Stress at Work

Expert knowledge means success

Contents

Introduction

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) requires employers to provide a safe system of work under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. Stress at work is seen as a potential consequence of an employer's failure to provide such safety.

HSE defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". Pressure is part and parcel of all work and helps to keep us motivated. But excessive pressure can lead to stress which undermines performance, is costly to employers and can make people ill.

Why do we need to tackle stress?
HSE commissioned research has indicated that:

- about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill;

- up to 5 million people in the UK feel "very" or "extremely" stressed by their work; and

- a total of 12.8 million working days were lost to stress, depression and anxiety in 2003/4.

HSE's key messages on stress are:

- HSE is working with businesses to enable them to manage work related stress more effectively;

- work-related stress is a serious problem. Tackling it effectively can result in significant benefits for organisations;

- there are practical things organisations can do to prevent and control work related stress; and

- stress is a management issue which you as a manager can help resolve.

The HSE has set the following targets related to work related stress that it intends to meet by 2010:

- A 20% reduction in the incidence of work related ill health.

- A 30% reduction in the number of days lost due to work related ill health.

- Rehabilitation opportunities back into work and opportunities to prepare for and find employment for people not working due to ill health or disability.

Practical Solutions to Tackle Stress at Work

Workplace stress can be terrifying for businesses large and small; it's likely that 10% of your workforce report very low levels of satisfaction with both their job and the organisation. There are practical things that organisations can do now to manage the risks associated with work-related stress.

The HSE's Better Working Environment Division (BEWD) has acquired responsibility for producing advice and publications in the form of guidance, standards and regulations on work-related ill-health matters including stress. Their action pack *Real Solutions, Real People* can be used to develop solutions to manage these risks. The pack includes an introduction on how to use it, learning points, prompt cards, and an action plan to record and monitor what needs to be done and comprises:

- *Tackling work related stress: A manager's guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being* (Guidance book HSG218)-to help employers identify risks associated with work-related stress. This publication is particularly useful for organisations employing more than 50 employees. (This publication is no longer available separately)

- *Real Solutions, real people: A manager's guide to tackling work-related stress*-to help employers develop locally applicable solutions to manage risks associated with work related stress in their organisation.

- A short introductory guide to HSE's *Management Standards for stress*- to help employers measure their performance in managing stress. The Management Standards represent a set of conditions that reflect high levels of health, well being and organisational performance. Following the HSE will enable you to identify the gap between your current performance and these conditions and develop your own solutions to close this gap.

- *Tackling work-related stress- A guide for employees* (leaflet INDG341). If managers follow the advice in this publication they will be on track to meet the Management Standards introduced in 2004.

Management Standards

The Management Standards cover six key areas of work that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. In other words, the six Management Standards cover the primary sources of stress at work. These are:

- Demands – such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

- Control – such as how much say the person has in the way they do their work.

- Support – such as the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

- Relationships – such as promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

- Role – such as whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.

- Change – such as how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Employers are advised to:
- Identify the hazards
- Decide who might be harmed and how
- Evaluate the risk and take action
- Record their findings
- Monitor and review

A guide to the Management Standards can be viewed at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/pdfs/shortguide.pdf

- One A2 action planner, six prompt cards and eighteen case study cards.
- *Work-related stress.* A short guide (2001). Aimed at smaller firms.
- *Five Steps to Risk Assessment* (1999) Provides general guidance on conducting a risk assessment.

The action pack *Real Solutions, Real People* (ISBN 0 7176 2767 5) is available from:

HSE Books,
PO Box 1999,
Sudbury,
Suffolk
CO10 2WA.

or from www.hsebooks.co.uk
or by telephoning 01787 881165.

