

ACAS Advice leaflet - Stress at work

What is stress?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them".

Don't confuse positive pressure, which can create a 'buzz', and the harmful effects of pressure that is beyond a person's ability to cope.

Why do people talk about stress so much today?

There is a growing awareness of the importance of health and safety and recognition that healthy employees make a greater contribution to a business. People are more aware of the harmful effects of stress in workplaces but it is not new - psychologists have been studying stress since the 1950s.

Why do we need to tackle stress?

Stress is costly, especially for small firms where cover for sick employees is difficult to arrange. Stress can reduce the effectiveness of employees and lead to higher rates of absence. Research estimates that 12.8 million working days were lost to stress, depression and anxiety in 2004/5. Each new case of stress leads to an average of 29 days off work. Work-related stress costs society about £3.7 billion every year (at 1995/6 prices).

Work-related stress is widespread. About one in five people in a stress study said that they found their work either very stressful or extremely stressful.

What form does stress take?

Work-related stress is not an illness but it can contribute to problems with ill health. As well as anxiety and depression, stress has been associated with heart disease, back pain and gastrointestinal illnesses.

Is my firm required by law to tackle stress?

As an employer you have duties under health and safety law to assess and take measures to control risks from work-related stress.

You also have a duty under common law to take reasonable care to ensure the health and safety of your employees. If one of your employees suffers from stress related ill-health and the court decides that you should have been able to prevent it, then you could be found to be negligent. There is no limit to the compensation your employee could get from this.

HSE Management Standards and supporting guidance aim to help and encourage employers to meet their legal obligations.

If you dismiss an employee because they have work-related stress, then an employment tribunal will treat this as unfair dismissal unless you can show that you acted reasonably.

Can stress be cured?

Some forms of stress can be prevented - for example, the kind of organisational stress caused by poor management, overload, unreasonable targets or the lack of policies for dealing with bullying or discipline. Individual stress - relating to relationships or personal problems outside work - can also be reduced with the right kind of understanding and support from you.

What are the main causes of stress and what can I do about them?

The table below is a brief summary of how Acas advice on good employment relations relates to the main causes of stress identified by the HSE. The full list of standards and advice on how to achieve them is available on the HSE website (see HSE information on Stress and Worker Involvement).

Main causes of stress:

Demands: employees often become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do

Control: employees can feel disaffected and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work

Support: levels of sick absence often rise if employees feel they cannot talk to managers about issues that are troubling them

Relationships: a failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying

What you can do about it:

- make sure employees understand what they have to do and how to do it
- meet training needs
- consider whether working flexible hours would help employees to manage demands
- involve employees and safety representatives in the way work is carried out
- consult employees and safety reps about decisions
- build effective teams with responsibility for outcomes
- review performance to identify strengths and weaknesses
- give employees the opportunity to talk about issues causing stress
- be sympathetic and supportive
- keep employees informed about what is going on in the firm
- have clear procedures for handling misconduct and poor performance
- have clear procedures for employees to raise grievances
- tackle any instances of bullying and harassment and make it clear

such behaviour will not be tolerated

Role: employees will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them

- carry out a thorough induction for new employees using a checklist of what needs to be covered
- provide employees with a written statement of employment particulars
- give employees clear job descriptions
- maintain a close link between individual objectives and organisational goals

Change: change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to uncertainty and insecurity

- plan ahead so changes can be signposted and managers and employees are prepared
- consult with employees TU Reps and safety representatives about prospective changes so they have a real input and work together with you to solve problems