

# Factsheet



## How to Handle Stress in the Workplace

The IET Benevolent Fund

In the UK over 13 million working days are lost every year because of stress. Health and Safety Executive statistics suggest that work-related stress affects men and women equally and that people aged between 45 and retirement suffer more than younger people.

The HSE defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". Stress affects memory, concentration and learning. It is believed to trigger 70% of visits to doctors, and 85% of serious illnesses (HSE stress statistics).

Everyone faces pressure in their jobs and it helps to keep us motivated. Some people thrive under short term extra pressure, but if excessive and prolonged, a range of physical and emotional health problems can arise sometimes leading to changes in behaviour and even illness.

While stress can be triggered by sudden, unexpected pressures, it is often the result of a combination of factors which build up over time. Some people become so used to the symptoms that it is normal to them over time.

Stress affects people in different ways and what is stressful for one person, may not be for someone else. Effects often depend on personality and how the individual has learned to deal with pressure.

### **What causes of stress in the workplace?**

Typical triggers of work related stress include:

- Insufficient training and opportunities for learning new skills
- Poor work-life balance
- Lack of control over work
- Excessive pressures on time
- Too much or too little work or responsibility
- Confusion about duties and responsibilities
- Lack of variety and interest
- Organisational confusion, restructuring, changes in the job

- Uncertainty over the future.

Physical symptoms of stress include:

- increased susceptibility to colds and other infections
- headaches
- muscular tension
- backache and neckache
- excessive tiredness
- difficulty sleeping
- digestive problems
- raised heart rate
- increased sweating
- lower sex drive
- skin rashes
- blurred vision

### **Emotional and behavioural changes**

Stress can cause feelings or emotions such as inability to cope, short temperedness, lack of achievement, loss of appetite, excessive smoking and drinking, indecisiveness, problems concentrating, lack of control, poor relationships with colleagues or clients and loss of motivation and commitment.

### **Self Help**

It's impossible to completely avoid pressure at work, it's part of everyday life.

But it's important to learn techniques for managing it. If you feel that you are suffering from work-related stress try to deal with the problem as soon as possible. Follow the simple steps below to help identify how you can manage your stress:

Look closely at how you operate inside and outside your work environment. If you know what is causing the stress it will help you to deal with it better. Try to be detached, take a step back and look at the issues that are causing the stress.

Think about which situations stress you most and work out how you could handle these differently. You may need to be more assertive or stop yourself getting too emotionally involved in certain situations. Training to help develop certain skills and boost your confidence might help.

Are you in control of your time? One of the most important ways of reducing stress levels is good time management. Basic methods include prioritising tasks, delegating where possible and not taking on more than you can realistically handle. Completing one task before beginning another will also help you to feel more in control. Don't try to control things that are uncontrollable, instead, adjust your reaction.

If the cause of the stress is an organisational problem, such as lack of clarity with your job and responsibilities or heavy work load, talking to your line manager or human resources department can help.

Don't be too hard on yourself. Think about what you've achieved at the end of the day, instead of worrying about future work and remember to take each day as it comes.

Simple regular relaxation routines such as stretching and deep breathing will help to prevent tiredness and aching muscles. Ensure you get outside for a walk during your lunch break.

### **Lifestyle changes**

Think about what you do in your free-time. If you are suffering from workplace stress, developing interests outside work will help you to put your worklife back into balance and give you a sense of proportion. Taking up new activities will also help your social life, reducing the chances of your work worries taking over your home life.

Diet and exercise are the two simplest ways to reduce susceptibility to stress and alleviate symptoms.

Exercise burns adrenaline and produces helpful chemicals in your body and positive feelings. It also helps to distract from the causes of stress as well as helping to develop and maintain a healthy body which increases resistance.

Regular meals and a balanced, healthy diet are essential and can help maintain your energy. Group B vitamins and magnesium are important.

Learn to relax. You are more likely to sleep better and be less susceptible to stress-related aches and pains such as muscle pain and headaches. There are a range of techniques and classes which you can find out about through health shops and centres and, the internet, books and via local information resources such as the library.

Talk to close friends or relatives. Sharing your worries with people you know and trust can bring a fresh angle and help you to deal with the situation better.

Try to reduce alcohol and tobacco intake and other toxins which upset the body's balance and have long term harmful effects which could increase stress levels.

## **Sources of further help**

Other treatments include counselling, which may also help to identify the cause of more serious stress problems

Some people need to seek further help for work related stress, as they may be depressed or have an anxiety disorder which needs treatment. If the stress is causing serious health effects you should talk to your GP.

Remember that stress is an unavoidable part of everyone's working life. While you may benefit from the pressure of challenges you can equally be affected by excessive demands leading to feelings of lack of control. By being aware of the causes and symptoms of stress and how to handle it, you can make very positive changes to your working lifestyle and in turn your life outside.

Please contact the IET Connect Helpline on 0845 685 0685 for more information.