues with their line manager – or colleagues – it is very useful to involve human resources, occupational health and a representative for the employee (such as a trusted colleague or a trade union representative), when working through the problem.

Employers are not legally responsible for tackling stress that originates in an employee's home life – such as when an employee's care responsibilities for a family member are causing them stress by impacting on their work performance as a result of their tiredness.

However, HSE says well-managed organisations will generally have arrangements in place to help address the pressure that employees may be experiencing as a result of 'home-related' stress. This might include measures

such as providing access to counselling services, adaptations to the work or changes to working hours.

HSE says it is generally in the employer's interest to support an employee who is experiencing stress outside work that is contributing to their stress at work. This is because if an employee is not working well, for whatever underlying reason, it will impact on their work performance and may also affect their colleagues.

Many employers also decide to provide training for staff on the causes of stress and how to deal with and report it.

Promoting positive mental health

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness among employers of the importance and benefits of promoting positive mental health at work; seeking to end the stigma around mental health problems; and supporting staff who are experiencing mental health issues.

Indeed, research shows employees with positive mental health are more likely to work productively, interact well with colleagues and adapt to changes in the workplace. Also, if staff feel they can talk openly about mental health, problems are less likely to build up, which could avoid or minimise absence due to mental health issues and improve staff morale. Also, workers experiencing poor mental health who are supported by their employer are more likely to be able to stay in or return to work after a period of absence, reducing long-term absences in the organisation.

Acas therefore recommends employers create a supportive environment where staff feel able to talk openly about mental health. Ways of achieving this include:
- Treating mental and physical health as equally important
- Making sure employees have regular one-to-ones with their managers, to talk about any problems they're having
- Encouraging positive mental health – for example, arranging mental health awareness training, workshops or appointing mental health 'champions' who staff can talk to.

A range of guidance on how to promote positive mental health is available – see the back pages. For example, BITC and Public Health England (PHE) offer a free toolkit setting out some of the steps employers can take to create a culture that promotes positive mental health, helps prevent workers from experiencing mental ill health and helps workers to better manage mental health problems. Some general tips from BITC/PHE include:
- Ensure there is a clear commitment from the senior level of the organisation that mental health matters – for example, by the business signing up to the Mental Health at Work Commitment, a set of actions any organisation can follow to improve and support the mental health of their staff (see next section)
- Create a workplace environment and culture that reduces the risk of mental health problems – for example, by having effective management standards in place so employees feel supported and valued (such as staff

appraisals and informal catch-ups to see if employees are happy in their job or need further support); ensuring employees have a healthy work-life balance, including reasonable hours and agreed deadlines; having systems in place, such as risk assessments, to prevent stress; and reviewing job design and roles to ensure they are appropriate and conducive to productive work

- Ensure all line managers receive training so they are conscious of the signs of poor mental health, clear on the support available, 'check in' with individuals at appropriate times and build their confidence in supporting staff with mental health problems
- Ensure all employees are educated to increase their mental health literacy and to recognise the signs that they may need support
- Ensure everyone knows how to access mental health support
- Take a proactive approach to ending mental health stigma – such as ensuring mental health is discussed openly in team and company meetings as well as during one-to-one's
- Make adjustments to work patterns and structures for anyone experiencing difficulties, to keep them in work
- Ensure employees who experience ill health and have to take time off work are supported to make a speedy and appropriate return, and adjustments are made for their return to work.

Employers should also remember that under the Equality Act 2010, in certain circumstances, mental health conditions are considered to be a disability. This means that if aware or informed of a worker's disability, the employer has a legal obligation to make 'reasonable adjustments' to work environments and/or arrangements to help the individual remain in or return to work, and to ensure they are not discriminated against in employment or treated less favourably than other people.

Workplace adjustments can be both temporary and made on a permanent basis, and could include steps such as allowing the individual to work part-time or flexible hours, or permitting them to take leave for appointments related to their mental health. Any adjustments should only be made following discussion and agreement between the employer and individual, including input from the person's doctor if necessary.

