



Managing and reducing workplace stress handbook

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Introduction

A certain amount of stress is a normal part of life and is something that we will all experience at some point. But like almost all things, in excess, work stress becomes chronic, which becomes overwhelming – and harmful to both physical and emotional health.

What is stress?

At the most basic level, stress is our body's natural 'fight or flight' response to pressures from a situation or life event. Stress is generally understood as the degree to which you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope as a result of pressures that feel unmanageable.

Stress is a response to a threat in a situation, whereas anxiety is a reaction to the stress.

If our stress response is activated repeatedly, or it persists over time, the effects of continued strain on the body may contribute to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety¹.

When long term stress, often referred to as chronic stress, comes as a result of a workplace, employers have a duty of care and responsibility to step in and assess the root of the problem.

While employers can't always avoid the tensions that occur on the job, they can take steps to identify, manage and reduce work-related stressors.



¹ [The Mayo Clinic](#)

Workplace stressors

Sometimes there may be no single source of work-related stress. It may be that a number of small things build up over time, or there may be a caustic mix of stressors combining in both work and personal life.

According to the World Health Organisation, stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances but is often made worse when employees feel they have little support from supervisors and colleagues, as well as little control over work processes².

Ensuring that employees at all levels are aware of the stress related hazards within the workplace, can help to manage these risks. These can be divided into work content and work context.

Work content stressors

- job content (for example role repetition, job stimulation and variety of roles)
- working hours (degree of flexibility, perceived flexibility, impact of shift design etc.)
- participation and control (participation in decision-making, perceived control over work processes, methods, and work environment etc).
- workload and work pace (work volumes, alignment with employee capabilities etc.)



² [The World Health Organisation, Occupational health: Stress at the workplace.](#)

Workplace stressors

Work context stressors

- employee's role in the organisation (role clarity, degree to which roles conflict etc.)
- career development, status and pay (job security, promotion opportunities, under- or over-promotion, perceived social value, consistency in performance evaluation systems, match of skills-to-role)
- interpersonal relationships (perceived support from managers and colleagues, strength of co-worker relationships, bullying/harassment, and violence, isolated or solitary work, etc.)
- organisational culture (communication, leadership, lack of behavioural rule, degree of clarity about organisational objectives, structures, and strategies)
- work-life balance (conflicting demands of work and home, degree of support for domestic problems at work, degree of support for work-related problems etc.)

- **Between 2019-2020, over 828,000 workers were suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety (new or longstanding)³.**
- **According to the Labour Force Survey, over 17.9 million working days were lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2019/20⁴.**

Whether an employer is a small business or a large corporation, the law requires all employers to assess the risk of work-related stress and to put steps in place to tackle those risks⁵.

³ [The Health and Safety Executive, Work-related stress, anxiety or depression statistics in Great Britain, 2020.](#)

⁴ [Labour Force Survey, Working days lost in Great Britain 2019/20.](#)

⁵ [Health and Safety Executive, Work-related stress and how to tackle it.](#)

Recognising the signs

While proactively identifying work-related risks and taking preventative measures should help minimise the risk of chronic stress for most staff, it may still affect some team members due to compounding factors outside of the workplace. Employers should be prepared to help and support a team member experiencing stress, and being able to accurately spot the signs that someone might be struggling is an important first step.

When it comes to work related stress, we all have a part to play.

It is important to never make assumptions, but signs that a team member may be stressed could include:

- changes in appetite
- an increase in poor coping mechanisms, such as smoking and/or increased alcohol consumption
- an increase in sickness absence and/or turning up late to work
- changes in the person's usual behaviour, mood or how they interact with colleagues
- changes in the standard of their work or focus on tasks
- appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn, or reduced interest in tasks they previously enjoyed

Recognising these signs of stress early on will help employers to manage potential stressors within the workplace, while working in partnership with any affected employees to support them in their daily role.



