

Managing work-related stress

1 . Causes and signs of stress

Stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'.

Some people benefit from a certain amount of pressure as it can keep them motivated. However, when there is too much pressure it can lead to stress.

Stress is not an illness but it can affect a person's physical and mental health.

If not properly managed, stress can cause:

- 'burnout' (physical and emotional exhaustion)
- anxiety
- depression

Stress can increase the risk of physical illnesses. For example:

- heart disease
- back pain
- digestive conditions like irritable bowel syndrome
- skin conditions

Causes of stress at work

There are many factors that can cause stress at work. These include:

- too many or conflicting demands
- poor working conditions
- little control over how and when work is done or decision making
- lack of support or encouragement from managers and others at work
- bullying and conflict at work, particularly if these are not managed well
- not having enough training or skills to do a job
- feeling unclear about roles and responsibilities
- low trust and not feeling able to speak up about concerns
- change within the organisation

Stress outside of work

Life events can have an impact on work-related stress.

Things that cause stress outside of work might include:

- [when someone has died](#)
- divorce
- [menopause](#)
- caring responsibilities
- poor health
- financial worries, for example cost of living

Workers do not have to tell their employer about their personal problems. But if they decide to, they might be able to get some support. For example:

- counselling services, for example an employee assistance programme (EAP)
- paid or unpaid time off to attend appointments
- time off, for example any special leave, annual leave or unpaid leave
- a temporary change in duties or working patterns to allow for changes in home life

Spotting the signs of stress

Workers should look after their own health and wellbeing at work. If they are experiencing stress, they should talk to their manager as soon as they can. Managers should also look out for any signs of stress among workers.

Signs of stress can include:

- poor concentration
- finding it hard to make decisions
- being irritable or short tempered
- tearfulness
- tiredness
- low mood
- avoiding social events

If an employer or worker spots signs of stress, it can be helpful to have an informal chat. This can help them understand how the person is feeling and what support they need. Getting help could prevent more serious problems.

Managers could encourage workers to do a 'Wellness Action Plan'. This can help them to:

- think about what's causing them stress
- talk to their manager and get the support they need

[Use a Wellness Action Plan from Mind](#)

2. Risk assessments

There are 2 main pieces of health and safety law which cover work-related stress:

- the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 – this puts a 'duty of care' on employers to protect their employees from the risk of stress at work
- the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 – this requires all employers to make a 'suitable and sufficient assessment' of the risks to the health and safety of their employees at work

This means that by law employers must:

- identify any risks to their employees' health, for example by carrying out a risk assessment
- take steps to prevent or reduce work-related stress

Employers must also make sure they're following the law on [working time rules](#) (Working Time Regulations 1998). This is because working long hours without regular breaks can be a cause of work-related stress.

Carrying out risk assessments

By law, employers must carry out a risk assessment to protect their employees from stress at work.

The law applies to anyone with the [legal status of employee](#).

Someone is not likely to be an employee if they're:

- a casual worker
- on a zero-hours contract

Employers should work with their employees to:

- identify the risks of stress
- decide how to remove or reduce the risks
- agree what steps to take
- make any changes to avoid or reduce risks
- regularly review the plan

Managers should carry out risk assessments on a regular basis.

If an employee tells them they are experiencing work-related stress, they should do an individual risk assessment.

Using tools can help managers work with their employees to identify the risks of stress. For example, the [Talking Toolkit from the Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\)](#).

This can help them to understand:

- what's causing work-related stress or any potential issues
- what they can do to tackle the causes

When a risk assessment needs to be in writing

If an organisation employs 5 or more employees, they must do a written risk assessment.

If an organisation has 4 or less people, they do not have to do a written assessment. But putting it in writing means:

- everyone knows what they've agreed to do to reduce the risks
- the employer is taking their duty to consider stress risks seriously

[Download a risk assessment template from the Health and Safety Executive](#)

If an employee is unhappy with how a risk assessment was handled

If an employee is not happy with how a stress risk assessment was handled, they can raise this with their employer. It's usually best to raise the problem informally first by [talking to their employer](#).

If that does not resolve the issue they can [raise a grievance](#). This is where they make a formal complaint to their employer.

For any questions about raising a problem, [contact the Acas helpline](#).

Agency workers

The law on stress risk assessments is likely to also apply to agency workers.

Before offering someone an assignment, an agency has a duty to find out:

- what risks there are
- what steps an employer is taking to reduce the risks

The employer should also include agency workers in their stress risk assessment process.

3. Supporting workers

It's important to talk about stress and create an open and honest environment at work. This can help workers to talk about how they are feeling, and to get the support they need.

Talking about work-related stress

Managers should be sensitive and supportive when talking to workers about work-related stress.

When a manager becomes aware that someone is experiencing stress, they should arrange an informal chat in private. They should:

- make time for the meeting in the working day
- be open minded about how the person might be feeling
- ask open questions
- listen to what they are being told
- try to identify the cause of the stress
- work together on possible solutions

Managers should support workers by signposting to any internal or external specialist help, if needed.

Find out more about:

- [supporting mental health at work](#)
- [specialist mental health support resources](#)

Acas also offers [training for managers on mental health in the workplace](#).

If someone does not feel comfortable talking to their manager

If someone does not feel comfortable talking to their manager, they might be able to talk to someone else. For example:

- another line manager
- someone they work with

If available, they could talk to:

- a trade union representative, if they're a member of a trade union
- a mental health champion
- an employee support network

Being clear about confidentiality

An employer should reassure the worker that they will not share anything they tell them with anyone else. But if there is a good reason to do so, they should be clear about who they'll share it with and why.

