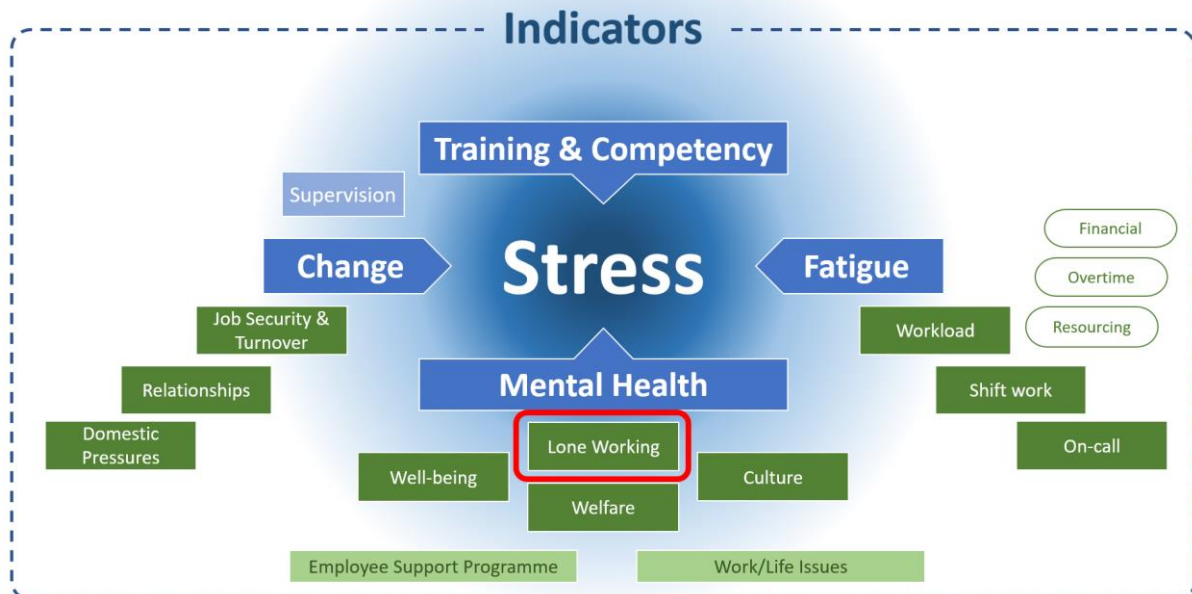


CDOIF: STRESS – Mental Health: A guide to recognising and managing working alone or isolated working in the workplace



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

Why should an employer be concerned about employees who work alone or in isolation and the potential impact it can have on their mental health and stress levels?

An employee who works primarily on their own can feel isolated from their employer. In such cases, things such as minor feelings of anxiety, depression or even acute stress, could develop into something more significant because of the sense of isolation.

How do I know if I may have a problem?

- An employee has a sense of isolation from their employer.
 - Unwillingness to report or communicate issues & concerns
 - Staff tell you what you want to hear, rather than what you should know
 - Lack of open-door engagement between management and staff
 - Company office is remote from individual's workplace
- Evidence of mistakes that may not normally be expected.
 - People who feel isolated or detached from their company may suffer stress or mental health issues and have lower engagement. Communication and concentration skills may suffer which may lead to an increase in errors and incidents,
- Unwillingness to socialise or engage.
 - Distancing and/or deterioration is evident in previously well-established relationships
 - Employee may be confrontational or reticent to engage when spoken to or asked to take on additional or changes to work

- Fatigue.
 - Isolation or loneliness can foster a sense of fatigue which in turn leads to disengagement and lack of concentration resulting in an increased likelihood of errors or incidents (see article on fatigue).
- Lack of access to welfare facilities (toilets, washrooms, food and supplies).
 - Needing to eat or rest on the move, no dedicated rest areas, lack of inter-action with others can all lead to poor physical and mental health.
- Feedback from client site about their employee.
 - Client sites or teams reporting on behavioural or performance change in an individual.
- Age
 - Different age groups cope with working conditions differently. For example, different age demographics may prefer more regular interaction and socialising with peers.
 - More experience or maturity can also instil confidence to speak up.
- New member to an already established team.
 - New members can feel on the outside if joining a well-run or established team, this can be even more so if there is a strong age or gender difference, and this in turn can lead to a sense of isolation.
- Employee spends long periods of their working day alone.
- Employee faces long periods of their day isolated in stressful conditions (drivers in traffic jams, crane operators in isolated cabin etc).
- Employee spends periods of time away from home and family.

