

CDOIF – A guide to recognising stress and mental health issues in the workplace

Why should an employer be concerned about stress and the mental health of their employees?

You face two main challenges. Issues caused by factors outside work that your employees might bring to work with them and issues caused, or made worse, by the work they do or the way your business operates. You, and your employees, need to be aware of both, and need to take steps to assess and address both.

Awareness involves understanding what problems mental health issues and work related stress can bring and being able to spot the signs of them, so that you can support employees who may be performing poorly as a result.

Remember, we can all experience problems, so consider your own mental health and stress levels.

What is the size of the problem?

Over a third of all instances of work-related ill health can be attributed to stress. On average each person suffering from this condition takes 24 days off work. ⁽¹⁾

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates the cost to society of work-related stress is around £5 billion each year, with around 12 million working days lost each year. By acting to reduce the problem, you can help to create a more productive, healthy and safe workforce which can bring greater business efficiencies. Many organisations have reported improvements in productivity, retention of staff and a reduction in sickness absence and accident rates after tackling work-related stress. See the HSE website for case studies of how organisations have tackled stress in their organisations. ⁽¹⁾

What should I be doing?

Workers with stress or mental health issues need support, not rejection. ⁽²⁾ You should be:

- raising awareness of stress and mental health issues amongst all staff, and especially those that manage others.
- providing advice, guidance or training so that they can recognise the signs in themselves and others, and where and how to get help.
- talking about such topics and helping to remove any perceived stigma that may stop people reporting their problems.

It is about:

- creating an environment where people are willing to highlight problems.
- listening to what people are saying, and especially colleagues, supervisors and line managers who may be able to spot potential issues, and
- listening to workers and their representatives, who may be aware of issues that managers are not

Employers should create a culture where employees feel able to discuss difficulties that might lead to mental health problems in the knowledge that they will receive a sympathetic, tolerant and flexible response. ⁽³⁾

How can I do it?

In the workplace there is a clear legal requirement to address work-related stress. It is important to identify where stress may occur and who may be affected; this should be done by carrying out a workplace risk assessment and addressing any actions as necessary. ⁽⁴⁾

HSE has identified 6 areas for managing workplace stress. These are the Management Standards for Work Related Stress.⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾ They identify the points to address in a risk assessment.

- [Demands](#) – this includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
- [Control](#) – how much say the person has in the way they do their work.
- [Support](#) – this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
- [Relationships](#) – this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
- [Role](#) – whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.
- [Change](#) – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Further Information

(1) HSE Stress website <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm>

(2) Mental Health and Work, (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2008)
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212266/hwwb-mental-health-and-work.pdf

(3) Tackling workplace stress using the HSE Stress Management Standards - TUC and HSE guidance for health and safety representatives (TUC/HSE 2017)
<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/tackling-workplace-stress-guide.pdf>

(4) IOSH (Institute of Occupational Safety and Health) – Stress - <https://www.iosh.co.uk/Books-and-resources/Our-OH-toolkit/Stress.aspx>

(5) How to tackle work-related stress: A guide for employers on making the Management Standards work
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg430.pdf>

(6) 'Managing the causes of work related stress – A step-by-step approach using the Management Standards' - (HSG218 ISBN 9780717662739) is now available from HSE Books priced £10.95 or free pdf download
<http://books.hse.gov.uk/hse/public/saleproduct.jsf?catalogueCode=9780717662739>