

# How to Conduct a Workplace Stress Risk Assessment

According to the Labour Force Survey 2018/19 (LFS), there were 602,000 UK workers suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety. This equates to 12.8 million lost working days. And with the UK currently in the grip of COVID-19, stress-related issues will surely only rise, with many people worried about their health and livelihoods. By understanding the HSE's six Management Standards, which have been designed to help employers reduce stress at work, you will be able to evaluate the current controls you have in place and decide if additional controls are needed. In doing so, you will be able help with employee wellbeing and, in turn, improve productivity.

Occupational stress can result from the responsibilities associated with work activities or caused by conditions that are based in the corporate culture, such as personality conflicts within the workplace or stressful events, such as COVID-19. As with other forms of tension, occupational stress can affect an individual physically, emotionally or behaviourally.

## The 3 Negative Effects of Stress to Look Out for

Pressure is not always a problem – some people thrive on pressure. But it becomes a problem when pressure becomes excessive and starts to overwhelm them. As stress begins to take its toll, a variety of symptoms can result as highlighted in the below table:

### 3 Indicators of Stress

Physical	Emotional	Behavioural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Breathlessness</li> <li>● Headaches</li> <li>● Fainting spells</li> <li>● Chest pains</li> <li>● Tendency to sweat</li> <li>● Nervous twitches</li> <li>● Cramps or muscle spasms</li> <li>● Pins and needles</li> <li>● High blood pressure</li> <li>● Feeling sick or dizzy</li> <li>● Constant tiredness</li> <li>● Restlessness</li> <li>● Sleeping problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Aggression</li> <li>● Irritability</li> <li>● Depression</li> <li>● Feeling bad or ugly</li> <li>● Fearing diseases</li> <li>● Fearing failure</li> <li>● Dreading the future</li> <li>● Loss of interest in others</li> <li>● Taking no interest in life</li> <li>● Feeling neglected</li> <li>● Feeling that there's no-one to confide in</li> <li>● Losing sense of humour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Indecision</li> <li>● Avoiding difficult situations</li> <li>● Frequently crying</li> <li>● Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>● Denying there's a problem</li> <li>● Unable to show true feelings</li> <li>● Biting nails</li> </ul>

If your employees start to show any of these symptoms, then this may indicate the individual is stressed and you need to take action as we outline next.

## The HSE's 6 Management Standards

The organisational factors, and therefore the ones you can control, that contribute to work-related stress are addressed in the HSE's 6

Management Standards for Stress. We've listed these in the table on the next page and have provided examples of some controls you can put in place, to ideally prevent, or reduce the risk of stress.

This approach has proved effective in larger organisations (50+ employees). But in smaller firms, and at a more day-to-day level, we offer 7 tips for managers to minimise their stress and that of their colleagues.

## 7 Tips to Manage Stress

- 1 **Set clear roles and responsibilities.** Resist role-creep (when staff, especially junior colleagues, are asked to take on 'just one more thing').
- 2 **Be reasonable in the targets you set** – and the expectations you place on the people who work for or with you. Use **SMART objectives** which are: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound.
- 3 **Provide a safety valve.** This could be a trusted senior manager or union representative to whom colleagues can speak confidentially, or an external confidential helpline.
- 4 Technology has created a culture of 24/7 availability. **Respect the private time** of those who don't choose to work like this.
- 5 **Deal with environmental causes of stress** by making sure the heating/ventilation system works properly, flickering fluorescent tubes are replaced promptly and that problems with equipment (printers that jam, computers that crash) are quickly put right.
- 6 **Encourage staff to achieve a good work/life balance.** Work's really important, but it isn't everything.
- 7 **Involve people in decisions that affect them.** People often have unjustified worries about change and their biggest concern is that it's being 'done to them'. So don't just keep them informed, try to ensure they can genuinely influence your plans.

To help assess your workplace for stress, use our **Stress Risk Assessment**. This covers each of the HSE's 6 Management Standards to help you identify if your organisation has a problem with stress and if so, how you can reduce it via your control measures.

