

DEALING WITH STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

What is work-related stress?

The HSE's formal 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 become stressed when they feel they don't have the resources they need (whether material, financial or emotional) to cope with these demands.

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

Pressure v 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. 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, it loses its beneficial effect and becomes harmful and destructive to health.

According to recent CIPD surveys, the main causes of stress at work include: excessive workload, non-work-related relationship or family issues, management style (for example a bullying or poorly trained line manager), poor working relationships or being faced with a large amount of organisation change or restructuring.

Signs of stress

The following table identifies some of the signs or changes you may observe in people who may be suffering from excessive pressure or stress:

<p>Work Performance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • declining/inconsistent performance • uncharacteristic errors • loss of control over work • loss of motivation/commitment • indecision • lapses in memory • increased time at work • lack of holiday planning/usage 	<p>Regression</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • crying • arguments • undue sensitivity • irritability/moodiness • over-reaction to problems • personality clashes • sulking • immature behaviour
<p>Withdrawal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • arriving late to work • leaving early • extended lunches • absenteeism • resigned attitude 	<p>Aggressive behaviour</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • malicious gossip • criticism of others • vandalism • shouting • bullying or harassment

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduced social contact • elusiveness/evasiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poor employee relations • temper outbursts
<p>Other behaviours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • out-of-character behaviour • difficulty relaxing • increased consumption of alcohol • increased smoking • lack of interest in appearance/hygiene • accidents at home or work • reckless driving • unnecessary risk-taking 	<p>Physical signs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nervous stumbling speech • sweating • tiredness/lethargy • upset stomach/flatulence • tension headaches • hand tremor • rapid weight gain or loss • constantly feeling cold

The legal position

Under UK health and safety legislation and common law, employers have a duty to take care of employees. This includes carrying out risk assessments and managing activities to reduce the incidence of stress at work.

There are three main types of legal duties which employees could use as a basis for a stress claim:

- negligence
- express or implied terms in the contract of employment that might be relevant to stress claims (for example the implied duties regarding health and safety and mutual trust and confidence)
- statute, including various pieces of health and safety legislation.

There is no one statute specifically covering the issue of workplace stress: the law governing stress has evolved mainly from case law.

Disability discrimination provisions in the Equality Act 2010 include mental illnesses which are persistent. So 'anxiety', 'stress' and 'depression' may be sufficient to qualify a person as disabled and are therefore covered by the Act as long as there is a substantial and long-term effect (for at least a year) on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day duties.

Dealing with stress at work

There are a number of ways to tackle the issue of stress at work. Early spotting of cases and intervention can prevent cases becoming serious but it also requires employees to feel able to flag a problem and managers to feel both confident and capable of taking action. It will help if you can:

- develop the people management skills and confidence of managers at all levels so they feel able to have the appropriate conversations with staff
- encourage managers to know their people's usual working styles to be able to spot behaviour which is out of sorts and may be an early warning sign of a potential issue
- develop a supportive work culture to encourage staff to discuss and seek support when experiencing stress

- provide, support mechanisms, for example a counselling service, employee assistance programme or charities.

If an employee has been on sickness absence for four weeks or more due to mental health issues, the employer can refer them to Fit for Work (see our guide to Sickness Absence Management) for a free and voluntary occupational health assessment.

Prevention

The following ideas are things to consider to reduce workplace stress and increase employees' resilience to deal with pressures they may face:

- Complete a stress audit and direct resources to reduce or eliminate the sources of stress
- Ensure people feel adequately trained and supported to do their jobs well
- Increase support for staff during periods of change and uncertainty
- Providing stress management and relaxation techniques training
- training aimed at building personal resilience (such as coping techniques, cognitive behaviour therapy, positive psychology courses)
- promoting healthy behaviour and exercise
- flexible working options and improved work-life balance
- personal counselling schemes