![RoSPA logo - accidents don't have to happen]

Stress in the workplace
e-book
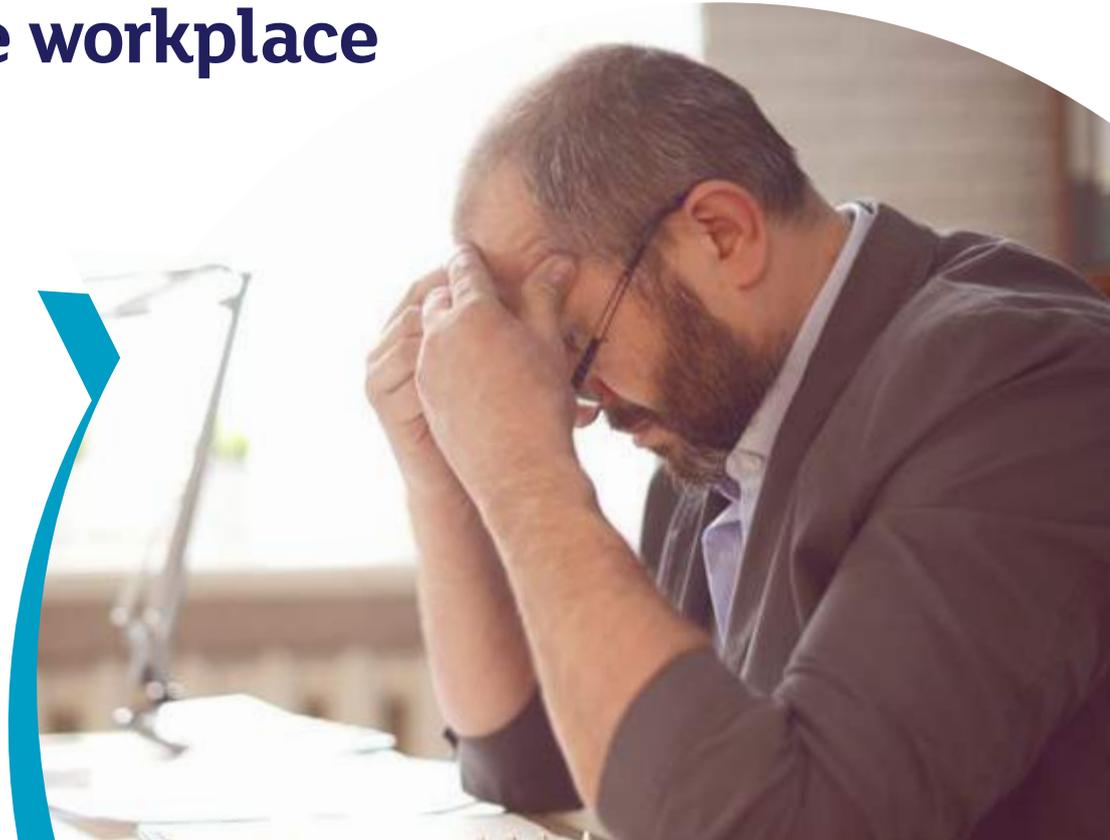
Contents

Know the facts:
1. What is work related stress?

We all experience stress – stuck in traffic, football team losing, kids misbehaving – and in many ways there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly normal to display a range of feelings and emotions when you're dealing with something you care about. We all need a certain level of stress to operate and it is important to remember that stress isn't an illness – it is a mental state.

Unfortunately for many people, stress becomes extreme, lasts for prolonged periods and develops into mental and/or physical illnesses.

The HSE health priority plan relating to work-related stress highlights that whilst the highest incidence rates are recorded in the public services, education, health and social care, prisons, emergency services and local and central government, there is increasing evidence that it is becoming a significant problem in other sectors.

In 2016/17 stress, depression or anxiety accounted for **40%** of all work-related ill health cases and **49%** of all working days lost due to ill health.

Know the facts:
2. The Law

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, employers have a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of their employees. They also have a legal obligation to conduct risk assessments, including for work related stress.

When you take this into consideration, along with the fact that work related stress is associated with poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence, then it is obviously in the interests of everyone to tackle work related stress at its roots before it develops into something far worse.

Furthermore, under the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999, you have a legal obligation to manage risks to employees' health. Once you have evaluated the risk stress poses in your workplace, you should take proactive steps to manage these risks.

Know the facts:
3. Facts and figures

- In the UK as many as one in five people are suffering from high levels of work-related stress.

- The occupations that reported the highest rates of total cases of work related stress (three-year average) were health professionals (in particular nurses), teaching and educational professionals, and caring personal services (in particular welfare and housing associate professionals).