What should I be doing?

Regular check-ins and/or 1-2-1's with employees and those working at a client site (discuss issues, feedback, observations etc). Establish and agree a support framework from client sites and implement an open culture where people feel safe and comfortable to talk and raise concerns. This can be either with colleagues or management by implementing an open-door policy between employees, or between client and management. Ensure that issues raised are taken seriously and acted upon in a timely manner, and importantly, that feedback is given.

Consider running an Employee or Culture survey regularly to allow you to monitor trends, effectiveness of any action or programme implemented, and the 'health' of the organisation.

Review working conditions, scheduling and work hours (i.e. repetitiveness, mundane, distractions etc), including call-out work, travel time and regular work pattern ~ ask yourself if it allows for adequate rest and social periods during the working day/week.

Ensure that a positive well-being programme is promoted and encouraged by raising awareness of mental health & well-being, and the potential impacts (negative and positive) it can have, across the workforce on individuals and the business.

How can I do it?

- Encourage interactions between employees at all levels, ensuring that it includes consideration and discussion around mental health and well-being – ideally this should be face to face.
 - Such forms of engagement allow supervisors and managers to directly engage with individuals in their workforce. This engagement develops relationships that allow a better understanding of work carried out, and so allows for opportunities to identify blockers and stress points before they occur. As an employer it is also helpful if you have these relationships as you can gain the trust and knowledge of employees who may develop long term health conditions or disabilities and support them to stay in work.
 - Develop a communications or support network between employees / lone workers to enable improved conversations between co-workers and employers.
- Building relationships and dialogue with client's
 - Consider implementing a coaching and mentoring framework using senior colleagues, employers and support professionals, utilising 'safe spaces' to encourage open discussions.
- Staff culture / well-being survey.
 - Consider developing or engaging a survey company to create a questionnaire that enables you to understand the current culture and values of both your organisation and staff and act upon the findings from the survey. Examples of good culture survey examples can be found in the further information section of this guidance.
- Sponsor a community action programme – these build relationships and the positivity of helping others outside of the work environment.
 - A community support programme has many benefits, some of which foster team relationships and, preventing silo's from forming. It encourages staff to give back to their own communities which is proven to develop positive mental health, and finally such programmes help develop the crucial non-technical skills such as communication, decision making, team building and situational awareness.
- Implement a Well-Being programme
 - Develop a programme that provides support and guidance to employees about physical, mental and occupational health, as well as explaining the benefits of such a programme.
- Provide information about other organisations or services that can help or provide external support, i.e. MIND, Samaritans etc.
 - This could be an Employee Assistance Program that allows individuals to seek assistance outside of their employer, in cases where confidentiality may be an issue or concern. Alternatively, an employer can signpost to external support organisations - further details of which can be found in the Further Information section below.
- Fatigue management plan
 - Identify fatigue hot-spots against working hours for on-call or remote employees
 - Develop a plan to manage identified 'hot spots' to prevent cumulative or chronic sleep debt.

- Any plan should be developed with or at least signed off by the employee or employee representative, and where required, suitable awareness training given

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/hwb-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/tacking-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) [Stress Workbook \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk) Mindful Employer <https://mindfulemployer.dpt.nhs.uk>

Disclaimer

This briefing note is shared in order to promote learning and improve safety. You should seek appropriate guidance regarding the relevance, accuracy, and completeness of this information to your circumstances prior to implementation