Taking steps to manage and reduce employee stress

Employers have a responsibility (both legally and morally) to ensure that the mental health and wellbeing of their workers is not being adversely affected by their roles. By developing and implementing framework to support and cultivate workplace cultures that understand the importance of workplace stress, employers can demonstrate their commitment to their team's mental health and wellbeing and maintain team performance and attendance.

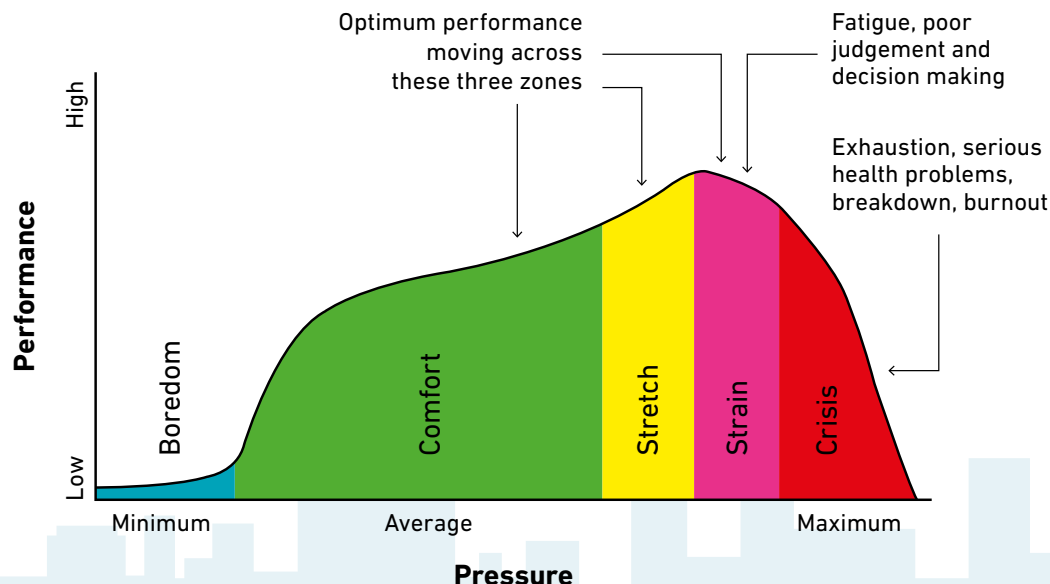
In the UK, employers legally have a 'duty of care' to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees while at work. This includes having to regularly assess the risks arising from hazards at work, including workplace stress.

The [Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\) Management Standards](#) set out guidance for employers which provides a good practice stress-risk assessment approach helping employers to identify, manage and mitigate stress at work. They cover six areas of work design which are closely linked with poor health, reduced productivity and increased accident and sickness absence rates. The Management Standards are: **demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.**

Mates in Mind recommends the HSE Management Standards approach to managing stress at work. The ['Tackling work-related stress using the HSE Management Standards approach'](#) guide provides an excellent resource to get you started.

Remember – we all have a role to play.

Stress Response Curve



Taking steps to manage and reduce employee stress

Steps to manage and reduce employee stress

- assess the risk and potential causes of stress within your organisation – for example, by looking at sickness absence records, staff turnover data, outputs from staff representation meetings, conducting specific stress-related surveys or focus groups
- use these to assess how the organisation is performing in relation to the six risk factors. This includes managers talking to their teams to identify stress 'hot spots'
- decide on improvement targets and action plans, in consultation with staff or their representatives.

Further mental health support

- Consider implementing regular mental health awareness training for staff and specialist training for managers on how to open up and manage mental health conversations with their team and equip them with the tools to identify and manage stress. For example, equip managers with the skills and confidence to talk about issues which may be causing stress at work and how to conduct 1-2-1 stress risk assessments.
- Utilise mental health awareness days to open up a conversation within the workplace about stress and encourage open, honest dialogue between teams on where they think the key stressors in their workload come from, and any ways they can suggest improvements.

The legal responsibility for employers

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities, as with any other hazard.

The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 requires an employer to take measures to control that risk.

Supporting your team

There are a number of ways you can support your team if you feel they may be struggling with workplace stress, here at Mates in Mind we suggest the following steps as a good place to start.

