

Work Related Stress - Information for Managers / Supervisors

What is Stress?

The Health and Safety Executive have defined stress as:-

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

Stress is the reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them which are not matched by their ability to cope. It is both a physiological and psychological reaction which occurs when people perceive an imbalance between the combined levels of demand placed upon them, both at home and/or at work, and their capacity to meet those demands. Stress can be positive and motivating in the short term, helping to achieve success; prolonged stress however, can lead to ill health.

As a manager or supervisor the objective should be to prevent stress within the workplace;

- Risk assess to identify the potential causes and improve or eliminate these where possible.
- Deal with problems as they arise, to promote openness and a 'blame free' culture.
- Provide rehabilitation and support of employees suffering from stress.

Impact of Stress on an Organisation

Stress can cause adverse effects on the organisation, including;

- Reduced staff performance and productivity
- Poor decision making
- Increase in mistakes which may lead to increased "customer" complaints
- Poor commitment to work
- Increased sickness absence
- High staff turnover
- Poor work relations

Stress in one or two people can adversely impact on others in the unit or team. For example, losing one colleague for an extended period with a stress-related illness can have a dramatic impact on the workload and morale of the rest of the team.

It is therefore important that managers assess and reduce the causes of stress in the workplace, in order to prevent or reduce the impact of these problems within the University.

Indicators of stress at work

Work performance alteration

1. Reduction in output or productivity
2. Uncharacteristic mistakes or errors of judgement
3. Poor concentration or decision making
4. Deterioration in planning and control of work
5. Increased absence

Change in attitude and behaviour

1. Loss of motivation or commitment
2. Working longer hours with diminished returns
3. Erratic or poor time keeping
4. Rapid changes in emotional mood
5. Increased use of alcohol and/or cigarettes

Alteration in relationships at work

1. Tension and conflict between colleagues
2. Poor relationships with clients
3. Increase in employee relations or disciplinary problems

Some Causes of Stress

There is rarely a single cause of stress and the causes may be interrelated, particularly the home / work interface. Causes of stress are referred to as stressors. Although not an exhaustive list, below are some suggested examples of stressors. It is important to remember it is the individuals' reaction / perception to a stressor that counts not the managers / assessors reaction to the stressor.

Physical environment;

- Poor lighting,
- excessive noise, heat, cold or humidity,
- perceived threat or danger,
- excessive need to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE),
- poor work environment / poor housekeeping,
- overcrowding,
- poor transport, long journeys

Domestic;

- Marital breakdown,
- children leaving/returning home,
- family illness/ dependency,

- financial problems,
- poor housing,
- moving house,
- ill-health

Environment both work and external;

- Poor working conditions,
- Too much / too little work,
- Repetitive or boring work,
- Task inappropriate to ability,
- Lone working / social isolation,
- inadequate pay,
- Job design,
- lack of control,
- lack of support or assistance,
- unclear or changing responsibilities / clarification of role / conflicting demands,
- poor communication,
- lack of security,
- lack of tolerance of mistakes,
- authoritarian management style,
- wider aspects of work such as assessment of job performance, reduced prospects of career progression and impending retirement.

Impact of Stress on an Individual

Stress can cause adverse effects on the individual, including;

Physical Effects

- Raised heart rate
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Skin conditions
- Headaches
- Nausea, aches and pains
- Lowering of resistance to infection

Behavioural Effects

- Tiredness and irritability
- Reduced quality of work, indecisiveness and poor judgement
- Reduced attention span and impaired memory
- Loss of sense of humour
- Poor sleep pattern, impaired concentration or excessively 'jumpy'
- Increased sick leave
- Poor time keeping
- Verbal or physical aggression

How to Manage Stress

Stress requires to be managed a number of ways within the workplace. Firstly the manager / supervisor needs to pro-actively assess the risks within the workplace which may cause stress and take steps to eliminate or reduce these risks where possible. As mentioned previously, stress is interrelated with work / home and each individual will react differently to circumstances and therefore, even with risks reduced to a minimum, managers should be aware of the common signs of stress in individuals (see Indicators of Stress at Work above) and deal with problems as they arise on a reactive basis. Therefore stress within the workplace needs to be managed both proactively and reactively.

In addition to being aware of the common signs of stress, managers should seek to create an atmosphere which encourages good communication between colleagues, thus helping to ensure employees feel they will receive support and understanding in resolving any issues or concerns they may raise.

Stress Checklist

Before carrying out a risk assessment, managers may find it helpful to complete a stress checklist, which can assist in identifying areas which may require further attention.

The Health and Safety Department has produced a model checklist to assist managers.

General Stress Assessment:

Employers are required to assess the risks to health under 'The Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999' and it is widely accepted that prolonged periods of stress, including work-related stress, have an adverse effect on health.

The Health and Safety Department has produced a model stress risk assessment form to assist managers assess the risks from work-related stress within their area.

Individual Stress Assessment:

Where an individual indicates a stress-related issue, they should be encouraged to discuss this with their manager in order for action to be taken. The stress-related issue may or may not be work related, but either will have an effect on how they function at work, and it's therefore important to offer help support.

In order for the individual to identify the relevant source(s) of stress which they perceive, it is important to encourage the individual to assess their own stress

levels using the stress self-assessment form in order that they can take action and/or seek help to reduce their own stress levels.

Work-related issues should be discussed and ways to reduce the stressors identified and agreed. It is important to monitor the effectiveness of any actions implemented and to review the situation on a regular basis.

However, individuals suffering from stress may not wish to discuss issues with their manager. In such instances, the individual should be encouraged to speak to others who may be able to assist, such as the Staff Counsellor, Occupational Health Unit, or Human Resources. Information on these contacts, as well as guidance, self help tools and a stress self-assessment form is available in the Information for Employees.

Support Services Available

Managers can seek guidance on managing stress within the workplace from the Occupational Health Unit. Where a member of staff has a stress-related issue, either the manager or the member of staff may wish to consider referral to the Occupational Health Unit and / or the University Staff Counsellor.

- Occupational Health Unit, tel. 650 8190
Individual staff contact details can be found at: www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/health-safety/occupational-health/about/contact
- Staff Counsellor, tel. 650 2513
A confidential answer phone. Leave a message and best contact number and your call will be returned as quickly as possible.

Sources of Guidance and Advice

- [Emotional Wellbeing - BBC](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/healthy_living/health_at_work/emotional_in dex.shtml)
http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/healthy_living/health_at_work/emotional_in dex.shtml
- [Health and Safety Executive - Work Related Stress](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm)
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm>
- [Health in Mind](http://www.health-in-mind.co.uk/)
<http://www.health-in-mind.co.uk/>
- [Mental Health - BBC](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/mental/)
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/mental/>
- [Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland](http://www.mwscot.org.uk/)
<http://www.mwscot.org.uk/>
- [Mind](http://www.mind.org.uk/) for better mental health
<http://www.mind.org.uk/>
- [See Me Scotland](http://www.seemescotland.org/)
<http://www.seemescotland.org/>