

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS AT WORK

What is stress?

Stress can be a physical or mental response to demands and pressures faced in life. Stress can be caused by personal factors, or it may be work related.

It is not unusual to feel acute stress often as a result of demands and obligations, but it is, when stress becomes long term, that it impacts on an employee's attendance and/or performance.

The most common cause of stress is work-related stress with 79% of people stating they have experienced it. This is closely followed by those who report to have experienced financial stress.

How to identify when an employee is stressed

Physical symptoms like frequent headaches, fatigue, or other stress-related health issues, as well as emotional signs such as increased irritability, may be signs of a stressed employee. Decreased performance or motivation as well as higher than usual levels of absenteeism or staff turnover could be indicative of a stressed workforce.

Where changes in an employee's behaviour or attendance are noted, it is advisable to conduct regular checks with the employee and return to work interviews where the employee has been absent from work.

Regular discussions encourage open communication, allowing employees to outline their concerns at an early stage. It is also an opportunity for an employer to identify any patterns in absence or underlying

reason for the absence, such as stress related to the workplace.

Employer's duty of care

Employers have a duty of care to protect their employees from the risk of stress at work. This means employers should have safeguards in place to prevent or reduce work related stress to all employees.

Where an individual employee exhibits the signs of stress or confides that they feel stressed due to their work, an employer should consider completing an individual stress risk assessment with the employee, focusing on the cause of the stress and what can be done to control levels of stress at work. Frequently, focus is placed upon the workload of the employee, any ambiguity in their job role/responsibilities and whether the work environment could be improved.

Please see [here](#) Talking Toolkit: Preventing work-related stress for more information.

Grievances and Stress

Where an employee feels stressed at work, they may raise a grievance. This could happen before their employer notices any signs of stress or once an employer takes steps to begin managing any issues related to stress at work.

Where an employee raises a grievance, an employer should deal with any concerns in line with their policies and procedures or in accordance with the Acas Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures.

If any performance or absence management processes are ongoing, it may be appropriate to postpone this until the grievance have been addressed.

Where investigations into the employee's grievance identifies concerns regarding stress at work, an employer should consider what steps may be taken to address this. It would be advisable to complete an individual stress risk assessment (as above) to focus on risks to stress levels and aim to address these. It is likely that a collaborative approach, working with the employee to identify and discuss potential solutions is likely to work best. Options often include adjusted rest breaks or working hours, support prioritising tasks and changing responsibilities.

For more information on grievance procedures, please see our factsheet on 'Grievance Procedure at Work'.

Is stress an illness?

Stress itself is not classed as an illness however, stress can contribute to recognised mental and physical illness such as anxiety, depression, digestive issues such as IBS, hypertension and many others.

Is stress a disability?

Stress on its own does not amount to a disability for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010.

However, as stress can exacerbate or contribute to other illness which may meet the definition, the Equality Act 2010 should be carefully considered.

The Act defines a disability as an illness or condition which:

- Is long term – capable of lasting 12 months or more; and
- has a significant and negative impact on the employee's day to day life.

Where the symptoms of stress meet the definition above an employer must consider reasonable adjustments to ensure the employee is not at a disadvantage because of that illness.

Managing absence due to work related stress.

Where an employee is repeatedly absent, for short periods, or is on long term sick due to work related stress, an employer may wish to consider what options are available to them.

If absence is short term, but repeated, an employer may commence an absence management process. Typically, an absence management process consists of a series of meeting with the employee to discuss:

- The effect of the pattern of absences on the employee's colleagues, department and the employer's business.
- The likelihood of continuing absences and the impact they may have.
- Whether there are changes to the employee's job or redeployment opportunities that would assist in attendance or reduce the effect on colleagues or on the employer's business.
- Whether the employee has a disability and, if so, whether there are any reasonable adjustments that could be made.

This type of meeting may be formal or informal. Employers should check any staff handbook or documented policy to make sure they are following the correct procedure.

It may be the outcome of such a meeting is a direction that absence levels have to be improved and that failure by the employee to do so may result in more formal meetings and/or disciplinary action. Usually, a timescale is provided for any improvement to be achieved and some suggestions for improvement. What action is appropriate, will always be a matter of degree, depending on the specific circumstances.

For more information on this process, please see our 'Managing Short Term Absence' factsheet.

Where an employee is off long term (more than 4-6 weeks) it is usual that they are invited to a 'welfare meeting'. The purpose of the meeting is to find out more about the absence and what can be done to assist and support the employee returning to work. The meeting will often look at whether any support or adjustments can be offered by the employer.

It is sometimes the case that an employee does not recover sufficiently to be able to resume their role in the workplace. If/when an employer considers 'there is nothing more which can be done' they will need to arrange a capability/absence review meeting. This meeting is one at which all the relevant facts relating to the employee's continue absence are considered and where one of the outcomes of the meeting could be the termination of the employee's contract.

For more information on this process, please see our 'Managing Short Term Absence' factsheet.

Whilst this information contains general guidance it is not a substitute for legal advice. Please call the helpline for further information on any issue concerning work related stress.

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