

Supporting employees who are experiencing stress

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Workplace

Health and Wellbeing **Academy**

Introduction

Stress is the how the body responds to pressure. Sometimes a certain amount of stress is helpful to motivate us. But if the pressure and demands at work become too much, this can lead to work-related stress.

Workplace stress, depression, and anxiety made up 51% of work related ill health and 55% of working days lost to work related ill health. Recognising the signs of work-related stress and dealing with it quickly can mean it will have less of a negative impact.

In 2021/22 there were just over

**900,000
workers**

affected by workplace stress, depression or anxiety in the UK.

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How stress affects the mind and body

The causes of work-related stress

How stress can impact the organisation

How to support your employees



How stress affects the mind and body

Because the body produces hormones in response to stress, this can affect a person's physical health.

They might experience:

- breathing difficulties
- sleeping problems
- tiredness
- sudden weight gain or loss
- sweating
- changes to their period

High levels of stress can worsen these effects.

Mental effects and emotional signs of stress can include feeling:

- constantly worried
- irritable and short-tempered
- overwhelmed
- depressed or anxious
- unable to switch off
- unable to enjoy yourself



The causes of work-related stress

Workplace stress can arise if employees are not able to cope with the demands of their job, or unable to control how they do their work. They can also be stressed if they don't receive enough information and support from managers or colleagues. An employee might also be stressed if they don't fully understand their role and responsibilities.

Relationships at work can also be a source of stress if employees have poor working relationships or are being bullied. Any big changes that happen at work can also cause stress. This might be changes in job role, team structure, or management.



Women have higher rates of workplace stress than men



How stress in the workplace can impact the organisation

If an employee is stressed, they might not be able to carry out their job properly and can make mistakes more often. They may even need to take time off work because they're stressed. The progress of tasks and projects might be hampered, which can affect team productivity and put an organisation's reputation at risk if deadlines are missed.

What to look out for

If employees are acting differently, this may be a sign of stress. An employee who is stressed may:

- take more time off work
- arrive at work late
- seem twitchy or nervous
- lack confidence or motivation
- have changes in mood or more emotional reactions to situations

Signs of stress in a team can include:

- arguing
- high staff turnover
- poor performance
- complaints

How to support your employees

Managers have a legal duty to assess the risks of stress in employees at work, and help them to tackle and resolve the problem or cause. This is particularly important if the stress is being caused by work pressure. A risk assessment can help to identify possible risks that might lead to stress, and what actions you can take to mitigate them. The Health and Safety Executive have examples of risk assessments to help you make one for your team or organisation. A risk assessment is important to help you protect your employees.

In general, if you notice your employees are stressed, you should encourage them to see a GP.

Where employees can find support

As a manager, you should let your employees know that they can speak to you about feeling stressed. This could be during the workday or in scheduled times such as in appraisals or progress meetings. However, they might not feel comfortable talking about stress with a manager, so other places they can find support are:

- from your organisation's Human Resources (HR) department or representative
- an occupational health service, employee assistance programme, or counselling service if your organisation provides these
- a trade union or worker representative
- a trusted colleague





Conversation tips and advice

You can help your employees with stress by talking to them and listening, if they're willing to speak to you about it. Approach them when they're on their own and try to be informal. For example, you could say "I'd like to have a chat about how things are going". Agree a time that works for both of you to have the discussion. You should speak to them in a private place that is quiet and free from interruptions.

Starting the conversation

- Start with an open question. For example, "How do you feel things are going at the moment?"
- Remind them that this is not a disciplinary or formal performance review, and that you want to help.
- If they don't say anything, try to encourage them to open up, but don't push them. If they don't seem like they want to talk to you, ask if they would like to speak to anyone else.
- If they get angry or emotional, let them express this and vent if it helps them. Offer to reschedule so they can have an opportunity to calm down.

Exploring causes of stress

- Once they are ready to talk, ask them sensitively if the stress is home-related or work-related.
- If the stress is home-related, remind them of the support available to them as an employee.
- If stress is work-related or partly related to work, find out what aspect of their job is causing stress (demand, control, relationships, their role, or any changes that have happened).
- Be open to accepting that you might be part of the problem. If this is the case, try to have an open and honest chat about what is influencing how they feel. If needed they can be referred to another manager, or a more senior member of the organisation.

Taking it forward

- Arrange a follow-up meeting if necessary and refresh any risk assessments.
- Agree what the approach, if any, will be to resolve the problem.
- Agree actions for each of you moving forward.
- Give as much control to the employee as possible to find the solution.
- Discuss any third-party involvement.
- Signpost if needed to relevant support services such as occupational health.

Once you've spoken to the employee and established the reasons for stress, aim to have follow-up conversations with them to see if there's been any progress. You may wish to schedule regular catch ups to help them manage and reduce their symptoms of stress.



Look after yourself

Remember to also take care of your own wellbeing if you are feeling stressed. This can show your employees that it's okay for them to do the same. And you will be in a better position to help others by dealing with your own stress first.

Find out more

More information from Bupa

We have more resources that can help you approach the conversation. Our workplace mental health hub provides further guidance on talking about mental health problems and dealing with disclosure.

<https://www.bupa.co.uk/health-information/mental-health>

Legal obligation

As a manager, it's important to understand any policies your organisation has relating to mental health and wellbeing. It's also important to understand any legal obligations on you as an individual, or on your organisation, which protect people with a disability – either physical or mental.

Sources

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