Other useful research reports on stress prevention and rehabilitation include:

- *Beacons of Excellence in Stress Prevention* which outlines criteria for best practice in stress prevention. These criteria were developed from a literature review of research in this area and through expert opinion. The criteria were used to identify organisations that could be considered examples of best practice in various aspects of stress prevention. To view the report visit:
www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr133.htm

- *Best practice in rehabilitating employees following absence due to work-related stress* which clarifies criteria of current best practice in rehabilitation. The report provides clear and practical steps employers can put in place to encourage employees to return to work and to prevent a recurrence of the initial stress. The case studies in the report cover England, Scotland and Wales, and there is also a section providing specific advice for small and medium sized companies. To view the report visit:
www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr138.htm

Six of the case studies from Real Solutions, Real People (one for each of the six key aspects of work identified in the Management Standards as potentially able to lead to work-related stress if not properly managed) are available on HSE's website at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/experience.htm
These are:

- Demands - Care home
- Control - Social services (Flexible working hours)
- Change - NHS Trust
- Relationships - SME (Improving working relationships)
- Role - Call centre (Role conflict)
- Support - Local authority noise control

What is stress?

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

Stress is a recognised psychiatric condition that may present the following behavioural and physical symptoms:

- Constant irritability
- Constant tiredness
- Indecision
- Loss of sense of humour
- Low/depressed mood
- Anger and frustration
- Feelings of victimisation
- Feelings of isolation
- Feelings of being unable to cope
- Lack of interest
- Lack of appetite
- Insomnia or sleep disturbance
- Stomach or bowel disturbances
- Headaches
- Nervousness or restlessness
- Sweating
- Muscle cramps or spasms
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Lack of interest in sex

Stress can be triggered by:
- Too much work
- Long working hours
- Tight deadlines
- Lack of control over work
- Lack of training
- Implementation of new technology
- Bullying
- Physical or emotional threats
- Verbal abuse from public
- Change of premises
- Isolation

Stress and the DDA

The Disability Discrimination Act determines a person to be disabled if they have "a mental or physical impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day to day activities".

The president of the Employment Appeal Tribunal has stated that there will be three possible routes to establishing the existence of "mental impairment" within the DDA, namely:
- proof of a mental illness specifically mentioned as such in the World Health Organisations' International Classification of Diseases
- proof of a mental illness specifically mentioned as such in a publication
- proof by other means of a medical illness recognised by a respected body of medical opinion

It may also be possible to establish mental impairment that does not arise from mental illness but this would require substantial specific medical evidence to support it.

Stress related illnesses covered by the DDA include:
- Bulimia nervosa;
- Depression;
- Chronic fatigue syndrome; and
- Psychological effects arising from severe disfigurement.

Anxiety and addictions are not covered by the DDA.

Questions and Answers for Managers

What is stress?

Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure. It isn't a disease. But if stress is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill health (e.g. depression, nervous breakdown, heart disease).

But stress can be a good thing, can't it?

No! Being under *pressure* often improves performance. It can be a good thing. But when demands and pressures become excessive, they lead to *stress*. And it's clear from the recognised symptoms of stress that it's actually *bad* for you.

As an employer, is it my concern?

Yes. It's your duty in law to make sure that your employees aren't made ill by their work. And stress *can* make your employees ill. Also, action to reduce stress can be very cost-effective. The costs of stress to your organisation may show up as high staff turnover, an increase in sickness absence, reduced work performance, poor timekeeping and more customer complaints. Stress in one person can also lead to stress in staff who have to cover for their colleague. Also, employers who don't take stress seriously may leave themselves open to compensation claims from employees who have suffered ill health from work-related stress. Fortunately, reducing stress need not cost you a lot of money.

Under health and safety law, what must I do about stress?

Where stress caused or made worse by work could lead to ill health, you must assess the risk. A risk assessment for stress involves:

- looking for pressures at work that could cause high and long-lasting levels of stress;
- deciding who might be harmed by these; and
- deciding whether you are doing enough to prevent that harm.

