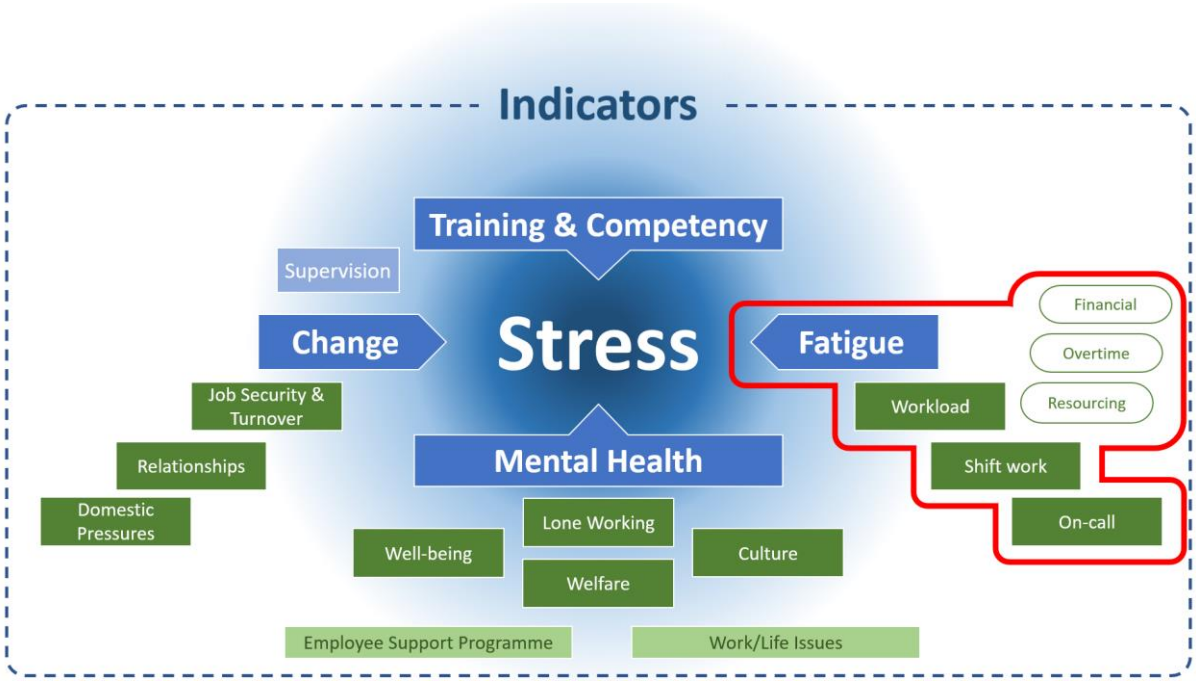
CDOIF: FATIGUE – Mental Health: A guide to recognising fatigue issues in the workplace



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

So, what is fatigue in relation to stress?

More than 3.5 million people are employed as shift workers in the UK.

Many of these workers are employed in the process industries as well as in other sectors such as emergency services, healthcare, utilities, transport, entertainment, and retail. Poorly designed shift-working arrangements and long working hours that do not balance the demands of work with time for rest and recovery may result in fatigue.

In the context of safety and health, fatigue refers to mental or physical tiredness that reduces a person's capacity to perform work safely and effectively which can lead to accidents, injuries and ill health.

The causes are not always shift-work related - workload and even being on-call or working extended hours may cause or contribute to fatigue. Examples are:

- Prolonged or intense mental or physical activity
- Sleep loss or disrupted sleep
- Travel
- Organizational change
- Irregular work scheduling or excessively long shifts
- Strenuous activity

- Long commutes to and from work
- Working in extremely hot or cold environments
- Financial pressures leading to excessive overtime requests or possibly doing additional work elsewhere.
- Lifestyle choices
- Health and medication

Fatigue may over time lower an individual's capacity to manage stressors in their personal and working life.

Why should an employer be concerned about fatigue?

Fatigue doesn't just cause workers to feel more tired, it may also increase the risk of accidents and injuries, reduce productivity, and cause absenteeism.

Research has shown that spending 17 hours awake induces similar levels of impairment as being close to the UK blood alcohol limit for driving[1]. Fatigue has been implicated in 10 - 20% of accidents on major roads and is said to cost the UK £115 - £240 million per year in terms of work accidents alone.[2]

Fatigue results in slower reactions, reduced ability to process information, memory lapses, absent-mindedness, decreased awareness, lack of attention, underestimation of risk, reduced coordination etc. Fatigue may lead to errors and accidents, ill-health and injury, and reduced productivity. It can be a contributing factor for major accidents.

How do I know if I may have a problem?

Fatigued workers can put themselves and others at risk of injury. It is important for managers and supervisors to know and watch out for the causes and signs of fatigue. These may include:

- Poorly managed overtime and shift-swapping which may reflect inadequate resource allocation and staffing levels which can be a key factor in worker fatigue.
- Physical signs of tiredness, weariness, or sleepiness such as drooping heads, incessant yawning, and eyelids that seem to be closing are the most obvious indicators that a worker is fatigued and needs time to recover before costly errors or accidents happen. Sometimes the causes may be poor or interrupted sleep, which can be more complex to deal with.
- Irritability – Workers can be irritable for many reasons, including problems at home, financial stress, conflict with co-workers, etc. However, lack of proper rest may be a cause. It is a good idea to watch for patterns of irritability or a newly developed "bad attitude," especially when combined with other signs on the list above.

