



STRESS MANAGER GUIDANCE

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**Reducing Stress
at Work
Guidance for Managers**

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Introduction

Good health is to be valued and enjoyed. It cannot be taken for granted. Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board is committed to improving the health of its employees by introducing and promoting policies that are conducive to a healthy lifestyle.

Work-related stress is a major cause of occupational ill health and a significant cost to the organisation in terms of sickness absence, high staff turnover and poor performance. If we can reduce stress we can reduce these costs and effective management of stress is the best way of doing this. This booklet is intended to help you manage the issue and minimise the impact of work-related stress on the Board.

Under UK law, employers have a "duty of care" to protect the health, safety and welfare of all employees while at work. They also have to assess the risks arising from hazards at work including work-related stress and put measures in place to manage the risk.

For many people 'stress' still represents something of an unknown quantity. The HSE has addressed this problem by developing Management Standards to help employers measure their performance in managing the key causes of stress at work and identify areas for improvement. These standards can be found in Appendix 1 or at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm

The standards look at the **demands** made on employees; the level of **control** they have over their work; the **support** they receive from managers and colleagues; the clarity of their **role** within the organisation; the nature of **relationships** at work; and the way that **change** is managed.

In many instances the sources of work-related stress can be tackled through improvement to the design and management of work and work environments. It is important to work with employees to recognise stress issues at source and agree realistic and workable ways to tackle these.

The HSE recommends a 5 step approach to assessing the risks associated with work related stress, the following sections provide further information and practical guidance in relation to these 5 steps.

Step 1 - "Look at the Hazards"

In relation to the HSE standards the following table provides information on the main causes of stress and what you can do about it.

| Main Causes of Stress: | What you can do about it: |
|--|---|
| <p>Demands: Most employees need a certain amount of challenge and pressure in their work to keep them motivated, however if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do they can become overloaded.</p> | <p>Attention needs to be given to the way the job is designed; are they capable of carrying out the work? Are there training needs? Look at other workplace hazards, e.g., noise, threat of violence, harmful substances and make sure they are properly controlled. Each individual is different and only by talking to your team can you get the balance right between challenging demands and stressful demands.</p> |
| <p>Control: employees can feel disaffected and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work or get no feedback on their performance.</p> | <p>Think about how employees are actively involved in decision-making. Encourage feedback and involve them in decision making and the way the work is carried out wherever possible. Build effective teams in which employees are given responsibility for outcomes. Use Personal Development Reviews to identify strengths and weaknesses and agree personal objectives.</p> |
| <p>Support: levels of sickness absence often rise if employees feel they cannot talk to managers about issues that are troubling them, e.g., not being able to balance the demands of work and life outside work.</p> | <p>Be aware of the outward signs of stress in individuals and be sensitive to changes in an individual's behaviour, such as worsening relationships with colleagues, absenteeism. Give employees the opportunity to talk about the issues causing stress, provide a sympathetic ear and keep them informed.</p> |
| <p>Role: employees will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them and where they fit in.</p> | <p>Ensure the Board's induction process is followed in relation to new staff. Work out accurate and up to date Job Descriptions, ensure employees are aware of the Board's Code of Conduct and maintain a close link between individual targets and organisational goals.</p> |

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| Relationships: a failure to build relationships based on respect and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying. | Refer to the Board's policies for handling grievances, unsatisfactory performance, poor attendance and misconduct, and for tackling bullying and harassment. |
| Change: change needs to be managed and communicated effectively or it can lead to huge uncertainty and insecurity about what is happening. | Plan ahead so that change does not come out of the blue. Provide effective support for staff throughout the process. Consult with employees so they have a real input, and work together to solve problems. |
| Reward and Contribution: Inadequate recognition and feedback on performance can lead to employees feeling that their contribution to the Board is not valued. | Ensure regular, positive and constructive feedback. Make sure staff are involved in consultation exercises and communication of information. Remember to include those who work part time and shifts. |

Step 2 - "Identify who Might be Harmed and How"

Work related stress could affect any member of your team. Situations that may cause stress can affect different people in different ways even though some may cope better with work pressures than others. At particular times employees may be more vulnerable to work related stress, especially where they are exposed to excessive pressures in the areas identified in the HSE Standards above. Exposure to these areas can affect employees in different ways; finding out how the factors are affecting your employees requires a partnership approach.