- High levels of stress (whether caused by work or arising from other life stressing events such as bereavement, divorce or money worries) can lead not only to ill health but can adversely affect concentration, information processing and the consistency of decision making.

- Workers experiencing high levels of stress may be more liable to commit errors in their work (whether slips, mistakes or violations) which in turn can lead to accidents.

- The main work activities attributed by respondents as causing their work related stress, or making it worse, was work pressure, lack of managerial support and work related violence and bullying.

Managing stress:
1. What causes workplace stress?

Stress at work can be caused by a variety of reasons, and is often a result of a number of individual factors. The HSE Stress Management Standards represent a set of conditions that if not managed properly are associated with poor health, lower productivity and increased accident and sickness absence rates.
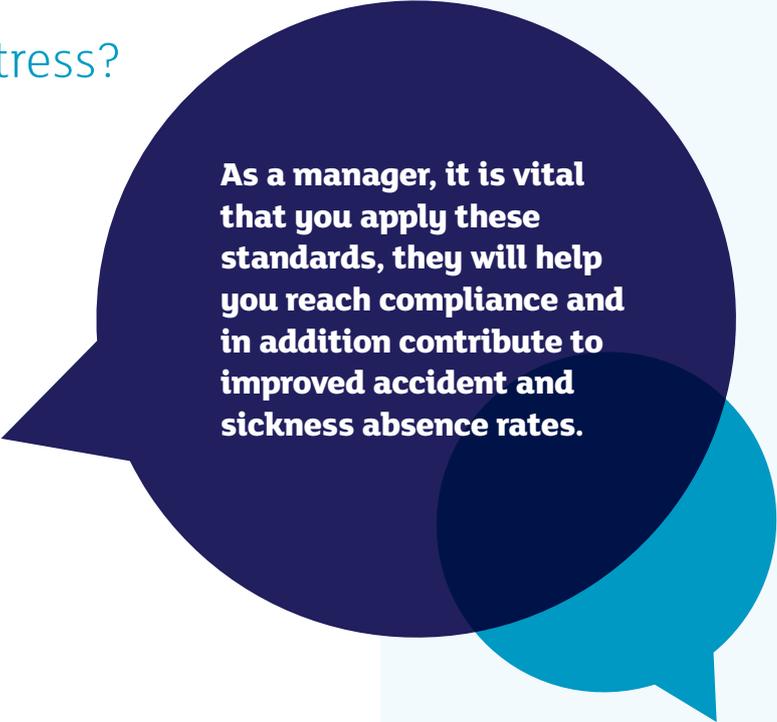
As a manager, it is vital that you apply these standards, they will help you reach compliance and in addition contribute to improved accident and sickness absence rates.

The Management Standards relate to:

Demands
Includes issues such as workload, work pattern and work environment

Control
How much say does a person have in the way they do their work?

Support
Are people encouraged and supported by their line managers, co-workers and the organisation as a whole?

Relationships
Is the working environment positive, no conflict between workers?

Role
Do people understand their role and responsibilities?

Change
Are large or small organisational changes managed effectively and clearly communicated?

These factors can interact with other causes of stress outside the workplace such as relationship or financial difficulties, coping with bereavement and so on.

Managing stress:
2. How to identify stress

Many symptoms of work related stress are the same as other forms of stress – fatigue, lack of appetite and tearfulness. These are often easy to spot, however the symptoms of workplace stress can sometimes be a lot more difficult to identify and in many cases they are only perceptible to the sufferer.
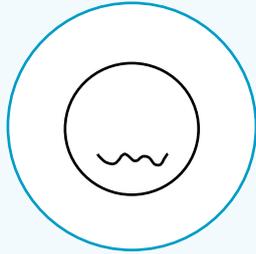
Emotional symptoms

- Negative or depressive feeling
- Disappointment with yourself
- Increased emotional reactions – more tearful or sensitive or aggressive
- Loneliness
- Loss of motivation, commitment and confidence
- Mood swings

Mental Symptoms

- Confusion, indecision
- Difficulty concentrating
- Poor memory
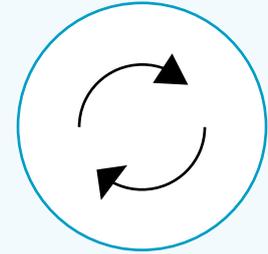
Changes from normal behaviour

- Changes in eating habits
- Increased smoking, drinking or drug taking 'to cope'
- Mood swings affecting your behaviour
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Twitchy, nervous behaviour
- Changes in attendance such as arriving later or taking more time off
- Increase in errors and accidents

Managing stress:
3. A quantitative approach
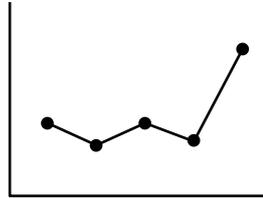
The HSE Stress Management Standards emphasise the importance of assessing the current situation within your workplace, considering pre-existing data to create a picture of what is happening in order for you to plan a way forward.