[1] (DfT (2010a) Road Research Report No.110 p26, Dawson and Reid 1997)
[2] Human factors/ergonomics - Fatigue (hse.gov.uk)

- Reduced alertness, concentration, or memory – watch for workers who appear to have trouble focusing or who can't recall seemingly simple things, like what they just said or did. Having difficulty solving problems can also be an indicator of fatigue.
- Lack of motivation – employees who appear to suddenly lack motivation to do their job, and do it well, may seem lazy but this is generally a sign of broader issues, including fatigue.
- Increased mistakes or lapses in judgment – if a worker who is otherwise proven to be competent and good at their job starts making frequent errors or poor choices, it might be a sign of fatigue.
- Medical conditions including physiological changes e.g. menopause, which may cause symptoms similar to fatigue.
- Increased susceptibility to illness – workers who are suddenly taking more time off due to illness may be suffering underlying issues related to fatigue.
- Increased number of unscheduled breaks or intake of high caffeine refreshments such as strong coffee or energy drinks.

What should I be doing?

Fatigue needs to be managed like any other hazard. It is important not to underestimate the risks and impacts of fatigue. For example, the incidence of accidents and injuries has been found to be higher on night shifts, after a succession of shifts, when shifts are long and when there are inadequate breaks.

The legal duty is on employers to manage risks from fatigue, irrespective of any individual's willingness to work extra hours or preference for certain shift patterns for social reasons. Compliance with the Working Time Regulations alone is insufficient to manage the risks of fatigue.

How can I do it?

Changes to working hours need to be risk assessed. The key considerations are set out in the principles contained in HSE's guidance.

Employees should be consulted on working hours and shift patterns. However, note that employees may prefer certain shift patterns that are unhealthy and likely to cause fatigue. e.g. because of financial pressures or an absence of supervision on some shifts.

To counteract this, you should develop a policy that specifically addresses and sets limits on working hours, overtime, and shift-swapping, and which guards against fatigue.

You need to implement the policy and arrange to monitor and enforce it. This may include developing a robust system of recording working hours, overtime, shift-swapping, and on-call working.

There are many different shift-work schedules and each schedule has different features. This sheer diversity of work and workplaces means that there is no single optimal shift system that suits everyone. However, a planned and systematic approach to assessing and managing the risks of shift work can improve the health and safety of workers.

There are several key risk factors in shift schedule design, which must be considered when assessing and managing the risks of shift work. These are:

- the workload,
- the work activity,
- shift timing and duration,
- number and length of breaks during and between shifts.

Look at other features of the workplace such as the physical environment, management issues and employee welfare which may also contribute to the risks associated with shift work.

Sleep disturbances can lead to a 'sleep debt' and fatigue. Night workers are particularly at risk of fatigue because their day sleep is often lighter, shorter, and easily disturbed because of daytime noise and a difficulty to sleep during daylight.

Assess the risks of workers with additional “on-call” duties, who are more at risk of having to suddenly work without sufficient breaks between work, often in high stress emergency situations.

What can I do to proactively address worker fatigue?

Employees certainly play a role in preventing fatigue, particularly where the causes go beyond the workplace. However, there are several things employers can do to reduce fatigue at work. An effective and proactive approach to fatigue risk management may involve some or all the following, for example:

- Shift scheduling: consistent schedules, frequent breaks, two consecutive days off each week, and no more than four nightshifts in a row.
- Balancing workloads and staffing.
- Developing a reporting system for fatigue related incidents.
- Workplace design: cool atmosphere, low humidity, natural light, minimal noise/vibrations.
- Employee training on fatigue and managing sleep disorders.
- Supervisor and management training on monitoring and identifying fatigue in workers.
- Support a proactive wellbeing programme to educate staff on the impact of physiological changes and lifestyle choices.

Further Information

(1) Managing shift work: Health and Safety Guidance HSG 256
Aimed at employers, safety representatives, trade union officials, employees, regulators and other stakeholders. This guidance explains employers' legal duties to assess risks associated with shift work and aims to improve understanding of shift work and its impact on health and safety. It includes good practice guidelines on how to reduce the

risks and practical advice on how employers, safety representatives and employees can reduce the negative impact of shift work (see Hints and tips for shift-workers).

(2) Reducing error and influencing behaviour (HSG48),
Contains a good summary of key fatigue issues

(3) Managing rail staff fatigue guidance (ORR) (PDF)
Although written for the rail industry, the principles contained in this guidance are transferable to other safety critical industries.

(4) Guidance for managing shiftwork and fatigue offshore
This information sheet provides advice on good practice approaches to shift working in the offshore industry. While it is intended to be used in conjunction with HSE's generic guidance on shift work this document provides specific advice relating to working practices in the UK offshore sector

(5) The Energy Institute guidance "Managing fatigue using a fatigue risk management plan (FRMP)"provides further information on the key elements and principles of a fatigue risk management system).

(6) Working time regulations 1998 The Working Time Regulations (hse.gov.uk)