There are some useful signs that you can pick up on, which include:

- ❖ Personality traits may become more pronounced, such as over-meticulousness in a careful employee or panic in an anxious person
- ❖ Irrational or wrong decision-making at work
- ❖ Increasing inability to cope with the demands of the job
- ❖ Poor morale and cynicism
- ❖ Poor working relationship with colleagues
- ❖ Irritability, attacks of temper or distress
- ❖ High resistance to going to work every day
- ❖ Unexplained absences or unconvincing excuses (especially Monday mornings)
- ❖ Lateness
- ❖ Excessive sick leave for minor ailments
- ❖ Accidents at work
- ❖ Unreasonable excuses for errors
- ❖ Overreaction to real or imagined criticism; and or obvious resentment
- ❖ Inefficiency such as difficulty in recalling instructions, repeated mistakes

- ❖ Inability to concentrate on what is being said
- ❖ Unreliable behaviour
- ❖ Other changes in behaviour such as repeated requests for reassurance, undue anxiety, distress and tearfulness.

Step 3 – “Evaluating the Risk”

Once you become aware that an employee is exhibiting signs of stress, you should take action to address the issue. How a stress situation is managed will influence the length of an employee's absence and any consequent costs. If no effort is made to intervene early and resolve issues, especially if the employee takes time off, the more difficult it may be to resolve.

At this stage it is recommended that a risk assessment is carried out - this will involve a careful examination of what, in the work environment, could cause harm to people. A small pilot exercise is recommended in the first instance and the Board may wish to work in association with and guidance from South Ayrshire Council's Corporate HR, Health and Safety and Occupational Health to carry out this task.

As part of any stress risk assessment, it is important, to look at the overall picture and not just rely on one measure of work related stress. There are a number of sources of information that could indicate a potential problem area as follows:

- Sickness Absence - High levels may indicate a potential problem area, checking the reasons given may help identify the cause.
- Low productivity can indicate problems - talk to employees to explore the reasons behind this.
- High employee turnover could be an indication of high stress levels, Investigate why people are leaving - conducting exit interviews is one way of doing this.
- Difficulty in attracting new staff and low response rates to vacancies may indicate a problem area.
- Respect at work incidents, grievances, disciplinary cases, work place accidents or injury, referrals to Occupational Health may indicate areas requiring further investigation.
- Customer dissatisfaction - if more customers than usual are complaining it could be because staff are under too much pressure.
- Performance and development review discussions can offer the opportunity to have a one to one discussion about work and to explore whether people in your team are experiencing excessive pressure.
- Team meetings and focus groups can help assess current performance. This type of meeting allows you to explore issues in considerable depth and can help to find out what specific groups of people think about their work.

If having looked at these sources of information, it becomes clear that there are problem areas it is essential that you work together with your employees to develop workable solutions. You should try to understand why a particular employee or group of employees is responding to a certain stressor in a way that is causing harm. It is important to identify and address the source of the stressor. It will be your response to the employee(s) stress that will be a critical factor in successfully resolving the problem. You need to work together to put appropriate measures in place to remove, alleviate or minimise the cause of the stress or assist the employee, where appropriate, in dealing with the issues believed to be causing the stress.

Early intervention can include solutions such as conflict resolution, mediation, and changes to workload or counselling. Regularly monitor the workloads of your employees to ensure a balance and intervene if you feel someone is not coping. You can help by working with the employee to set priorities for example. A stressed employee will often be demotivated and closed to new ideas.

Similarly, there may be areas of your own performance which can improve, including your own behaviour. Promoting an atmosphere of openness and mutual support, motivation by example and encouragement is preferable to the setting of strict discipline, tough targets and an aggressive management style.

As you have a critical role to play in the successful management of work related stress, it is important that you are aware of what you can and cannot do when supporting employees suffering from stress. Some problems need the support or attention of qualified experts therefore it is important to refer employees for expert help when this is more appropriate. Please refer to the Board Personnel Representatives, South Ayrshire Council's Corporate HR, Health and Safety or Occupational Health for advice.

Board policies and procedures which may be relevant and helpful to any issues raised by the employee are available on SharePoint these include Managing Attendance at Work , Code of Conduct, Special Leave and the Board's Grievance procedure.

Step 4 - "Action Planning"

Having investigated and identified areas where work related stress is a problem, it is important to develop solutions and an action plan to prioritise areas to be tackled, to demonstrate that you are addressing your employees concerns and provide something to evaluate and review against.

- Involve your employees in the formulation of action plans and solutions.
- Ensure individual concerns can be raised and addressed.
- Develop an action plan to encourage continuous improvement.
- Follow up any changes made to ensure they are having the effect you intended.

