



H & S Guidance - Stress

INTRODUCTION

Occupational stress is generating increasing public and media concern. Although there are no precise figures on the prevalence of occupational stress, it is widely held that the problem is substantial and increasing. This is supported by a number of surveys that suggest that occupational stress is now seen as a major contributor to overall illness and sickness absence in the workplace. Legal judgements recently have awarded damages in stress-related cases.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is the reaction people have to excessive demands or pressures. In the workplace it arises when people try to cope with the tasks, responsibilities or other types of pressure connected with their jobs but find difficulty, strain or worry in doing so. Stress triggers complex changes in the body's processes, causing physiological changes and affecting the way people think, feel and behave i.e.

Physiological changes

- increased heart rate, perspiration.
- dry mouth.
- headache, dizziness, blurred vision.
- lowered resistance to infections.
- aching neck and shoulders.
- skin rashes

Behavioural changes

people becoming anxious, irritable, drink more alcohol, smoke more, loss of sleep, reduced motivation

People experience stress in different ways and to different degrees. Much depends on how individuals cope or think they cope and the extent of support that is available to them. The stress response is



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not in itself an illness - it's effects often being short-lived and causing no lasting harm. However, where workplace pressures are intense, sustained for some time or are simply beyond the capacity of the person to cope stress can lead to actual mental and/or physical ill-health.

Where such a risk exists, then stress and the workplace pressures causing it become a legitimate health and safety concern.

WHAT MAY GIVE RISE TO STRESS?

There are a number of aspects of work that may give rise to stress:

ASPECT	EXAMPLES
General management and culture of the organisation	Lack of clear company objectives and values Poor communication Lack of employee consultation/involvement during periods of organisational change
Role in organisation	Lack of management support and development for staff Employee's roles within the organisation unclear Conflicting objectives and priorities
Career development	High level of responsibility for people Career uncertainty Career stagnation Poor status
Decision making/control	Job insecurity or redundancy Low participation in decision-making Lack of control over work



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Relationships at work	Little decision-making in work Social or physical isolation Poor relationships with superiors Interpersonal conflict, including
Home/work issues	bullying, violence, sexual or racial harassment. Conflicting demands of work and home Low levels of support at home
Job design	Dual career problems Ill-defined work High uncertainty in work Lack of variety or short work cycles Fragmented or meaningless work Under-use of skill
Workload/work pace	Constant exposure to client/customer groups Lack of control over pacing Work overload or underload
Work schedule	High levels of pacing or time pressure Shift working Inflexible/overburdensome work schedule Unpredictable work hours Unsocial work hours

THE LEGAL POSITION

There is no specific legislation on controlling stress at work. However, employers have a **general duty** under the Health and



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Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that their workplaces are safe and healthy. Also, under the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1992 employers are **obliged to assess** the nature and extent of risks to health in their workplace and base their control measures on it.

Employers have a legal duty to take reasonable care to ensure that health is not put at risk through excessive and sustained levels of stress arising from work activities i.e. to treat stress like any other health hazard.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

1. Good management - including 'regard for people' attitudes.
2. Ensure appropriately open and understanding attitudes to stress.
3. Ensure jobs are 'do-able', matching the job with the person in it.
4. Management style - consistent, concerned, communicative and caring.
5. Managing periods of change so as to reduce uncertainty.
6. Providing help, support and training.
7. Monitoring stress levels - perhaps through a combination of sickness absence monitoring and periodic anonymised staff surveys.

Some of the things that can help in a positive approach to stress reduction are:

General management and culture

- Clear company objectives
- Good communication
- Close employee involvement, particularly during periods

Decision-making and planning

- Opportunities for staff to contribute ideas, in particular in the planning and organisation of their own jobs

Employees' role in the organisation



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of organisational change

- Good management support and appropriate training and development of staff

Relationships at work

- Training in interpersonal skills
- Effective systems for dealing with interpersonal conflict, bullying and racial or sexual harassment, including:
agreed grievance procedure & proper investigation of complaints

Work schedule

- Flexible work schedules
- Planned and agreed work hours

- Clearly defined objectives and responsibilities linked to organisational objectives

- Support for those with high level of responsibility for the welfare and well-being of people

Job design

- Well designed tasks & responsibilities
- Plenty of variety avoiding short work cycles
- Proper use of skills
- Proper training for those dealing constantly with the public or client groups

- Proper hazards control

Workload/work pace

- Targets that are stretching but reasonable

CHECKLIST - STRESS

1. Do you recognise occupational stress as a legitimate health and safety issue?



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YES/NO

2. In running your business, where necessary, do you seek to minimise occupational stress through the following:

- Development of an appropriate management culture (communicative, participative, supportive)?

YES/NO

- Involvement of staff in decision-making and planning?

YES/NO

- Appropriate role for, and support of, employees in the organisation?

YES/NO

- Optimising relationships, interpersonal skills etc. at work?

YES/NO

- Flexible work schedules, planned and agreed hours of work?

YES/NO

- Appropriately considered job design?

YES/NO

- Stretching but reasonable work targets?

YES/NO

3. If necessary, do you monitor occupational stress (or its possible indicators)?

YES/NO

REFERENCES/FURTHER DETAILS

HELA Circular 81/4 – Work Related Stress.
www.hse.gov.uk/lau/lacs/81-4.htm



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Booklet HSG 116 Stress at Work - a guide for employers (HSE) (1999) ISBN 0-7176-0733-X.

Leaflet INDG341. Tackling work-related stress a guide for employees (HSE). www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg406.pdf

Leaflet 'Work Related Stress- A Short Guide' (HSE) INDG281 (11/99) www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/misc686.pdf