

Stress management



Stress affects employers as well as employees. It can cause illness and absenteeism. It can also be the cause of bad business decisions, poor workplace relations and loss of productivity.

This briefing covers the following points:

- The cost of ignoring stress.
- How to recognise stress.
- The major causes of workplace stress, and what to do about them.
- Relaxation techniques.

1 The cost of stress

Every day, over a quarter of a million people in the UK take time off because of stress.

It is believed to be responsible for up to 40 per cent of all absences from work and can reduce employee performance by up to 70 per cent.

1.1 High levels of workplace stress are likely to result in high levels of **employee turnover**.

- Continuous employee turnover will disrupt business and reduce productivity.
- It will also increase costs (for example, on recruitment and training).

1.2 Employees who are under stress make poor **decisions**.

- They are more likely to make casual errors.
- They may also apply faulty judgement to more important matters (for example, contract negotiations).

1.3 Workplace **relations** and customer service may deteriorate.

- Employees are likely to be more irritable and less tolerant.

1.4 Overall, where stress is a problem, **productivity** will be lower.

- For example, employees may miss deadlines, or even ignore them.

Pressure is a part of getting any job done. Many people thrive on pressure, up to a point. But when pressure becomes stress, it is a problem management needs to address.

2 Recognising stress

The sooner you recognise excessive stress, the sooner you can do something about it.

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2.1 Train your employees to look out for the **symptoms** of serious stress in themselves and their colleagues.

- Make sure they know you are prepared to discuss problems, so they bring them to your attention.

2.2 Individuals may find they **cannot cope** with their workloads.

- They may constantly feel rushed and unable to concentrate.
- They may not be able to switch off from work, or feel tired all the time.
- In the worst cases, they may dread coming in to work at all.

2.3 You may notice behavioural **changes**, even though the employees concerned may not be aware of them.

- Employees under stress are likely to lose their sense of humour and become moody and irritable.
- The pattern of their working days may change.
- The standard of their work may suddenly drop.
- They may start taking more sick leave.

►The Health and Safety Executive publishes a free guide called 'Work-related stress' (01787 881165 or www.hse.gov.uk/pubns).

2.4 Employees under stress may show signs of **physical illness**.

- They may complain of nausea, frequent headaches and migraines or other unexplained aches and pains.
- They may admit to sleeping badly.
- They may seem jumpy, or you may notice they are shaky or trembling.

2.5 People suffering from stress may experience longer-term **serious illness**.

- Stress has been linked to asthma, high blood pressure, heart disease, ulcers, strokes and even cancer.
- Stress can cause mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, and may even lead to suicide. Visit the Mental Health Foundation website at www.mentalhealth.org.uk for free booklets and links to other sources of help.

“An effective way to reduce stress is to give employees greater control over their work activities. Listen to their concerns and where possible take action. A caring and supportive approach will benefit both the individual and the company.”
Carole Spiers, Carole Spiers Associates

Tough at the top

Owner managers and directors often find their positions lonely and isolating, which itself can cause stress.

- A** There is often little support in **decision-making**.
 Employees often expect the boss to know exactly what to do.
- Decision-making is more stressful if there is no-one to share responsibility should things go wrong.
 - Discussing work-related or personal problems with employees may feel inappropriate, leading to further feelings of isolation.
- B** Try finding ways to **talk**.
- Create an informal group of colleagues who work at the same level in other companies. They will probably be just as keen to discuss their challenges at work as you.
- C** Consider bringing in **outside help**.
- A mentor (or executive coach) could help you cope with the pressures of running a business. A mentor could also help you sort out priorities and long-term goals and assist in managing change within your company.
 - Most Business Gateways offer mentoring.

3 Pressure of work

A common cause of workplace stress is taking on (or being expected to take on) too much work.

3.1 Giving employees unrealistic **targets** can result in a drop in morale and a corresponding loss of productivity.

- It is counterproductive to expect employees to meet unreasonable deadlines on a continuous basis.
- Poor instructions and lack of planning and prioritising may also cause stress, particularly when combined with a heavy workload (see **Managing your time**).
- Employees may over-estimate their own capacity for work, in an attempt to please or impress. They could end up producing far less than they would have done with a more modest target in the first place.

3.2 Management action can resolve many of these difficulties.

- Ensure employees understand the long-term goals and objectives of their jobs.

- Ensure targets are challenging but realistic.
- Make sure employees do not take on too much work. Encourage delegation wherever possible.
- Provide training in time management, if necessary.
Encourage employees to prioritise and tackle the most important tasks first.
- Cut back on time-wasting activities, such as over-long meetings.

4 Long hours

In order to get the job done, it may sometimes be necessary for employees to come in early and leave late.

Spotting and tackling stress

The first step to dealing with stress is taking a systematic approach to identifying problems. You can then address the root causes of stress (see 3–7) and help the employees concerned.