Start a conversation

Find an appropriate place and time, preferably on neutral ground to open up a conversation. Ask simple open-ended non-judgemental questions and let people explain in their own words how work might be affecting their mental health. Don't make assumptions and be as honest and clear as possible.

Provide support options

Once you have had an initial conversation, follow up with options for further support, such as counselling or advice. It is important that you ensure confidentiality – people need to be reassured that what they disclose will be held confidentially. Encourage people to seek further support and advice, such as speaking to their GP about available support from the NHS. If your organisation has an Employee Assistance Programme it may be able to arrange counselling.

Develop an action plan

Work with your employee to develop an individual action plan which identifies the signs of their mental health problem, triggers for stress, the possible impact on their work, who to contact in a crisis, and what support people need. The plan should include an agreed time to review the support measures to see if they're working.

Follow up

It is important that once you have started the conversation, you also follow up and maintain regular contact with the individual. This will let the person know they are not alone and forgotten about and also ensure you are doing everything you can to support your team.

Employers can also seek their own legal advice on their overall workplace approach, or in a specific case. Instating transparent policies for managing workplace mental health, and communicating this clearly to staff, will help organisations to ensure consistency and support the development of a positive workplace culture.

[Download the confidential support services help sheet.](#)

Developing and implementing your approach to workplace stress

Long term changes to manage workplace stress

Once you have identified who and how and individual may be at risk or exposed to work-stress risks in your company, you can implement a framework for a healthy workplace environment, which supports the mental health and wellbeing of your workforce. These actions can be as simple as employing a [regular all-employee stress risk assessment](#)⁶, through to an entire top to bottom culture change, aimed at building an environment of open, honest dialogue and communication between management and workers.

Workplace adjustments

- **Making support services clear and attainable** – Make sure your staff know about the support services available to them, such as an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) if your organisation has one
- **Train line managers and supervisors** in recognising the signs that someone might be struggling and what action they should take – as well as equipping managers with the skills and confidence to talk about issues which may be causing stress at work and how to conduct 1-2-1 stress risk assessments
- **Recognition and respect** – being respected and appreciated by others is one of the most fundamental human needs. As such, demonstrating regular recognition of your team will in turn, ensure they feel appreciated, which is one of the most important factors that increases motivation and satisfaction as well as health and wellbeing
- **Changes to individual's role** – Consider implementing flexible hours or change to start/finish time. For shift workers not working nights or splitting up their days off to break up the working week can also help
- **Change of workspace** – e.g. quieter, more/less busy, dividing screens. Perhaps consider a light-box or seat with more natural light for someone with seasonal depression
- **Develop a return-to-work policy in partnership with the individual** e.g. phased return – reduced hours gradually building up
- **Increased support** – Increased supervision or support from manager. For example, some people can take on too much so may need their manager to monitor their workload to prevent this and ensure they're working sensible hours
- **Consider expanding the available support for employees with a psychological first aid infrastructure.** For example, training a cohort of employees as mental health first aiders (underpinned by an appropriate and robust infrastructure)

Remember, once aware of health or disability information, employers have legal duties to consider making reasonable adjustments. They also have a general duty of care and responsibility for employee health and preventing personal injury. However, adjustments should be made to help all staff cope and recover, whether or not they have a formal diagnosis.

⁶ [Mates in Mind recommends using the HSE assessment](#)

Developing and implementing your approach to workplace stress

How you speak to your team matters

While having open and honest conversations about our mental health is a hugely important first step, the way we have these conversations is almost equally important. Self-esteem and feelings of anxiety can be exacerbated when people feel their abilities aren't being trusted. On the other hand employees don't want their manager to be distant when they're struggling.

Managers should continue to give employees work that is challenging and engaging but at the same time it's important to be there to offer support.

Introducing an employee stress risk assessment model into your business is an important first step towards supporting employee wellbeing.