## HSE's 6 Management Standards for Stress

Standards	Example of Stressors	Control Measures
<b>1. Demands</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Excessive monitoring of work performance.</li> <li>Excessive workloads being placed on individuals.</li> <li>Extremely demanding deadlines and targets.</li> <li>Long hours/shift work causing disruption to daily routines.</li> <li>Working environment problems such as poor housekeeping, dirty conditions, extremes of temperature, noise, poor lighting, etc.</li> </ul>	By understanding the demands placed on your employees (e.g. through regular observation and discussions with your workers), you can introduce simple control measures to find ways to reduce the workload placed on individuals. In conjunction with the person's Line Manager, you may be able to introduce flexi-time, or offer more flexible working arrangements for a better work-life balance.
<b>2. Control</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A lack of control over task.</li> <li>A lack of control over work scheduling.</li> <li>Employee has no say in the way work is done/no consultation.</li> <li>Forced pace of work.</li> <li>Lack of policies.</li> </ul>	<p>Employees can become stressed by the lack of control they have in their work.</p> <p>Finding a balance can be difficult but by working with the individual and their Line Manager, you will be able to assess the tasks, the rate of work, level of supervision required and empower your employees to take control over their tasks, where appropriate.</p>
<b>3. Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employees do not know where to go for support.</li> <li>Lack of information and/or training given to employees.</li> <li>Lack of management and peer support.</li> <li>No response to requests for help and support.</li> </ul>	Find opportunities to support your employees. For example, those now working at home could receive wellbeing calls from their managers on a regular basis. You could also provide access to a confidential helpline as part of an Employee Assistant Programme.
<b>4. Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aggressive/autocratic management style.</li> <li>Atmosphere of conflict.</li> <li>Customer pressures.</li> <li>Harassment/discrimination/bullying issues.</li> <li>Level of supervision (oppressive/insufficient/no support).</li> <li>Poor relationship with supervisors and/or peers.</li> </ul>	Due to people working remotely, or having staff on furlough, developing a positive workplace culture is more challenging at present. But with regular communication, especially using online collaboration tools such as MS Teams, or even just using email groups, you can still communicate with your workers almost as though you are all still in the office. Plus, you have the added advantage of transparency, ensuring everyone gets the same message at the same time.
<b>5. Role</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of clarity about objectives and individuals' roles and responsibilities.</li> <li>Poor leadership.</li> </ul>	Provide clarity about company and individual objectives, roles and responsibilities. This is especially important during COVID-19 where people may be working remotely.
<b>6. Change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conflict between individuals.</li> <li>Constant restructuring/reorganisation/change/uncertainty.</li> <li>Lack of understanding of job requirements.</li> </ul>	Roles can be constantly evolving in many organisations. It is vital that managers always consult with employees about their roles and don't just inform them of changes.

### Apply the Management Standards to Home Working

With many employees now working from home, applying the HSE Management Standards can bring new challenges for employers. We look at 7 key actions to consider as part of your stress risk assessment:

- 1 Adjust employee workload** to take account of individual pressures at home including poor working environment, IT access difficulties and competing demands such as home schooling.
- 2 Be alert to signs that employees have excessive workload** or are not 'switching off' from work. Examples include sending e-mails out of hours and a deterioration in work quality.
- 3 Check that adequate breaks** are being taken between work tasks and meetings. This is important both physically and mentally.
- 4 Support employees to report and take sickness absence** where it is necessary for both physical and mental health conditions. It can be tempting for staff to 'soldier on' at home where their poor health is not so visible to managers.
- 5 Ensure that regular communication with staff includes one-to-one management sessions** covering employee welfare.
- 6 Check that all employees are aware they still have access to confidential support services** if they need them.
- 7 Be transparent with employees about future work plans** as uncertainty about role and working arrangements post-Covid is likely to cause stress. Consult with staff on their preferences if you are thinking of introducing flexible working opportunities.