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Stress in the workplace

Learn how to identify the signs of stress, address stress at work, and distinguish between stress and pressure

Introduction

Stress can place immense demands on employees' physical and mental health and well-being, impacting their behaviour, performance and relationships with colleagues. It's a major cause of long-term absence from work, and knowing how to manage the factors that can cause work-related stress is key to managing people effectively. Employers should conduct stress risk assessments and manage workplace activities to reduce the likelihood of stress developing.

This factsheet defines stress and draws the distinction between stress and pressure. It offers information on UK employers' duties under health and safety law and concludes with guidance on how to deal with stress at work, providing information on prevention, early intervention and stress policies.

Explore [our stance on employee health and well-being](#) in more detail, along with actions for Government and recommendations for employers.

What is work-related stress?

The UK [Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\) definition of work-related stress](#) is: 'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work'. People can become stressed when they feel they don't have the resources they need (whether physical, financial or emotional) to cope with these demands.

It's well recognised that excessive or sustained work pressure can lead to stress. Occupational stress poses a risk to businesses and can result in higher sickness absence, lower staff engagement and reduced productivity. Over [11 million working days](#) are lost a year because of stress at work. UK employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by doing a [stress risk assessment](#) and acting on it.

If people feel under too much stress and for too long, mental and physical illness may

develop. [Acas' advice](#) says 'Stress can affect people mentally in the form of anxiety and depression, and physically in the form of heart disease, back pain and alcohol and drug dependency'. Find out more about [workplace mental health](#).

Our 2020 [Health and well-being at work survey report](#), in partnership with Simplyhealth, found that stress-related absence continues to increase among UK employees, with stress a main cause of both short- and long-term absence from work. Positively, more employers are recognising stress as an issue, and taking steps to tackle stress within their organisations. However, a third of people professionals who report that stress-related absence has increased over the past year say their organisation isn't taking any steps to address it.

Many workplace initiatives can help people to manage stress, whatever the cause. Stress in an employee's personal life, for example due to financial worries, loss of a loved one or a change in circumstances, can understandably influence performance at work because people don't necessarily leave their worries at home. This means employers and managers treating people as individuals and helping them to balance their work and personal responsibilities. Ultimately, building employee resilience and supporting staff experiencing stress can help retain a valued employee and enable them to perform at their best in the long-term.

Pressure and stress

There is sometimes confusion between the terms 'pressure' and 'stress'. It's healthy and essential that people experience challenges within their lives that cause levels of pressure, for example the need to make decisions quickly when faced with a dangerous situation. And up to a certain point, an increase in pressure can improve performance, such as feeling motivated to meet a deadline. However, if pressure becomes excessive, and/or continues for an extended period of time, it can become harmful to health. It's also important to remember that every individual is different and their experience of pressure, and when that can tip into stress, will vary.

According to our 2020 Health and well-being survey, the main causes of employee stress include:

- Workloads/volume of work.
- Management style.
- Non-work factors - relationship or family issues.
- Relationships at work.
- Non-work factors – personal illness or health issues.
- Pressure to meet targets or deadlines.

Stress in the time of coronavirus

The COVID-19 pandemic raises serious concerns about people's mental, as well as physical, health. The fear and uncertainty about the risk of infection can be exacerbated by work-related pressures on people. Many people have been suddenly shifted to new ways of working, such as full-time homeworking, that can increase demands but decrease the level of control people feel they have: this can be a recipe for increased stress. Many employees are also juggling work demands as well as caring responsibilities, either for children or vulnerable relatives. These concerns are a severe test of people's resilience, and employers need to be aware of the personal, as well as work, pressures on people.

Employers should ensure they have an effective framework in place to detect signs of distress and/or stress and support people's mental health. They need to ensure line managers in particular have the knowledge and confidence to spot the early warning of signs of stress, such as changes in behaviour and/or performance levels. They need to have sensitive conversations with individuals and signpost to help where needed. All employees should be encouraged to have a good self-care routine including a healthy approach to diet, relaxation and sleep which can help to reduce stress levels.

The mental health charity Mind have produced a [guide](#) to support people's mental well-being at work during coronavirus, and CIPD members can use our [Well-being helpline and resources](#). There's more on what employers should be doing in our [Responding to the coronavirus hub](#).

Signs of stress

The first signs that indicate employees may be suffering from excessive pressure or stress are changes in behaviour or performance. The kinds of change that may occur are listed below, but the important point to remember is being alert to changes in behaviour or performance in employees.

Work performance

- Declining/inconsistent performance.
- Uncharacteristic errors.
- Loss of motivation/commitment.
- Lapses in memory.
- Increased time at work.
- Lack of holiday planning/usage.

Conflict and emotional signs

- Crying.
- Arguments.
- Undue sensitivity.
- Irritability/moodiness.
- Over-reaction to problems.
- Personality clashes.

Withdrawal

- Arriving late to work.
- Leaving early.
- Absenteeism.
- Reduced social contacts.

Aggressive behaviour

- Malicious gossip.
- Criticism of others.
- Bullying or harassment.
- Temper outbursts.

Other behaviours

- Difficulty relaxing.
- Increased consumption of alcohol.
- Increased smoking.
- Lack of interest in appearance/hygiene.
- Accidents at home or work.

Physical signs

- Nervous stumbling speech.
- Sweating.
- Tiredness/lethargy.
- Upset stomach/flatulence.
- Tension headaches.
- Rapid weight gain or loss.

The legal position

Under UK health and safety legislation and common law, employers have a duty to take

care of employees. The Health and Safety Executive says that employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it.