This should enable you to identify work-related stress risks in your company and support you in meeting your duty of care in the identification and mitigation of work-related stress. These should involve employees in identifying issues through measures such as surveys, focus groups, working groups or 1-2-1 discussions for example – so collectively, you can identify the issues and the right solutions. We would suggest looking at this from a whole business level, a division/ department level and at an employee level – for example:

1. An all-employee wellbeing-stress risk assessment (ideally annual) which combines proven stress risk assessment models (such as the Health & Safety Executive's Management Standards Indicator Tool). This will help you identify the nature and frequency of exposures to work-stress. You may also want to include measures of individual health and organisational health to help you understand relationships between work-stress, the mental wellbeing of your employees and employee engagement.
2. A team/department stress-risk assessment model which will enable manager to identify work-related stressors at a team-macro level. You may also want to run focus or working group sessions with teams.
3. Introduce an individual stress-risk-assessment process to support managers in one-to-one discussions with members of their team.

Mates in Mind can support in the development, communication, delivery and analysis of any of these steps.

About Mates in Mind

Mates in Mind charity was born after the Health in Construction Leadership Group identified that the industry needed to address the silence surrounding mental ill health and organisations needed support to implement meaningful change.

Today, Mates in Mind supports over 400 organisations of all sizes, working together to improve mental health within their workplaces and across the wider sector.

What we do

Mates in Mind is a leading UK charity that enables UK organisations, of any size, to improve their workforces' mental health. We do this by providing the skills, clarity and confidence to employers on how to raise awareness, improve understanding and address the stigma that surrounds mental health.

Working alongside our partners, sector leaders and growing community of Supporters, our work is delivering effective change across construction, related industries and more widely. We bring insight and expertise that is improving the understanding of mental health across hundreds of workplaces.

Importantly, our approach enables individuals to understand how to better support themselves and others, when they should seek help and guidance and where they can get support.

Our vision

Mates in Mind had an ambitious goal – to reach 75% of the construction industry by 2025, giving people the skills, knowledge and understanding to improve mental wellbeing across the sector.

By reaching these targets, we aim too:

- Raise awareness and understanding of mental health and mental ill-health.
- Help people to understand how, when and where to get support.
- Break the silence and stigma through promoting cultures of positive wellbeing throughout the industry.

About Mates in Mind

Join Mates in Mind today and become part of the change

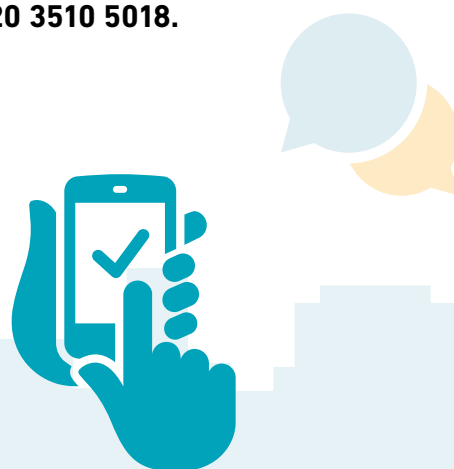
Mates in Mind Supporters have exclusive access to a range of resources, training and support, designed to help organisations implement their workplace mental health program across the organisation.

In addition to access to exclusive resources, new products and training programmes, Mates in Mind Supporters can:

- An annual assessment of your programme and recommendation report to help you identify any gaps in your approach and tailor your plan against best practice
- Access to our 'Start the Conversation' all-employee general mental health awareness programme
- Have a dedicated Support Manager to guide you through your organisation's mental wellbeing journey and offer you new resources as soon they come available.
- Access a suite of courses to ensure that all levels of management feel confident and equipped to fulfil their duties in looking after employee mental health
- Benefit from counselling through the National Counselling Society at a discounted rate, to help staff members who need extra support especially in current times.

Make this the year your organisation becomes part of the change and creates a mentally healthy environment within your workplace. By working together with Mates in Mind, you can be part of the change transforming the construction industry. Be a Mate. Be the Change.

To find out how to get involved, call our Support Team on 020 3510 5018. Alternatively, email the team at support@matesinmind.org





Be a mate.
Be the change.

Contact us

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