• **Sickness/absence data** – An objective look at historical absence data can illustrate emerging trends and give an indication of where issues may be arising

• **Productivity data** – If performance appears lower than expected from an individual, team or department compared with other teams or previous years, closer inspection through discussions with employees may reveal factors affecting performance and causing work related stress

• **Turnover** – Exit interviews can be effective in revealing if work related stress is a contributory factor to an employee leaving the organisation. If some units have a higher level of turnover, this can point to stressors existing in that unit

• **Accident statistics** – Data on accidents and incidents can indicate where work related stress exists. However, if, for example, near misses are not reported the reliability of the data is reduced

• **Using a questionnaire** – Distribution of questionnaires can give organisation-wide feedback on issues with stress. If the same questions are asked year on year then trends from analysis of the responses can show where further resources need to be implemented. Remember, the questionnaire should be written for the specific organisation and the confidentiality of responses made clear.

Managing stress:
4. A qualitative approach

Aside from quantitative methods, it's also important to get opinions from staff and develop good managerial practices that will help you identify stress.

• **Informal talks to staff** – Gauging the mood of teams from walking through departments or having brief chats with staff can reveal more obvious signs of excessive pressure and when repeated on a regular basis changes are more easily noticed

• **Performance appraisals** – As part of the formal appraisal system an assessment of whether any symptoms of stress are emerging can be learned from these one-to-one discussions

• **Managing attendance** – Following sickness absence, it has become best practice to invite employees to a 'return-to-work' interview. From this any signs that the time off may have been because of work-related stress can be identified and remedial action undertaken
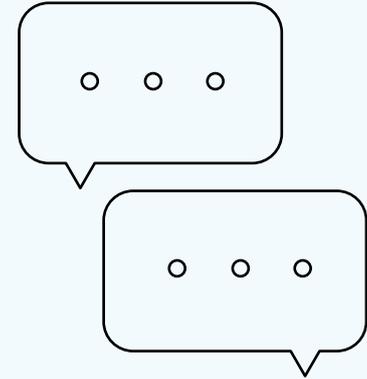
Managing Stress:
5. Take action

Qualitative and quantitative approaches allow you to risk assess the situation within your organisation…however that is only the beginning! Staff engagement across the organisation will underpin performance improvement, use your risk assessment to plan the way forward.

- Make employees aware of the signs and symptoms of stress
- Involve staff in awareness training
- Ensure managers develop the skills required to deal with stressed employees
- Further training should be discussed with higher management if managers feel it is necessary
- Involve health and safety representatives

- Provide stress awareness campaigns – this could include poster campaigns
- Ensure job training is sufficient – stress can be caused by people having to struggle with a task because they lack the job knowledge or skills
- Take prompt action if you suspect an issue may involve stress or believe you have seen an employee showing signs of stress
- Give support – aim to eliminate the cause of the stress

RoSPA's position

The RoSPA position on mental health in the workplace encourages employers to adopt a holistic approach to managing the risks to the health safety and wellbeing of their staff. All employers have a legal duty to ensure that they are not damaging employees' mental health and need to ensure they have the policies, skills and processes in place to help staff with mental health issues. Suitable training for both senior and line managers is fundamentally important in this context.

RoSPA would also like to see HSE, in appropriate cases, using their powers to require businesses with significant unaddressed stress related problems to introduce mental health change programmes under the supervision of outside experts.

RoSPA believe there is a need to improve the level of access which employees have to suitable occupational health services and support provided by suitably trained and empowered occupational health professionals.

Preventing stress:
1. Relaxation techniques

To further reduce your stress levels, why not try some relaxation exercises? Relaxation is one of the most enduring and successful stress management strategies, with enormous benefits.
Try the following while sitting with your back well supported and your eyes closed.

Focus on your body

• Slowly scan your body and relax all your muscles, starting with your feet and moving slowly up to your face muscles

• Tell yourself to let go of the tension as you focus on each area of your body

• When you have finished, think of your-self as relaxed and comfortable

• Picture a calm, peaceful scene

• Imagine yourself sitting or lying on a beach feeling the warmth of the sun

• Think of yourself as completely relaxed and enjoy the sensation.

All of these techniques can be easily incorporated into a busy routine.