- A** Conduct a **stress audit** of your business.
- Your audit should highlight actual and potential causes of stress such as bullying, a lack of support from managers or long hours.
 - The audit can be done by using questionnaires or by talking to staff, individually or in groups.
- B** **Stress-management training and seminars** may help individuals cope better with the pressures they face.
- C** **Counselling** is one method used to deal with stress problems – though it tends to be favoured by large companies.
- One-to-one stress counselling services can be found through the Employee Assistance Professional Association (0800 783 7616; www.eapa.org.uk) or the International Stress Management Association (07000 780430; www.isma.org.uk).
- D** The Health and Safety Executive has introduced **voluntary management standards** for work-related stress.
- These look at causes of stress and how to resolve them. Visit www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards.

4.1 Working in long sessions can adversely affect the **quality** and **quantity** of employees' work. (See **Working time and the minimum wage**).

- As employees become more tired, they find it more difficult to concentrate and perform.
- Tempers are more likely to fray.

4.2 Defuse these problems by encouraging employees to take regular **breaks**.

- Make sure they break for meals, rather than eating on the job.
- At least once a week, encourage employees to leave at a reasonable hour and do something in complete contrast to their work.

4.3 Encourage employees to take regular **short breaks**, in addition to longer holidays.

- The benefits of such breaks extend throughout the year.
- They are also much less disruptive, as they often do not require additional cover.

Longer holidays are also important, as they allow employees to wind down fully.

5 Management style

Problems with the boss, or another employee, are a major cause of workplace stress.

5.1 Behaviour which is bullying or **aggressive**, from whatever source, will certainly cause employee stress.

- Bosses who make a point of humiliating their employees in public are likely to lose the respect and co-operation of their workforce. They could also lay themselves open to legal action.
- Bosses who allow subordinates to humiliate other employees run the same risks.
- What one person sees as playful or joking behaviour may be viewed by another as harassment. (See **Discrimination**).

5.2 **Ineffective** management can also put employees under serious stress. (See **Leadership**).

- Reluctance to address known problem areas is likely to cause a high level of anxiety amongst employees.
- Reluctance to deal with problem employees can be even more destructive.

“Even if people enjoy working long hours — because they are interested in the project — habitual long hours can lead to lower productivity and creativity.”

Liz Morrison,
Tactics
Management
Consultants

“While learning to relax is a useful means of reducing stress in the short term, longer-term benefits can usually only be achieved by a change in attitude. Encourage people to reassess their working patterns, and to become more aware of their emotional well-being.”

Ruth Lesirge,
Mental Health
Foundation

- Failure to establish clear targets and priorities for individual employees can leave them floundering in a sea of conflicting responsibilities.

5.3 Managers should establish a **style** of working behaviour that is appropriate and productive.

- Look for ways to give employees more control and autonomy over their work. Ask for input, ideas and opinions.
- Rule by reward, not punishment. Aim to make employees understand their work is valued and appreciated.
- Review performance regularly, so employees know how well they are doing.
- Operate an open door policy, and ensure employees know they can approach you with their problems.
- Do not drop people in at the deep end. Offer training, help, advice and support so they can fulfil their roles more effectively.

See **Performance appraisals**.

5.4 Take positive steps to avoid a **long hours** culture.

- For example, the directors of a business may choose to work long hours. They have an obvious long-term incentive. But other employees should not be made to feel guilty for leaving on time.

6 Lack of communication

In times of change, employees who do not know what is happening to them or the company cannot work effectively.

The answer is to improve communications.

6.1 Any significant **change** in the way the business is run can create stress.

- For example, the appointment of a new manager. See **Managing change**.

6.2 **Tell** employees what is going on in the organisation, so they feel more secure.

- Let them know the reasons for changes which may affect them.
- Actively encourage a free flow of ideas and feedback in order to get people involved and feeling motivated.
- Arrange meetings to discuss new projects, so everyone knows what is happening and what is expected of them.
- Discuss employees' long-term career plans.

Assuming it is true, make them feel they have a future within your organisation.

If possible, try to make sure there is someone in the workplace people feel they can bring their problems to, both informally and in confidence.

7 Problems at home

You cannot afford to ignore employees' personal problems, because of the impact they have in the workplace. A flexible approach is needed.

7.1 Bereavement obviously causes a high level of stress.

- Divorce, serious illness, moving house and serious financial problems also carry a high stress quotient.
- Holidays, problems with children and family arguments cause stress — though usually at a lower level.

7.2 A **sympathetic** approach will help employees get back to normal more rapidly.

- Be prepared to offer employees time off if necessary.
- Consider offering more flexible working arrangements.
- If necessary, encourage employees to seek professional help.

8 Learn to relax

There are many different ways to relax and wind down.

8.1 Adopting a healthy **lifestyle** provides a good base from which people can deal with the stress in their lives.

- Eating healthily and getting enough sleep are the foundations of a low-stress lifestyle.
- Yoga, meditation, the Alexander Technique and t'ai chi are examples of positive relaxation techniques.

8.2 Most people find it difficult to **switch off** from work, particularly after a tough day.

- Sport and other physical activities are good for relieving the build-up of stress.
- Getting a massage, going for a walk, listening to music or taking a hot bath can also help.

Expert contributors

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Further help

There are other Directors' Briefing titles that can help you. These briefings are referred to in the text by name.

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