This booklet answers some common questions about work-related stress. It explains what it is, and what you can do about it. The advice is intended specifically for managers of small firms, or organisations employing up to 50 staff. If you employ more than 50 people, you may find our more detailed guide, Tackling work-related stress: A managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being, more useful. The booklet does not introduce any concepts that are different from good management. Our belief is that plain good management can reduce work-related stress where it is already occurring, and can prevent it in the first place.
What is stress?

Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure. It isn’t a disease. But if stress is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill health (eg depression, nervous breakdown, heart disease).

But stress can be a good thing, can’t it?

No! Being under pressure often improves performance. It can be a good thing. But when demands and pressures become excessive, they lead to stress. And it’s clear from the recognised symptoms of stress that it’s actually bad for you.

As an employer, is it my concern?

Yes. It’s your duty in law to make sure that your employees aren’t made ill by their work. And stress can make your employees ill. Also, action to reduce stress can be very cost-effective. The costs of stress to your organisation may show up as high staff turnover, an increase in sickness absence, reduced work performance, poor timekeeping and more customer complaints. Stress in one person can also lead to stress in staff who have to cover for their colleague. Also, employers who don’t take stress seriously may leave themselves open to compensation claims from employees who have suffered ill health from work-related stress. Fortunately, reducing stress need not cost you a lot of money.

Under health and safety law, what must I do about stress?

Where stress caused or made worse by work could lead to ill health, you must assess the risk. A risk assessment for stress involves:

- looking for pressures at work that could cause high and long-lasting levels of stress;
- deciding who might be harmed by these; and
- deciding whether you are doing enough to prevent that harm.
If necessary, you must then take reasonable steps to deal with those pressures. You must review the assessment whenever you think that it may no longer be valid. You should make sure that you involve your employees — including Trade Union safety representatives where they have been appointed — at every stage of the assessment process.

Q: Isn't stress also caused by problems outside work? Are you saying I have to do something about that?

A: You're not under a legal duty to prevent ill health caused by stress due to problems outside work, eg financial or domestic worries. But non-work problems can make it difficult for people to cope with the pressures of work, and their performance at work might suffer. So being understanding to staff in this position would be in your interests.

Q: Are some people more likely to suffer from stress than others?

A: We're all vulnerable to stress, depending on the pressure we're under at any given time: even people who are usually very hardy. As an employer, you're responsible for making sure that work doesn't make your employees ill. If you notice that someone is particularly vulnerable because of their circumstances, look at how their work is organised. See if there are ways to relieve the pressures so that they do not become excessive. However, unless you know otherwise, you could assume that all your employees are mentally capable of withstanding reasonable pressure from work.

Q: How do I recognise stress in a particular person?

A: Many of the outward signs of stress in individuals should be noticeable to managers and colleagues. Look in particular for changes in a person's mood or behaviour, such as deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness, absenteeism or reduced performance. Those suffering from stress may also smoke or drink alcohol more than usual or even turn to drugs. They might also complain about their health; for example they may get frequent headaches.
How do I find out if stress could be a problem for my firm or organisation?

First, take informal soundings to get some idea of what problems there might be: for example, see if your staff are disillusioned with their work. This may show up as an increase in absenteeism (especially frequent short spells of sickness), lateness, disciplinary problems or staff turnover, or a reduction in output or quality of product or service. There may, of course, be other reasons for these symptoms, but if they could be related to stress at work, get your staff to tell you about it by:

- talking and listening to them. You could base the discussion on the sort of pressures mentioned in the middle of this booklet;
- asking them to describe the three ‘best’ and the three ‘worst’ aspects of their job, and whether any of these put them under uncomfortable pressure.

You can use the information you collect to identify common and persistent pressures, and who might be harmed by them.

Several off-the-shelf questionnaires do the same kind of thing. These can be helpful but tend to be lengthy and may not ask the type of questions that are relevant to your organisation. Also, interpreting the findings may require specialist knowledge.

Remember to:

- respect the confidentiality of your staff;
- tell your staff what you plan to do with any information you collect;
- involve them, as much as possible, in subsequent decisions;
- involve safety representatives, if you have them, in your plans and decisions;
- if you employ five or more staff, record the important findings from your risk assessment, for example by writing them down;
- check from time to time that the situation hasn’t changed.

If I do find out that stress is, or could be, a problem, what can I do about it?

There’s no single best way of tackling work-related stress. What you do will depend on your working practices and the causes of the problem. But only providing training or help (or both) for sufferers won’t be enough – it won’t tackle the source of the problem! The boxes in the middle of this booklet show some of the pressures at work that might be relevant to smaller organisations, along with some suggestions about what to do.
WORK-RELATED STRESSORS

**Culture**

*Problems that can lead to stress*

- lack of communication and consultation
- a culture of blame when things go wrong, denial of potential problems
- an expectation that people will regularly work excessively long hours or take work home with them

*What management can do*

- provide opportunities for staff to contribute ideas, especially in planning and organising their own jobs
- introduce clear business objectives, good communication, and close employee involvement, particularly during periods of change
- be honest with yourself, set a good example, and listen to and respect others
- be approachable – create an atmosphere where people feel it is OK to talk to you about any problems they are having
- avoid encouraging people to work excessively long hours

**Demands of the job**

*Problems that can lead to stress*

- too much to do, too little time
- too little/too much training for the job
- boring or repetitive work, or too little to do
- the working environment

*What management can do*

- prioritise tasks, cut out unnecessary work, try to give warning of urgent or important jobs
- make sure individuals are matched to jobs, provide training for those who need more, increase the scope of jobs for those who are over-trained
- change the way jobs are done by moving people between jobs, giving individuals more responsibility, increasing the scope of the job, increasing the variety of tasks, giving a group of workers greater responsibility for effective performance of the group
- make sure other workplace hazards, such as noise, harmful substances and the threat of violence, are properly controlled
### Control

**Problems that can lead to stress**
- lack of control over work activities

**What management can do**
- give more control to staff by enabling them to plan their own work, make decisions about how that work should be completed and how problems should be tackled

### Role

**Problems that can lead to stress**
- staff feeling that the job requires them to behave in conflicting ways at the same time
- confusion about how everyone fits in

**What management can do**
- talk to people regularly to make sure that everyone is clear about what their job requires them to do
- make sure that everyone has clearly defined objectives and responsibilities linked to business objectives, and training on how everyone fits in

### Relationships

**Problems that can lead to stress**
- poor relationships with others
- bullying, racial or sexual harassment

**What management can do**
- provide training in interpersonal skills
- set up effective systems to prevent bullying and harassment (e.g., a policy, agreed grievance procedure and proper investigation of complaints)

### Support and the individual

**Problems that can lead to stress**
- lack of support from managers and co-workers
- not being able to balance the demands of work and life outside work

**What management can do**
- support and encourage staff, even when things go wrong
- encourage a healthy work-life balance
- see if there is scope for flexible work schedules (e.g., flexible working hours, working from home)
- take into account that everyone is different, and try to allocate work so that everyone is working in the way that helps them work best

### Change

**Problems that can lead to stress**
- uncertainty about what is happening
- fears about job security

**What management can do**
- ensure good communication with staff
- provide effective support for staff throughout the process