If necessary, you must then take reasonable steps to deal with those pressures. You must review the assessment whenever you think that it may no longer be valid. You should make sure that you involve your employees –

- including Trade Union safety representatives where they have been appointed - at every stage of the assessment process.

Isn't stress also caused by problems outside work? Are you saying I have to do something about that?

You're not under a legal duty to prevent ill health caused by stress due to problems outside work, e.g. financial or domestic worries. But non-work problems can make it difficult for people to cope with the pressures of work, and their performance at work might suffer. So being understanding to staff in this position would be in your interests.

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

We're all vulnerable to stress, depending on the pressure we're under at any given time: even people who are usually very hardy. As an employer, you're responsible for making sure that work doesn't make your employees ill. If you notice that someone is particularly vulnerable because of their circumstances, look at how their work is organised. See if there are ways to relieve the pressures so that they do not become excessive. However, unless you know otherwise, you could assume that all your employees are mentally capable of withstanding reasonable pressure from work.

How do I recognise stress in a particular person?

Many of the outward signs of stress in individuals should be noticeable to managers and colleagues. Look in particular for changes in a person's mood or behaviour, such as deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness, absenteeism or reduced performance. Those suffering from stress may also smoke or drink alcohol more than usual or even turn to drugs. They might also complain about their health: for example they may get frequent headaches.

How do I find out if stress could be a problem for my firm or organisation?

First, take informal soundings to get some idea of what problems there might be: for example, see if your staff are disillusioned with their work. This may show up as an increase in absenteeism (especially frequent short spells of sickness), lateness,

Statistics on stress at work published by HSE

- The 2006/07 survey of Self-reported Work-related Illness prevalence indicated that around 530,000 individuals in Britain believed in 2006/07 that they were experiencing work-related stress at a level that was making them ill. An estimated 245,000 people first became aware of work-related stress, depression or anxiety in the previous 12 months and an estimated 13.8 million reported lost working days per year in Britain due to self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety.
- The 2007 Psychosocial Working Conditions (PWC) survey indicated that around 13.6% of all working individuals thought their job was very or extremely stressful.
- The annual incidence of work-related mental health problems in Britain in 2006, as estimated from the surveillance schemes OPRA and SOSMI, was approximately 5,900 new cases per year. However, this almost certainly underestimates the true incidence of these conditions in the British workforce.
- Survey data suggest the incidence rate of self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2006/07 is of a similar order to that in 2001/02 (after a fall between 2004/05 and 2005/06). This is statistically significant.

For more information visit www.hse.gov.uk/ statistics/causdis/stress/ index.htm

disciplinary problems or staff turnover, or a reduction in output or quality of product or service. There may, of course, be other reasons for these symptoms, but if they could be related to stress at work, get your staff to tell you about it by:

- talking and listening to them;
- asking them to describe the three 'best' and the three 'worst' aspects of their job, and whether any of these put them under uncomfortable pressure.

You can use the information you collect to identify common and persistent pressures, and who might be harmed by them. Several off-the-shelf questionnaires do the same kind of thing. These can be helpful but tend to be lengthy and may not ask the type of questions that are relevant to your organisation. Also, interpreting the findings may require specialist knowledge. Remember to:

- respect the confidentiality of your staff;
- tell your staff what you plan to do with any information you collect;
- involve them, as much as possible, in subsequent decisions;
- involve safety representatives, if you have them, in your plans and decisions;
- if you employ five or more staff, record the important findings from your risk assessment, for example by writing them down;
- check from time to time that the situation hasn't changed.

If I do find out that stress is, or could be, a problem, what can I do about it?

There's no single best way of tackling work-related stress. What you do will depend on your working practices and the causes of the problem. But only providing training or help (or both) for sufferers won't be enough – it won't tackle the source of the problem!

Remember to:

- involve your staff and their representatives – they are certain to have good ideas you could use;
- follow up any changes you make to ensure that they're having the effect you intended;
- review what you've done when you make major changes in your workplace (e.g. organisational change, new equipment, work systems or processes) to make sure that stress hasn't increased;

- lead by example – as a manager, you can communicate powerful signals about the importance of avoiding stress.