Contemplation

Sit comfortably in a quiet place, with your arms and legs uncrossed and breathe gently for a few minutes. Then choose a word that feels comfortable for you (e.g. relax, calm, peace, love etc)

Silently repeat this word to anchor your mind. Continue with this practise for 10-30 minutes. Open your eyes and stay seated for a few more minutes before engaging in activity.

Mindfulness Meditation

• Begin by sitting comfortably and lowering your eyes. You can sit upright on a chair it is not necessary to sit cross legged on the floor!

• Take your attention into your body and to your breath. Observe the movement of your breath in your body, the rise and fall of your chest and abdomen. Now choose a positive word such as calm, relax or peace. Gently repeat this word in your mind not necessarily to the rhythm of your breath at your own pace. Your mind may wander to other thoughts, this is normal. As soon as you notice that, gently bring your attention to the word you have chosen to anchor your meditation and carry on.

• Continue this way up for up to 15 minutes, then take your attention off your breathing and just be silent. Wait about two or three minutes before starting your work.

Preventing stress:
2. Dealing with change

Change is a part of working life – restructures, promotions, downsizing – most of us have experienced a significant change at work.

- Talk to close friends and family members - they will help support you throughout the change. Are there changes they can make that will help you?

- Talk to your manager and colleagues - Get all of the facts and discuss how you can manage the changes

- Be open minded - don't be afraid to ask for help

- Try to relax – use the relaxation techniques on the previous page

- Look for the positives – what benefits can come from the change? What would be the cost of not changing?

Next time you face a change, try the following techniques

Managing change is a significant challenge, but it is not an insurmountable one.

Preventing stress:
3. Bullying in the workplace

Unfortunately, many people are likely to experience bullying or harassment over the course of their career. In some cases, this can have a significant impact on employee health, including:

- Psychological health problems such as depression, anxiety or low self-esteem
- Physical health problems such as stomach problems or sleep difficulties
- If you've witnessed the bullying of a colleague, this can also be very upsetting and can impact on your health.
- Performance at work can be affected.

526,000 workers suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2016/17

[The Prevention of Harassment Act (1997)](#) was created to cover all forms of discrimination, which can be on the grounds of race, sex, disability, age, religion or belief, or sexual orientation. It encourages businesses and organisations to take the following actions in order to prevent the risk of bullying:

- Devise and implement a bullying and harassment policy

- Promote a culture where bullying and harassment is not tolerated

- Be aware of the organisational factors that are associated with bullying, and take steps to address them If as an employee you are being bullied or harassed, or know of a colleague who is, then the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provides guidance about things you can do to try and tackle the problem, including:

- Consulting your organisation's bullying and harassment policy

- Speaking to someone you feel comfortable talking to about your concerns

- Attempting to resolve the issue informally

- Mediation by a neutral third party

- If however informal resolution has not worked, you should follow a formal complaints procedure and if your complaint is upheld, your organisation may pursue a number of options, including obtaining professional legal advice.

Preventing stress:
4. Top tips

Finally, here is a selection of quick tips that will help you and your colleagues avoid stress and achieve peak performance.

- Get enough sleep. Your body function gets out of balance easily with lack of sleep. Most people need 6-8 hours a night. Making this a priority will help give you the energy to cope with other aspects of life

- Do not be afraid to say "NO". "I'm sorry, I do not have the time/space/mental, physical energy/ to take this on at this time". We cannot be everything to everyone, all of the time. When someone tries to be that, they soon 'burn out'

- Learn to count your blessings, not your misfortunes, i.e. try to keep a positive approach, valuing the good things in your life rather than concentrating on the bad things

- A perfectionist attitude is unrealistic and leads to unnecessary stress. No human being gets it right every time!

- One mistake does not make you a failure, just human

- Keep your self-image high, through positive self-dialogue ("I am important", "I am loved", etc)

- Incorporate some physical activity into your daily routine every day, e.g. walking, swimming, cycling etc. Stress is burned away through physical activity. This keeps your body fitter, so it will return to a state of equilibrium quicker following a stress response

- Ask for help if you feel things are spiralling out of control. It is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength to ask for help

Next Steps
RoSPA offers a number of courses and resources that will help you and your business if you are experiencing stress or any of the other issues covered in this guide:

- Stress and violence in the workplace - We can assist organisations evaluate and enhance their management of stress and violence at work by providing a consultant to carry out a comprehensive audit of both the organisation's procedural arrangements against current best practice and the degree to which these standards are achieved in practice.

- Behavioural Safety - Our advanced behaviour-based safety training will give delegates a thorough introduction to applied behavioural analysis, equipping them with the skills to effect real changes to attitudes and beliefs in the workplace.

RoSPA's workplace safety blog contains a number of useful articles on the subject of stress.

RoSPA

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