There is no one statute specifically covering the issue of workplace stress: a number of laws are relevant, and much of the law governing stress has evolved from case law rather than legislation. It's important for employers to keep up to date with the implications of recent cases as the law in this area is continually evolving. CIPD members find out more in our [Stress law Q&As](#).

Dealing with stress at work

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE)'s [Management Standards](#) provide guidance for employers on how to identify and manage the causes of work-related stress. The HSE lists [six main areas](#) of work design which can affect stress levels, which need to be managed properly. They are:

- **Demands:** for example, workload and the working environment.
- **Control:** for example, how much say someone has over their job.
- **Support:** for example, level of supervision and resources available to do the job.
- **Relationships:** for example, promoting positive working to help prevent conflict.
- **Role:** for example, making sure people understand their role and how it fits in the organisation.
- **Change:** for example, how organisational change is managed and communicated.

Developing an organisational framework

There are four main approaches that organisations can take to address stress at work as part of a holistic framework. These can be used together as a single initiative or adopted individually in a step-by-step well-being programme.

- **Policy, procedures and systems audit:** requires the organisation to audit its policies, procedures and systems to ensure that it provides a working environment that protects the well-being of the workforce and can identify troubled employees and provide them with an appropriate level of support.
- **Problem-centred approach:** provides a problem-solving model for dealing with stress and other psycho-social issues. It takes issues that arise within the workplace and identifies why they have occurred and then finds ways to solve them. The identification process may involve carrying out a risk assessment, examining sickness absence levels, employee feedback, claims for compensation and performance deficits.
- **Well-being approach:** takes the view that the aim is to maximise employee well-

being. Although it uses similar tools to those used by the problem-centred approach it is much more proactive in identifying ways to create a healthy workforce.

- **Employee-centred approach:** works at the level of individual employees. Individuals are provided with education and support to help them deal with the problems they face in the workplace. The employee-centred approach focuses on employee counselling and stress management training.

Ideally employers should approach stress management proactively, focusing on prevention and early intervention, and not just responding when a problem becomes significant or when someone goes on sick leave.

Prevention

Many organisations are trying to both reduce the main causes of stress in their organisation and increase employees' resilience to deal with pressures.

To help prevent workplace stress:

- Carry out a stress risk assessment, and then allocate resources to reduce or eliminate the sources of stress.
- Give people adequate training and support to do their jobs well.
- Increase support for staff during periods of change and uncertainty.

Interventions to help build workforce resilience and promote well-being in the workplace, include:

- Stress management and relaxation techniques training.
- Training aimed at building personal resilience (such as coping techniques, cognitive behaviour therapy, positive psychology courses).
- Regular activities promoting healthy behaviour and exercise.
- Flexible working options and improved work-life balance.
- Reminding employees of available help, including counselling schemes, and how to access them.

Early intervention

Spotting and addressing early signs of an issue can prevent it escalating. If employees raise an issue and managers are confident and capable of taking action, then early intervention is preferable. Although line managers should hopefully be able to spot the early signs of stress and mental health issues in their team members, employers should ensure there is someone who takes responsibility for line managers' mental health and well-being too, because this can be overlooked.

The HSE has produced a new resource, the [Talking Toolkit](#), to help managers start a conversation with their employees in identifying stressors (risks) to help manage and prevent work-related stress.

Employers often invest in:

- Developing the people management skills and confidence of managers so they can have sensitive conversations with staff.
- Developing a supportive work culture to encourage staff to discuss and seek support when experiencing stress.
- Providing, and signposting to, sources of support, for example a counselling service, employee assistance programme and charities.

The role of line managers

Line managers have a crucial role to play in preventing and dealing with workplace stress. While employers increasingly expect line managers to look after people's health and well-being, often employers don't provide the necessary training and support. For example, our 2020 [Health and well-being survey](#) found that just half of organisations train managers to manage stress.

A line manager is in the best place to understand the demands on a team member, as well as their personal needs and circumstances; they are therefore in a unique position to identify and deal with potential triggers for stress. They are also very likely to be the first port of call if a team member is feeling stressed and needs support. Our [top tips to support managers to minimise stress in their teams](#) outlines six simple steps:

- Get to know your team better.
- Lead by example to promote healthy working habits.
- Review workloads, duties and responsibilities.
- Reflect on your management style.
- Discourage 'presenteeism' in your team.
- Manage the mental health of your team while remote working.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

[Acas - Dealing with stress at work](#)

[Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\) - work-related stress](#)

[GOV.UK - Employing disabled people and people with health conditions](#)

[GOV.UK - Expenses and benefits: counselling for employees](#)

[International Stress Management Association](#)

[The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy](#)

Books and reports

CLARIDGE, B. and COOPER, C. (2014) *Stress in the spotlight: managing and coping with stress in the workplace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

COOPER, C. and HESKETH, I. (2019) *Wellbeing at work: how to design, implement and evaluate an effective strategy*. London: CIPD and Kogan Page.

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW. (2014) *HBR guide to managing stress at work: renew your energy, lighten the load, strike a better balance*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

ROBERTSON, I.T. and COOPER, C.L. (2008) *Stress*. CIPD toolkit. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Visit the [CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop](#) to see all our priced publications currently in print.

Journal articles

CLARK, P. (2019) [It's time to rethink stress management](#). *People Management* (online). 23 August.

KAPADI, H. (2018) [What employers can do to minimise stress at work](#). *People Management* (online). 15 August

MACKIE, J. (2018) [Can stress be a disability?](#) *People Management* (online). 10 April.

MAKOFF-CLARK, A. (2018) [Work-related stress jumps by a quarter to reach 'epidemic' levels](#). *People Management* (online). 1 November.

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This factsheet was last updated by Rachel Suff.