But why would employees want to tell me about their stress?

You're right. Employees may be reluctant to admit they are feeling stressed by work. This is because being stressed can be seen as a sign of weakness. You can help by making it easier for your staff to discuss stress. Reassure them that the information they give you will be treated in confidence.

What can I do to prevent stress from becoming a problem?

Most of the 'things to do' boil down to good management. They're ongoing processes that need to be built into the way your organisation is run.

- Show that you take stress seriously, and be understanding towards people who admit to being under too much pressure;
- Encourage managers to have an open and understanding attitude to what people say to them about the pressures of their work, and to look for signs of stress in their staff;
- Ensure that staff have the skills, training and resources they need, so that they know what to do, are confident that they can do it and receive credit for it;
- If possible, provide some scope for varying working conditions and flexibility, and for people to influence the way their jobs are done. This will increase their interest and sense of ownership;
- Ensure that people are treated fairly and consistently and that bullying and harassment aren't tolerated;
- Ensure good two-way communication, especially at times of change. Don't be afraid to listen. Ask yourself whether you do these things.

What should I do if an employee complains about being stressed?

First, listen to them! If the stress is work-related:

- try to address the source(s);
- involve the employee in decisions;
- if necessary, encourage them to seek further help through their doctor;
- if you are not their line manager, ensure that he or she treats the employee with understanding and maintains confidentiality.

Where you can't control the work-related sources of stress, it may be appropriate to move the employee, if you can. If a period of sick leave is recommended, keep in touch with the employee and their doctor. Remember that they may be able to return to work to do part of their job, work reduced hours or do a different job, before they are ready to return to their old one.

Try to be flexible! Don't be tempted to think that firing someone provides an easy way out! If you don't act reasonably in dismissing an employee, they could claim unfair dismissal.

Finally, bear in mind that if one of your employees is suffering from work related stress, they may represent the tip of an iceberg. Find out whether others are also experiencing stress at work.

Should I be providing stress management training?

Stress management training comes in various forms. It usually teaches people to cope better with the pressures they may come across. Because it focuses on the individual, it tends not to tackle the causes of stress at work. However, it can be useful as part of a 'bigger plan' to tackle work-related stress.

Should I be providing a professional counselling service or an Employee Assistance Programme?

A counselling service is usually paid for by employers. It provides counselors to whom individuals can talk privately about their problems. An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) can provide various services (e.g. counselling, performance management, financial advice, legal assistance). You're not under any legal obligation to provide such services. Also, because these services must protect the confidentiality of the individual, the information they can give you may not help you tackle the causes of stress at work. On the other hand, like training, they can be useful as part of a 'bigger plan' to tackle work-related stress. So, consider carefully whether such services would fit your needs and provide value for money for your organisation.

Do I need external consultants to help me deal with this?

In most cases, complex and expensive risk management procedures aren't necessary to tackle stress. Ordinary good management and regard for people may well be as effective as a high profile approach that might be recommended by outside consultants. But if you're worried that stress is a major problem and you can't deal with it internally, you could think about taking on an external consultant to help you. Make sure you choose them with care!

Where can I get more information or help?

General advice is available from:

- **InfoLine**
  - a confidential HSE phone service. Your calls will be charged at the national call rate. Tel: 08701 545500.

- **Your local HSE Inspector or the HSE Employment Medical Advisory Service**
  (listed under 'Health and Safety Executive' in the phone book).

- **Your local authority inspector** (listed under 'Local Authorities' in the phone book).

- **The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)**
  - can provide information and leaflets on employment rights and good management practices (listed under 'ACAS' in the phone book).

- **Chambers of Commerce**
  - can provide information and advice, consultancy services and training on a range of business-related issues, including health and safety. For details of your nearest Chamber, contact 020 7565 2000.