However, whether or not the employee's mental health condition is classed as a disability under the Equality Act, it is best practice for employers to make reasonable changes to help someone experiencing poor mental health to attend work and/or to reduce the pressure on their mental wellbeing. A common example would include allowing the employee to have more rest breaks.

Mental wellbeing – recent developments

In October 2017, a government-commissioned review set out a number of recommendations for the government, employers and regulators to adopt to improve and support the mental health of

people at work in the UK.

Thriving at Work found that 300,000 people with a long-term mental health condition leave their jobs every year in the UK. Research carried out for the report by Deloitte – and updated in 2020 – also found that poor mental health costs UK employers up to £45 billion each year.

However, the research also found that investing in mental health at work can reap financial rewards for businesses, with an average return on investment of £5.00 per £1.00 spent.

As a result, the review made a variety of recommendations for government, regulators and employers designed to ensure that all employers prevent and address mental ill health caused or made worse by work and support individuals with a mental health condition to enter, remain in and thrive at work.

The review recommended that all employers – regardless of size, type or industry – adopt and implement six 'mental health core standards', covering basic good practices for protecting and enhancing workers' mental health.

The core standards are to:

- Produce, implement and communicate a mental health at work plan
- Develop mental health awareness among employees
- Encourage open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling
- Provide employees with good working conditions and ensure they have a healthy work/life balance and opportunities for development
- Promote effective people management through line managers and supervisors
- Routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing.

Thriving at Work also recommended that all public sector employers, and the UK's large private sector companies with more than 500 employees, go further and adopt more ambitious 'enhanced' mental health standards. These are to:

- Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting
- Demonstrate accountability
- Improve the disclosure process
- Ensure provision of tailored in-house mental health support and signposting to clinical help.

The report's authors said most of the core and enhanced standards can be implemented at little or no cost, and they believed all organisations in the country are capable of quickly implementing the core standards.

In response, the UK government stated that the Civil Service, as a large employer, would adopt both the core and enhanced mental health standards. It also said that the government will support and encourage all private sector businesses to adopt the core and/or enhanced standards, as appropriate.

Mind has published guidance on how employers can implement the standards – see: www.mind.org.uk/workplace

Also, a group of UK mental health charities, leading employers and trade associations have developed a voluntary Mental Health at Work Commitment. This sets out six key actions organisations can

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follow to improve and support the mental health of their staff. The six actions, or standards, are based on what best practice has shown employers should be doing to create an environment where employees can thrive. They also build on the standards set out in the *Thriving at Work* review. Organisations who sign up to the Commitment make a public pledge to take the recommended actions to support the mental wellbeing of their staff.

See:
mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

Finally...

Although the demands employees face at work can help motivate them do their jobs well, problems such as unreasonable work demands, poor working relationships and bullying can result in people suffering stress. This can give rise to a number of symptoms and ill-health effects, from irritability and lack of concentration to high blood pressure and depression.

Work-related stress can also trigger an existing mental health problem that an employee was otherwise successfully managing without it affecting their work, and stress caused by factors unrelated to work may also affect an employee's ability to do their job properly.

Therefore, employers should carry out a risk assessment to determine if there is a risk of ill health caused by stress at work and, if so, put in place suitable measures to eliminate or control the risks. This might include steps such as

ensuring suitable job design, providing support mechanisms for employees and establishing and maintaining effective policies and procedures for preventing and dealing with cases of bullying and harassment.

By doing this, they can reap the benefits of a more productive and healthy workforce, and ensure that stress and mental health problems are treated with the seriousness that they deserve.

Get the poster:
Remind workers to look for the signs of stress in colleagues and encourage them to seek help.