For example, the line manager might need to:

- tell human resources if it involves taking time off work
- get specialist help if the worker's safety is at risk

Making an action plan

When a worker is experiencing work-related stress, they should agree with their employer what they can do to reduce it. One way of doing this is to put in place an action plan.

This should include:

- what the problem is
- the proposed solution
- what actions to take to achieve the solution
- the dates by which to achieve each action
- a date to review the plan and see if it has achieved its aim

[Use a Wellness Action Plan from Mind](#)

Making adjustments at work

If a worker is disabled their employer must make [reasonable adjustments](#).

If a worker is experiencing work-related stress but is not disabled, the employer should still talk with them about adjustments that might help. Often it's enough to agree simple changes to working arrangements or responsibilities.

This might include:

- flexible working hours
- allowing more rest breaks
- giving someone different responsibilities
- helping them to prioritise their workload
- providing training or mentoring

When making any adjustments, managers should:

- review them regularly to check that they are effective
- consider how to support the rest of the team so that they're not overloaded

Protecting workers from discrimination

Stress on its own is not classed as a medical condition. However, stress might affect someone with a physical or mental health impairment classed as a disability. They would be protected from discrimination.

For example, Sam has been diagnosed with anxiety. Work-related stress is making Sam's anxiety worse. Sam must not be discriminated against because of their anxiety.

By law (Equality Act 2010), someone is disabled if both of these apply:

- they have a 'physical or mental impairment'
- the impairment 'has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'

Substantial means 'more than minor or trivial' and long-term means 'has lasted or likely to last for 12 months or more'.

If a worker is disabled, their employer must not discriminate against them because of their disability.

Find out more about:

- [disability discrimination at work](#)
- [what disability means by law](#)
- [understanding mental health and the law](#)

Disciplinary or grievance procedures

A disciplinary or grievance procedure can be very stressful. An employer should carefully balance wellbeing and the need not to delay a procedure unnecessarily.

An employer should always follow:

- their own policy, if they have one
- the [Acas Code of Practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures](#)

The Acas Code applies to anyone with the [legal status of employee](#). But it's good practice for employers to follow it for all workers.

Employers should consider how they can provide support to avoid causing more stress. For example, allowing the person to be accompanied when there is no legal right to be.

The employer must make [reasonable adjustments](#) if the worker is disabled.

If a worker is not able to attend a meeting

If a worker does not feel able to attend a meeting due to work-related stress, the employer should consider rearranging.

In some cases, with the worker's agreement, it might be appropriate to get professional medical advice on how to carry out the procedure fairly.

If an employer believes they cannot delay the procedure or they want to proceed without the worker, they should [contact the Acas helpline](#).

Related content

[More support for managing disability at work](#)

4. Time off with stress

Where possible, an employer should help a worker who's experiencing stress to stay in work.

However, taking time off for work-related stress might give someone the space and time to recover. This can be helpful if stress is making their physical or mental health worse.

If a worker needs time off work, they should follow their organisation's sickness policy, if they have one. They might be entitled to sick pay.

[Find out more about sick pay entitlement](#)

Keeping in touch

When a worker is off work with stress, an employer should have a reasonable amount of contact with them.

Workers often benefit from regular contact because it can:

- prevent isolation
- support them while off sick
- help with the return to work

However, the employer and worker should agree how often they'll keep in touch so that it's not overwhelming. It's a good idea to review this regularly and check that this contact is helpful for the worker.

[Find out more about keeping in touch during absence](#)

Having a return to work meeting

The employer should talk to the worker when they return to work after time off with work-related stress.

A [return to work meeting](#) is a good opportunity to:

- make sure the worker is ready to return to work
- see if they need any support
- agree on a plan for returning to work, if appropriate, for example a [phased return to work](#)
- review or do a stress risk assessment
- talk about any work updates that happened while they were off

Using a [Wellness Action Plan from Mind](#) can help a manager to talk with a worker about the causes of the stress. This can help the employer reduce the risk of the worker needing more time off.

Other things to discuss could include:

- the signs of poor mental health
- what the worker should do if they become unwell, for example who to contact
- what support or adjustments they might need

5. Preventing stress

To create a positive environment at work and help prevent work-related stress, employers should:

- have a clear policy on mental health and stress
- address the causes of stress through risk assessments and surveys
- encourage people to raise their concerns – for example, if a person feels they are being discriminated against
- provide training for managers – for example, on managing conflict, change and work-related stress
- support workers – for example, listening to concerns and acting on them quickly
- promote a work-life balance – for example, encouraging workers to use their breaks and take holiday
- provide access to support – for example, an employee assistance programme (EAP) or training on stress management techniques

Taking steps to prevent work-related stress will help:

- make workers healthier and happier at work
- improve performance and make workers more productive
- reduce absence levels
- avoid disputes at work
- make the organisation more attractive to job seekers

How workers can look after themselves

To look after their own health and wellbeing at work, workers should:

- raise their awareness of what might be causing them stress
- take steps to reduce their stress levels – for example, taking regular breaks or getting outside on a lunch break
- tell their employer when they're experiencing stress at work and ask for help – managers should know where to go for advice and support
- make use of support and training offered by their organisation

The support employers offer might include:

- counselling or mental health support through an employee assistance programme (EAP)
- a mental health peer support programme or employee support network
- occupational health

Related content

[Podcast – Work-related stress: lifting the pressure at work](#)

[Blog – Make it routine to prevent work-related stress](#)