

## Absence Management

### How to 5: Support employees who are experiencing stress

Advice for line managers

<b>Contents:</b>	<b>Page</b>
Introduction .....	1
What is stress? .....	1
Legal Position .....	2
Preventing stress at work .....	2
Spotting the signs of stress .....	4
Managing stress at work .....	5
Managing stress-related sickness absence .....	5
Checklist of responsibilities .....	6

#### Introduction

This guide will help you to spot the signs of stress within your team and to manage the effects of stress at work.

#### What is stress?

A certain amount of pressure can be beneficial at work; it can help employees stay focussed, energetic and alert.

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as:

*'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them'.*

Stress is one of the most common causes of absence from work. Stress in itself is not a medical condition, but research shows that prolonged exposure to unmanageable stress can lead to psychological and physical ill-health such as depression and anxiety, back pain, headaches and heart disease.

Stress can occur if:

- the demands of work are greater than your ability to cope
- pressure becomes excessive
- you have too few demands, as you may become bored
- you feel undervalued, with lack of recognition
- you feel you have little or no say over the work you do or how you do it.

## Legal position

All employers have a legal responsibility to ensure the health, safety and welfare of employees at work. This includes minimising the risk of stress-related illness or injury to employees.

You must make every effort to recognise any signs of stress in your employees and must consider whether an individual risk assessment is appropriate. This takes the form of a discussion between the employee and you or another risk assessor.

Employees also have an obligation to safeguard their own health and well-being and should talk to their team leader/manager if they are experiencing stress at work.

## Preventing stress at work

There are six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence:

**Demands of the job;** this includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment

**Control;** How much, or how little, control the employee has over their work

**Support;** from team leaders/management and colleagues, this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, manager and colleagues

**Relationships;** interaction with people at work, this includes promoting positive action to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

**The employees' role;** How clear is the employee's role and responsibilities, whether they understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the employee doesn't have conflicting roles

**Change;** how much organisational change does or has the employee had to deal with, how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated. How people are managed on a day-to-day basis is very important for their mental well-being. You should demonstrate a number of key behaviours to help prevent stress at work. These are:

- setting realistic, measurable objectives and delegating work appropriately
- communicating objectives and expectations clearly
- monitoring and reviewing individual and team workloads
- coaching/mentoring employees
- providing the right level of autonomy and control
- being personally accessible and encouraging employees to talk to you if they feel under pressure
- taking a consistent approach to management (for example, decision making, allocating work, setting performance targets etc.) and treating all employees with respect
- addressing problems as soon as they arise
- acting as an objective mediator in conflict situations.

The relationship between you and the employee is an important one. In some cases, the employee may feel that your relationship is contributing to them experiencing stress at work. If so, talk to the employee to try and identify and resolve any problems.

The HR Workforce and Transformation Team can be contacted for further advice and support.

## Spotting the signs of stress

Everyone experiences stress differently and early intervention is key to minimising the harmful effects.

It is important that everyone learns to recognise the indicators of stress so that steps can be taken to address the causes, ease stress and reduce symptoms.

Common warning signs and symptoms can be categorised as follows:

<p><b>Cognitive</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Memory problems</li> <li>Inability to concentrate</li> <li>Poor judgment</li> <li>Seeing only the negative</li> <li>Anxious or racing thoughts</li> <li>Constant worrying</li> </ul>	<p><b>Emotional</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moodiness</li> <li>Irritability or short temper</li> <li>Agitation, inability to relax</li> <li>Feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>Sense of loneliness and isolation</li> <li>Depression or general unhappiness</li> </ul>
<p><b>Physical Symptoms</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aches and pains</li> <li>Stomach upset</li> <li>Being unwell more often than usual</li> </ul>	<p><b>Behavioural Symptoms</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eating more or less</li> <li>Sleeping too much or too little</li> <li>Isolating yourself from others</li> <li>Delaying actions or neglecting responsibilities</li> <li>Using alcohol or other drugs</li> <li>Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing the floor)</li> </ul>

You have an important role to play in spotting the signs of stress within your team, and in taking the necessary action to address the causes. But it is not up to you to diagnose stress – you need to encourage the employee to seek support and advice via Occupational Health and their GP.

If you feel an employee is showing signs of stress you should talk to them as soon as possible. Tell them honestly about your concerns and that you have noticed a change in their behaviour/performance. Consider arranging an individual risk assessment if appropriate.

## **Managing stress at work**

It is better to take early action to identify and address the causes of stress while the employee is still at work, rather than wait until they take time off. In most cases, stress can be managed in the workplace by making simple changes.

If these changes do not resolve the problem and the employee is still struggling with their work load you will need to consider whether there are further steps you can take to support the employee or whether there is a performance issue.

## **Managing stress-related sickness absences**

If an employee is absent due to stress, there are steps you can take to help the employee back to work when they are ready.

Managing a stress related sickness absence is much the same as any other sickness absence.

When talking to the employee during their absence it is good practice to focus on the following:

**Keeping in touch;** As with any sickness absence, it is important to maintain regular contact with the employee. Discussions will focus on what the employee can do, or might be able to do with help, and on identifying ways to support them back to work when they are ready

**Planning for return to work;** Managing a return to work can be difficult, but taking early positive steps during the absence can help to secure a successful outcome. An individual risk assessment could be helpful as part of planning for a return to work

**Occupational Health;** Shropshire Councils occupational health service can advise and guidance on how you can support the employee back to work. They can also advise on whether the employee may have a disability which means you need to consider making reasonable adjustments

**Employee Assistance.** Remind the employee of the support that is available from the HR Workforce and Transformation Team and encourage the employee to access this when appropriate.

## Checklist of responsibilities

Managers have an important role in preventing and managing stress at work. The following key behaviours are based on CIPD/MIND guidance.

Managers must encourage employees to:

- to look out for the warning signs of possible stress and act on any indication of undue pressure
- discuss work related issues with employees if they are feeling under excessive pressure
- seek expert medical advice if appropriate
- ensure that employees are taking their annual leave throughout the year to help achieve work/life balance
- ensure that employees do not work excessive hours or feel under pressure to take work home
- Make an early referral to Occupational Health for advice on supporting the employee back to work and managing stress in the workplace
- effectively deal with any instances of harassment and bullying in the workplace
- arrange for an individual risk assessment to be conducted when an employee raises an issue of stress at work
- make sure that employees are aware of the support available through the HR Workforce and Transformation Team and Occupational Health Service.
- ensure that the working environment and working practices are hazard free
- identify and implement accessibility requirements
- adopt a work-focussed approach during any absence to explore whether any temporary changes can be made which would enable the employee to return to work
- keep in regular contact with the employee and work with them to plan their return to work
- undertake Managing Stress and Conflict training via Leap into Learning.

- encourage employees to manage their own health and well-being, including seeking help from their GP and/or the Occupational Health Service.
- adhere to any policies on prevention and management of stress
- encourage employees to raise issues early if they are experiencing excessive pressure at work or if they are experiencing any other difficulties affecting their work performance or attendance
  - manage their own health and well-being, including seeking help from their GP and/or the Occupational Health Service.
  - take their annual leave during the year
  - adhere to any policies on prevention and management of stress
  - speak to their line manager if they are experiencing excessive pressure
  - speak to their line manager if they are experiencing any other difficulties affecting their work performance or attendance
  - co-operate with any referral to Occupational Health and contribute to the individual risk assessment process and its outcomes.

This list is not exhaustive.