

# MANAGING WORK RELATED STRESS

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### ***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 (eg depression, nervous breakdown, heart disease).

### ***Stress can be a good thing, can't it?***

Being under pressure often improves performance, so 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.

### ***So, what are the signs of stress?***

Individuals suffering from stress often display a range of signs that may be noticed by colleagues and you, as their manager. These signs include:

- tiredness and irritability
- reduced quality of work
- indecisiveness and poor judgement
- loss of sense of humour
- physical illness such as headaches, nausea, aches and pains
- seeming jumpy or ill-at-ease, or admitting to sleeping badly
- increased sick leave
- poor timekeeping
- changes in working day patterns - perhaps by staying late or taking work home

You should also look for signs of more widespread problems among your team, for example:

- arguments and disputes between staff
- general absenteeism
- an increase in grievances and complaints
- greater staff turnover

### ***What if the stress is caused by problems outside work? Are you saying I have to do something about that?***

Common external causes of stress include:

- relationship difficulties
- serious illness in the family or caring for dependants such as children or elderly relatives
- bereavement
- moving house
- debt problems

You're not under a legal duty to prevent ill health caused by stress due to problems outside work, eg 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?***

There is no simple way of predicting who will be affected by stress. We're all vulnerable to stress, depending on the pressure we're under at any given time. However, unless you know otherwise, you can assume that individuals are mentally capable of withstanding reasonable pressure from work.

## ***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 sorts of things can lead to stress at work?***

Confusion about job role and how everyone fits in  
Lack of communication and consultation  
A culture of blame when things go wrong, denial of potential problems  
Regularly working excessively long hours or taking work home  
Too much to do, too little time  
Boring or repetitive work, or too little to do  
The working environment  
Lack of support from managers and colleagues  
Not being able to balance the demands of work and life outside work  
Lack of control over work activities  
Poor relationships with others, bullying, racial or sexual harassment  
Uncertainty about what is happening and fears about job security

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

Most of the 'things to do' boil down to good management practice, for example:

- Take the issue of stress seriously and be understanding towards people who admit to being under too much pressure.
- Have an open and understanding attitude to what people say about the pressures of their work and look for signs of stress in your 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.

### ***I am a line manager, what do I need to do next?***

Attend the training that is available to help you identify and manage stress within your team.

Ensure that any risks associated with work related stress are identified and properly assessed using one of the model risk assessments for either school or non-school employees.

Report and manage any stress related absence in accordance with the Managing Sickness Absence and Ill-health Policy.

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

Appropriate support and advice should be sought from Human Resources (HR) if work related stress is identified as a problem, is a reason for absence or if an individual is returning to work following a stress related absence.

You should also consider referring the employee to the training available to raise individual awareness of stress and coping strategies which is available. Contact the Health and Safety Support Team if you need more information.

### ***What should I do if I am feeling stressed myself?***

Signs that you might be experiencing stress yourself could include:

- poor judgement and indecisiveness
- difficulty in concentrating
- a lack of assertiveness
- irritability, aggressiveness, depression or loss of sense of humour
- physical symptoms such as breathlessness, headaches, chest pains, nausea, sleeplessness, high blood pressure and constant tiredness

Stress can be magnified if you try to manage it on your own. If you have no one to confide in, it can be easy for things to get out of proportion. So, talk to your manager; if they don't know there's a problem, they can't help. Channel your energy into solving the problem rather than just worrying about it. Think about what would make you happier at work and discuss this with your manager

If you don't feel able to talk directly to your manager, talk to HR or the Corporate Health and Safety Support Team. Talk to your GP if you are worried about your health.