

HEALTH MANAGEMENT INSIGHTS

Stress

For most people, pressure can make work exciting and challenging. However, continuous or excessive pressure can result in stress – a natural physiological reaction to demands that are too much to cope with.

Stress can become long-term or chronic and can lead to poor work performance, reduced motivation, absence and a decrease in energy and stamina. According to HSE statistics in 2020, stress, depression or anxiety accounted for **51%** of all work-related ill health cases and **55%** of all working days lost due to work-related ill health.

Key takeaways for HR professionals:

- > Stress can cause short and long term effects on both physical and emotional health, particularly if it is prolonged and not managed effectively. These include depression and anxiety disorders.
- > Stress has also been associated with an increase in physical health issues such as heart disease.
- > As a business, a commitment to managing stress at work and developing a strategy to deal with it is the most effective approach to take. This includes setting up a steering group, ensuring senior level buy-in, identifying risk factors and having a process in place to deal with stress.
- > Whilst wellbeing initiatives such as training on managing resilience or promoting positive lifestyle changes can be worthwhile, they won't stop some people becoming stressed. They can however assist individuals after the root cause of stress has been dealt with by maintaining good routines and other positive lifestyle factors.
- > Preventing stress by early intervention and designing stressors out of jobs are the most effective ways to tackle it.
- > Employers have a legal duty to look after the mental wellbeing of their workforce under health and safety legislation. In addition, if someone is identified as disabled under the Equality Act 2010, you may be obliged to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate them.

1. What are the symptoms of stress?

Not everyone manifests the same symptoms but below are some of the common physical and emotional signs of stress:

Physical

- > Fatigue
- > Tension headaches
- > Upset stomachs
- > Breathlessness
- > Sleep problems
- > Back aches
- > Appetite changes
- > Panic attacks
- > Muscle tension

Emotional

- > Tearfulness
- > Irritability
- > Hostility
- > Anxiety
- > Withdrawal
- > Low self esteem
- > Apathy
- > Loss of concentration

As many of these symptoms are associated with other medical conditions, it may take time for a definitive diagnosis to be made. Often it is other people who are the first to recognise that all is not well, rather than the individual themselves.



828,000 workers suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2019/20

Other signs of stress

People who suffer with stress often complain of feeling tired all the time. Their behaviour may be affected and you may notice some of the following changes:

- > Inattention, resulting in accidents or errors
- > Self focus and insensitivity to others, possibly verbally or physically abusive
- > Increased nicotine and alcohol consumption
- > Over-eating or loss of appetite
- > Work performance may be suffering
- > Increased number of absences or lateness
- > Working longer hours but productivity decreases
- > Expressing discontentment or sense of inadequacy
- > Inability to cope with routine activities



2. Minimising the risk of stress through self help

One of the ways people can manage stress is by making small changes to their lifestyle and behaviours. The tips below can help:

Be realistic



- > Don't set unreasonable goals
- > Don't let unreasonable demands go unchallenged
- > Understand what's important
- > Prioritise activities and don't overdo it
- > Don't put things off that can be reasonably done
- > Plan leisure time and ways to unwind
- > Remember nobody's perfect

Stay healthy at home



- > Get enough sleep
- > Eat properly, don't skip meals and have a balanced diet
- > Be active physically and have hobbies and interests
- > Be sensible with alcohol – it's a depressant
- > Nurture your relationships and share your problems
- > Be aware of the warning signs of stress
- > Use relaxation techniques, for example, taking a bath

Stay healthy at work



- > Take breaks
- > Use the full holiday entitlement
- > Negotiate realistic targets
- > Optimise your time management, for example, make a list, identify your best time of day etc.
- > Voice your concerns to your manager- your employer may ask you to complete a stress risk assessment to help explore your work concerns and identify solutions

If the risk of stress is continuous and not managed it can lead to exhaustion, which in turn can result in anxiety and depression.

Self help strategies



There are lots of websites that offer information and practical exercises to help relieve stress. A few recommendations are:

- > **Relaxation exercises** – [Mind website](#)
- > **Stress and anxiety app** – [NHS website](#)
- > **On-line Cognitive Behavioural Therapy courses** – [Living Life To The Full website](#)
- > **Mindfulness information** - [NHS website](#)

3. Managing stress in the workplace

Remember, encouraging healthy eating, exercise, smoking cessation, yoga etc can all support employees with their overall health, but they do not tackle the root cause of stress. It's important for managers to instigate regular conversations with their team about stress to understand the real causes.

Advice for Managers

- > If a team member is showing signs of stress, whether work-related or not, early support or short-term flexibility could protect their health and wellbeing and keep them in work.
- > Talking openly with your team members gives them an ideal opportunity to raise issues. It can be a great way to alleviate the problem and reduce stigma.
- > Reducing pressure and managing stress in the workplace has many benefits, including cost savings and improved productivity. As a manager you also have a legal duty to do so.
- > Consider reasonable adjustments for your team member such as flexible working or different duties if appropriate.
- > Consider signposting your team member to:
 - * your Employee Assistance Programme for advice (if you have one).
 - * a private counsellor. BACP – British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy offers a list of accredited therapists; <https://www.bacp.co.uk/>
 - * their GP who will be able to check their overall health and provide access to support and treatments as necessary. These may include face-to-face counselling, CBT, or even medication, particularly if they've developed any secondary health issues such as depression.



Remember...

Stress does not mean failure. It is nature's way of helping people survive.



17.9 million working days

were lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2019/20

Further sources of information

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/#.XFOxhbBCfAU>

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/wbk01.pdf>

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf>

Contact us to find out more.



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