Step 5 - "Monitoring and Review"

- Identify any new risks.
- Build in regular reviews when there are major changes in the workplace to ensure stress hasn't increased. Look at the indicators identified on page 6 under the section "Evaluating the Risk", e.g., employee turnover, sickness absence etc. this will allow a baseline against which to evaluate and measure the impact of your stress risk management process.
- Lead by example and communicate the importance of avoiding stress.

It is important to remember that the standards are about making steady improvements in the way stress is managed. You need to be committed to continually working with employees to identify and address the possible problems in the workplace that would lead to stress related ill health.

The following checklist provides information for managers to enable them to prevent stress from becoming a problem.

Managers Checklist:

- Develop and implement management practices based upon consultation with employees where problems are discussed openly within a supportive environment.
- Show that you take stress seriously and be understanding towards people who admit to being under too much pressure.
- Ensure good communication between management and employees, particularly where there are organisational and procedural changes.
- Ensure employees are fully trained to discharge their duties.
- Ensure employees are provided with meaningful developmental opportunities
- Monitor workloads on a regular basis to ensure that people are not overloaded.
- Monitor working hours and overtime to ensure that employees are not overworking.
- Monitor holidays to ensure the employees are taking their full entitlement.
- Ensure that bullying and harassment is not tolerated within their jurisdiction.
- Are you aware of an employee suffering stress outside work e.g., bereavement or separation and assistance available?
- Encourage line managers/supervisors to look for signs of stress in their staff.

Support Mechanisms

Employee Information Sources

Relevant information will be distributed to employees by leaflets, posting on the SharePoint and generally publicised to provide awareness, highlighting support mechanisms available and how to access these services in a discrete manner. Further advice on external support mechanisms is available in the Dealing with Stress Information for Employees guide, available on SharePoint.

The Board's Personnel Representatives

The Board's Personnel Representatives will be happy to provide advice and support on handling a stress related problem. In some cases it will be recognised that more specialist advice and guidance from healthcare professionals is required to deal with a particular situation or to support an individual employee.

Counselling

Access to counselling services may be available through contact with South Ayrshire Council's Occupational Health Service through management referral. Counselling services may also be accessed through an employee's G.P.

Training and Employee Development

An inability to cope with specific work activity is often cited as a stress hazard. Managers should ensure that all employees are adequately trained and have the necessary skills for the post. Managers may also require training in people management skills as their own management style may create a stressful environment for their employees.

The Board provides a range of training and employee development opportunities in order to assist all employees through the provision of knowledge, skills and experience. Discussion should be undertaken between employees and line managers about the relevance and availability of these opportunities.

Occupational Health

The Board has provided professional health support through the provision of South Ayrshire Council's Occupational Health Service.

The Occupational Health Team will play a major role in advising on the development of positive initiatives that are aimed at promoting good health amongst employees. They will achieve this by working closely with South Ayrshire Council's Corporate Human Resources Team and the Board's Personnel Representatives to identify actions required.

Health and Safety

The Health and Safety Group will be happy to provide advice and guidance on this issue including some of the practical solutions required, for example, proposed changes to an employee's physical work environment.

Managing Change

There are specific procedures in place to support employees during any period of redeployment as a result of *Managing Change*. For more information please refer to the *Managing Change Policy*.

Appendix 1 – HSE Management Standards

Health and Safety Executive **Management Standards for Tackling Work Related Stress**

The Management Standards

DEMANDS

Includes issues like workload, work patterns, and the work environment

The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs; and
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- The organisation provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work;
- People's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands;
- Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees; and
- Employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

CONTROL

How much say the person has in the way they do their work

The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work; and
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- Where possible, employees have control over their pace of work;
- Employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work;
- Where possible, employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work;
- The organisation encourages employees to develop their skills;
- Employees have a say over when breaks can be taken; and
- Employees are consulted over their work patterns.

SUPPORT

Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues

The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors; and
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- The organisation has policies and procedures to adequately support employees;
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff;
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues;
- Employees know what support is available and how and when to access it;
- Employees know how to access the required resources to do their job; and
- Employees receive regular and constructive feedback.

RELATIONSHIPS

Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour

The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours e.g., bullying at work; and
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- The organisation promotes positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness;
- Employees share information relevant to their work;
- The organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour;

- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour; and
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

ROLE

Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles

The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- The organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the different requirements it places upon employees are compatible;
- The organisation provides information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities;
- The organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon employees are clear; and
- Systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

CHANGE

How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation

The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change; and
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- The organisation provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes;
- The organisation ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals;
- Employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs. If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs;

- Employees are aware of timetables for changes;
- Employees have access to relevant support during changes.