



Work Related Stress – Information and Guidance 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 for whatever reason at a particular time. 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;

- Minimise stressors for the individual and support for employees suffering from stress
- 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.

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 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.

Stress is not covered by any specific piece of legislation, however the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations apply in regard to the requirement to assess the risks relating to stress within the workplace.

Identify the Hazard:

Identify all the common organisational stressors (hazards) relating to the work activities; evaluate the risks (low / medium / high); describe all existing control measures and identify any further measures required.

Specific hazards Specific assessments are available for hazardous substances, lone working etc. and should be assessed on a separate risk assessment form and cross-referenced with this document where appropriate.

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/health-safety/risk-assessments-checklists/risk-assessments>

Some common organisational stressors to consider may include:

- Unrealistic targets and workloads
- Insufficient resources
- Long working hours
- Rapid change
- Conflicting priorities
- Uncertainty or insecurity
- Poor communication
- Lack of involvement
- Poor delegation
- Management style and conflict

A variety of methods can be used to identify these including informal staff talks, focus groups, sickness/absence records, questionnaires and workplace inspections.

Evaluate the risk

1. Assess the likely impact of the identified causes on staff.
2. Remember that different times of the year may result in different risks, depending on priorities and workload. For example the start of the Academic year, exam times, (financial or other) year end, etc. may require to be considered separately.
3. Speak to staff to ascertain the problem as they perceive it.
4. If speaking to an individual who is known to suffer from stress, this will require a careful planned approach and should be done sympathetically,

as stress reaction may be foreseeable. It may help to gain advice from Occupational Health Unit or Human Resources in such circumstance.

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.

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,
- management style / conflict
- wider aspects of work such as assessment of job performance, reduced prospects of career progression and impending retirement.

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

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

Identify Control Measures - Possible Solutions

Demands

- Evaluate that sufficient resources are available to complete work allocated, if not re-evaluate priorities
- Ensure the demands on staff are achievable
- If work load is a problem, look at trying to reduce it. Ensure targets are challenging but realistic, listen to the individual; consider flexible working
- Support staff by assisting with prioritisation of work and the establishment of realistic deadlines
- Strike a balance between ensuring that staff are interested and busy but not under-loaded, overloaded or confused about the job
- Help people prioritise workloads, provide time management training if required;
- Provide adequate staff training and ensure that their skills and abilities match the demands of the job
- Encourage staff to raise problems in early stages if they cannot cope
- Encourage delegation if it is possible;
- Ensure that proper risk assessments are carried out to control physical hazards
- Ensure that employee's concerns about their work environment are considered and addressed
- Ensure that any risk from physical violence, verbal abuse and bullying is identified, controlled or dealt with
- Encourage team cohesion and commitment
- Make sure holidays are taken, not accumulated;

Control

- Endeavour to provide more control to staff by enabling them to plan their own work, make decisions about how this should be completed and how problems should be tackled
- Enrich jobs by ensuring that staff are able to use their skills to get tasks completed and understand how their work fits in to the wider aims of the Department or Section
- Only monitor employees output if this is essential
- Ensure regular meetings with staff take place to see how things are going
- Provide a supportive environment

Support

- Provide support and encouragement, even when things go wrong
- Listen to staff and agree actions for tackling problems
- Review employees' performance so that they know how they are doing. Encourage feedback from your employees to identify any problem they may be having
- Ensure that staff are fully involved

- Encourage staff to share their concerns about work-related stress at an early stage
- Encourage staff to discuss their problems with you, make yourself approachable;
- Take a sympathetic approach to any personal problems the employee may have;
- Ensure that adequate training and information have been provided
- Ensure that individuals do not feel that they are being discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, disability and other irrelevant reasons – value diversity
- Encourage achievement of effective work-life balance.

Relationships

- Ensure that procedures already established via Human Resources are fully utilised. See: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/human-resources/policies-guidance/a-z-policies>
Ensure there are suitable lines of communication between employees, colleagues, and line managers, to discuss work procedures and other work related issues.
- Ensure you are satisfied there are no significant work related problems or concerns within the work area. Know your staff and recognise changes in behaviour.
- Ensure all staff are aware of how to report work related problems or concerns within your School. Ensure you are approachable and there are opportunities to communicate.
- Ensure there are no significant concerns about bullying or harassment within your area of responsibility.

Role

- Ensure that roles are defined and understood to prevent conflict and ambiguity
- Make sure staff have a clearly defined role and understand exactly what their role and responsibilities are
- Encourage staff to talk at an early stage if they are not clear about priorities or the nature of the task to be undertaken
- Talk to staff regularly to ensure they are clear about their current job, what it entails and what the expectations of them are
- Ensure that all new members of staff or re-deployed staff receive adequate induction

Change

- Explain clearly why any changes are necessary, explain timetables for actions and outline the initial steps to be taken
- Communicate new developments as quickly as possible to avoid the spread of rumours and misinformation
- Ensure full opportunity to comment and ask questions before, during and after change

- Involve staff in discussions about how jobs might be developed, changed and how means of solving problems can be generated
- Ensure that risk assessments are reviewed if changes such as decreases in staff are liable to increase the probability of hazards arising

Persons at Risk:

Any member of staff may be affected by work-related stress. Some individuals may be more vulnerable than others, dependant on their job and domestic pressures. The focus is not merely on the individual but on the work and organisation as a whole. Know your staff. Individuals suffering from stress often display a range of outward signs that may be noticed by colleagues and other managers.

These signs include:

- Tiredness and irritability
- Reduced quality of work indecisiveness and poor judgement
- Loss of sense of humour
- Physical illness such as headache, nausea, aches and pains
- Poor sleep pattern or excessively 'jumpy'
- Increased sick leave
- Poor time keeping
- Staff taking work home or staying late excessively

It is important that these individuals are made aware of the outcome of the risk assessment and informed of actions and control to minimise the risk.

Recording of Assessment Details:

1. Record the significant findings of your risk assessment and set a review date;
2. Ensure support is offered;
3. Refer to the University's support services available for guidance where required;
4. Refer to the HSE website for guidance.

It is important that schools maintain records of risk assessments for inspection. Obtaining a signature from individuals to confirm that they have read and understood the information contained in the risk assessment is advised and should be implemented at the discretion of each school.

Support Services Available

Managers can seek guidance on managing stress within the workplace from the Occupational Health Unit and/or Human Resources. 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.

- 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 Counselling, tel. 650 2513
A confidential answer phone. Leave a message and best contact number and your call will be returned as quickly as possible.
- Human Resources for your local area:
<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/human-resources/about>

Sources of Guidance and Advice

- [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 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/>