British Safety Council members with the Tools and Templates module can download this poster from their online account. Log in at:

www.britsafe.org

Recommended reading

HSE guidance on minimising the risk from coronavirus at work
hse.gov.uk

Stress and mental health at work HSE webpages
hse.gov.uk/stress

How to tackle work-related stress. A guide for employers on making the Management Standards work

Tackling work-related stress using the Management Standards approach.
A step-by-step workbook

Management Standards tools, templates and checklists

Working together to reduce stress at work.
A guide for employees

Talking toolkits: Preventing work-related stress

HSE Stress Management Standards. Guidance for health and safety representatives

Line manager competency indicator tool

Example stress policy
hse.gov.uk/stress/resources.htm

Workplace stress posters (HSE)
hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/workplace-stress-poster.htm

ISO 45003: Occupational health and safety management — Psychological health and safety at work — Guidelines
bit.ly/3p1ZR0G

Acas guidance on topics such as supporting mental health at work and flexible working
acas.org.uk

BITC/Public Health England employer toolkits on topics such as supporting mental health, reducing the risk of suicide and employee sleep and recovery
bitc.org.uk

CIPD guidance on topics such as supporting mental health
cipd.co.uk

People managers' guide to mental health (CIPD and Mind)
bit.ly/2NBleEj

IOSH guidance on supporting mental health
iosh.com

Mates in Mind guidance on mental health
www.matesinmind.org

Mental Health at Work toolkits for employers
mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

Mental Health Foundation guidance for employers on supporting workers' mental health as workplaces re-open following the pandemic and for individuals on looking after their mental health
mentalhealth.org.uk

Mental Health at Work (over 450 online guidance, toolkits and case studies provided for employers by various organisations, that are curated by Mind with the support of the Royal Foundation's Heads Together campaign)
mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

Mental Health at Work Commitment (set of actions, organised into six standards, that any organisation can follow to improve and support the mental health of their people)
mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/commitment

Mind guidance on supporting and improving the mental health of workers, including 'How to implement the Thriving at Work standards in your workplace' and free Wellness Action Plans designed to help people to support their own mental health at work
mind.org.uk/workplace

Further information

Acas
Independent organisation that provides advice to employers on employment relations issues such as supporting mental health at work.

acas.org.uk

Being Well Together
Programme from the British Safety Council that provides employers with a wide range of services and tools to enable them to support the health and wellbeing of their workers. Supporters get a range of benefits, such as support for their wellbeing programme and wellbeing training and guides for employers and employees.

www.beingwelltogether.org

British Safety Council
Offers training to help employers and employees manage organisational and personal stress. These include e-learning for workers on reducing personal stress and for managers on reducing stress in their teams. There are also courses to get everyone talking about mental health and to teach people how to help a colleague who may be experiencing a mental health problem.

www.britsafe.org

Business in the Community (BITC)
Charity that provides guidance for employers on improving the health and wellbeing of their workers.

bitc.org.uk

CIPD
Professional UK body for people development professionals. Offers free guidance on subjects such as supporting mental health at work.

cipd.co.uk

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
UK safety regulator. Offers guidance on managing work-related stress.

hse.gov.uk

Healthy Working Lives (Scotland)
Free health and safety advice service for Scottish employers of all sizes.

healthyworkinglives.com

Healthy Working Wales
Free health and safety advice service for employers and employees in Wales. Website provides guidance to help employers improve the health, safety and welfare of their staff.

www.healthyworkingwales.wales.nhs.uk/home

Mates in Mind
A sister charity of the British Safety Council that helps UK employers to support the mental health of their workers. It offers training designed to get everyone thinking and talking about mental health and to give people the skills to support the mental wellbeing of their colleagues.

www.matesinmind.org

Mental Health at Work
Website that brings together a variety of guidance on menal helath at work from key UK organisations. The website is curated by Mind and funded by The Royal Foundation as part of their Heads Together mental health awareness campaign.

mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

Mind
Charity that provides a range of information and support for those living with a mental health problem or supporting someone who is. Also offers guidance for employees on managing personal stress and for employers on how to create mentally healthy workplaces.

mind.org.uk

Trades Union Congress (TUC)
Provides guidance to help trade union representatives manage risks to workers' health, safety and welfare.

tuc.org.uk

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