- **Employers' associations**
  - can sometimes provide advice on the problems that may lead to stress.

- **Mind Out for Mental Health**
  In March 2001, the Government launched a national campaign – Mind Out for Mental Health – to combat the stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health. Working Minds is the employer programme of the campaign. This part of the campaign works in partnership with employers to help improve workplace policy and practice on mental health. Visit www.mindout.net for more information.

- **Advice on aspects of mental health is available from:**
  The Health Development Agency, Trevelyan House, 30 Great Peter Street, London SW1P 2HW (Tel: 020 7222 5300).

  The Health Education Board for Scotland, Woodburn House, Canaan Lane, Edinburgh EH10 4SG (Tel: 0131 536 5500).

  The National Assembly for Wales, Health Promotion Division – HP3, Cathays Park, Cardiff CF10 3NQ (Tel: 02920 825111).

- **Information on Employee Assistance Programmes is available from:**
  EAPA (UK), Premier House, 85 High Street, Witney, Oxon, OX8 6LY (Tel: 0800 783 7616).

- **Advice on choosing external consultants is available from:**
  The British Psychological Society, St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR (Tel: 0116 254 9568).

- **Publications etc**
  Real Solutions, Real People
  HSE Books 2004 ISBN 0 7176 2767 5 – an action pack on how to identify and manage the risks associated with work-related stress. The pack includes an introduction on how to use it, learning points, prompt cards, and an action plan to record and monitor what needs to be done.

  Managing work-related stress: A guide for managers and teachers in schools
  HSE Books 1998 ISBN 0 7176 1292 9 - provides good general advice that isn't just relevant to those working in schools.

  Mental well-being in the workplace: A resource pack for management training and development
  HSE Books 1998 ISBN 0 7176 1524 3

  Essentials of health and safety at work
  HSE Books 1994 ISBN 0 7176 0716 X

Copies of *Beacons of excellence in stress prevention,* RR133, ISBN 0 7176 2709 8, price £20, and *Best practice in rehabilitating employees following absence due to work-related stress,* RR138, ISBN 0 7176 2715 2, price £20 are available in hard copy from

HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA, Tel: 01787 881165 Fax: 01787 313995, Web: www.hsebooks.co.uk

Copies of the research reports and updates on progress with the Interventions Guide are available on HSE's website at www.hse.gov.uk/stress

Research reports are also available to download on www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/index.htm

Managing Workplace Stress - a best practice blueprint (CBI Fast Track Series), by Stephen Williams and Lesley Cooper, published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd. London 2002.

The European Perspective

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work website provides research information on stress at work. Stress is becoming an increasingly global phenomenon affecting all countries, all professions and all categories of workers, families and society in general. There is evidence that the experience of stress at work is associated with changes in both behaviour and physiological function, which may both be detrimental to employees' health. Stress may contribute to the development of various symptoms of occupational ill health and of physical and psychological disorders. The emerging approach for intervention focuses on a pro-active response to stress, with emphasis on preventive measures and elimination of the causes of stress, rather than on the treatment of its effects. This very complex issue is covered by a broad field of research activities.

Preventing Psychosocial Risks at Work, especially Stress was the topic of the European Week for Safety and Health at Work in 2002. For information on this, please visit: http://osha.eu.int/ew2002.

Further Information

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act (1974) places a general duty of care on employers to protect the health and safety of their employees. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999) also requires employers to carry out a risk assessment involving the health, safety and welfare of their staff.

Guidance launched in October 2003 covered each of the stressor areas identified in HSE's publication *'Tackling work-related stress - a managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being'* (HSG218, ISBN 0 7176 2050 6). These are: Demands, Control, Support, Role, Relationships and Change.

This guide is for general interest - it is always essential to take advice on specific issues.

We believe that the facts are correct as at the date of publication, but there may be certain errors and omissions for which we cannot be responsible.