

Stress Management Guidance

1. What is Stress?

Stress is a reaction that individuals have to excessive pressure. When we feel that we are unable to cope it can lead to an unwanted physical, mental or emotional reaction, such as lowering of resistance to infection, feeling depressed or withdrawn, or difficulty with sleeping.

2. What Positive Effects Can Pressure Have?

We all benefit from a certain amount of pressure in our lives and finding and maintaining the optimum level for each individual is key to maximising performance and the successful engagement with an organisation.

There is no such thing as a pressure-free job and a reasonable amount of pressure within the workplace is both inevitable and desirable. Meeting new challenges and demands can be very positive, rewarding and motivating. Determining what is a suitable level of pressure for each individual is critical to maximising performance, productivity and staff morale.

3. What Negative Effects Can Stress Have?

When pressures become excessive and exceed an individual's ability to cope we may begin to experience stress. The short-term reactions to stress (i.e. stress response) may include a range of physical, behavioural and emotional signs such as:

1. Increased heart rate, sweating, trembling, headaches, backaches
2. Poor concentration, loss of interest, indecision, feelings of panic
3. Increased anxiety, irritability, frustration, poor concentration, reduced self-esteem, mood swings
4. Increased drinking, smoking, loss of appetite, sleeping difficulties

When pressures are intense or continue for a long time period then the long-term effects can result in ill health problems such as coronary heart disease, depression, stomach disorders, and high blood pressure.

4. Who is Likely to Suffer from the Adverse Effects of Stress?

It is not only managers or those in positions with a lot of responsibility that can be susceptible to the effects of stress.

Research has identified that the likelihood of experiencing stress is often greater when people do not have as much control over their working day and the demands being placed upon them.

Boredom resulting from too little pressure or a repetitive, monotonous job can be just as stressful for some people as excessive workloads and demands can be for others.

5. What Negative Effects Can Stress Have Upon The Organisation?

The high turnover of employees, poor job performance, low morale, poor quality control, high absenteeism, erratic timekeeping and an increase in the number of accidents can all occur as the result of stress within the workplace. This can be extremely costly, and can lead to a decrease in productivity as well as a decline in the quality of customer service.

6. What Are My Responsibilities as a Manager in Relation to Stress Management?

As a manager you should be committed to identifying and controlling the adverse effects of work-related stress across the organisation.

You should encourage open communication so that employees will be more likely to make you aware of any concerns they have in relation to the pressures or demands of their work.

7. What Can Cause or Lead to Stress Within the Work Place?

It is difficult to identify specific causes of stress (stressors), as they will vary depending on the individual concerned. Too much work, not enough work, repetitive or monotonous activities, and poor relationships at work are all examples of causative factors contributing to stress.

8. What About Issues Outside of Work?

Stressors outside of work include; financial problems, family/relationship issues, medical conditions and legal disputes. The interaction between stressors of the workplace and home must be taken into account. People experiencing stress through factors outside of the workplace do not simply switch off when they arrive at work and vice versa.

9. How Can I Identify That Someone May be Suffering from Stress?

People will react differently to stress. Changes in behaviour can provide an indication that someone is feeling stressed. For example, if a confident, assertive employee suddenly becomes more passive and prone to making mistakes they may be suffering from stress.

It is important that as a manager you know your employees well so that you will be in a position to detect such changes.

As a manager you should look out for early signs of stress so that you can act quickly to prevent it developing into a serious problem. Some of the key signs that may indicate that a problem is beginning to develop are listed below:

Staff Attitude & Behaviour	Employees working increasing hours for diminishing returns, Loss of motivation and commitment, Poor time keeping.
Work Performance	Reduced productivity, Increased error rate, Poor decision making, Deterioration in planning and control.
Sickness Absence	Increased sickness absence (particularly frequent, short periods).

10. What Can I Do as a Manager to Help Reduce Stress Within the Workplace?

You should make yourself aware of the characteristics of work that are more likely to cause excessive stress. Work-related stress has traditionally been associated with a mismatch between the demands of a particular job and the ability of the post-holder to fulfil those demands; normally due to work over-load, work under-load or activities associated with repetitive and monotonous work. By knowing your employees well you will be in a position to identify what the optimum level of pressure for each individual is, which will allow you to set appropriate and achievable challenges for people to ensure that the highest level of productivity is maintained.

As a manager you have responsibility for providing a suitable physical working environment, by ensuring that appropriate and adequate facilities are in place, physical hazards are identified and removed, working temperatures and lighting are appropriate and disturbing noises and distractions are controlled.

It is possible to plan tasks so that they are designed in a way that is less likely to cause stress. Lack of control has been identified as one of the main causes of stress and so where practical you should allow people to plan their own daily work schedule. Conducting regular reviews should help identify any potential problems.

It is your responsibility to ensure that employees are provided with adequate training and information to do their job effectively. Induction training is of critical importance and where people deal with customers or particular client groups they should be provided with relevant special training.

As a manager you should adopt an open, supportive management style based on our stated business values of support, respect and participation in decision making. The table below provides examples of good management practices that can help reduce stress within the workplace:

Organisational Culture

Strong leadership,
Clear objectives,
Effective communication,
Support for employees,
Employee participation in planned change,
Consistency of treatment.

Decision Making & Planning

Opportunities for employees to take part in decision making,
Flexibility regarding work demands,
Scope for varying working conditions.

Relationships at Work

Foster good relationships between managers and employees,
Effective systems for dealing with interpersonal conflict,
Training in interpersonal skills.

11. How would I Support an Employee who is Suffering from the Effects of Stress?

Where you identify that an employee is not coping effectively with the demands placed upon them you should act quickly to try and resolve this.

You should first of all have an informal discussion with the employee to check that all the stressors of the job have been identified and measures have been agreed and implemented to control the risks. If the stressors are more complicated you should assess and record the issues using the 'stress risk assessment form'.

Once complete you should then work with the employee to agree and implement measures for controlling the risks which might contribute to ill health.

Regular monitoring and reviewing is also important to ensure that the stressors have been either eliminated or reduced to a reasonable level.

In serious cases, where you are unable to resolve the issue you should contact the People Hub for advice or assistance.

You may find it appropriate, or in extreme cases necessary to refer the employee to Occupational Health for additional advice and support. It may be possible to organise short term independent counselling to employees who wish to receive it.

12. What responsibility do I have as an Employee for Managing Stress?

You should work with your managers to implement effective, positive measures for stress control and always make your manager aware of any concerns that you have.

You should have proper regard of your own skills and abilities and the pressures placed upon you and, where necessary, you should take appropriate action to control the onset of work-related stress using the 'ABC of Stress Control' as described below:

- Awareness – Be aware of the stressful characteristics of your work and the effects stress may have on you.
- Balance – Try to achieve a positive balance between the demands you experience in your family, working and social life.
- Control – If you experience demands which you believe are likely to exceed your capacity to cope take early, positive action to manage the pressure effectively.

13. What Coping Strategies Might I Use to Help Manage Any Excessive Pressure I Experience?

Manage your workload – Assess the demands your work places on you, prioritising important work.

Manage your time effectively – Set sensible, realistic goals and use your time wisely to achieve each target.

Establish a daily work routine – Where practical establish regular working practices incorporating short, frequent breaks to help keep you alert and effective over your working day.

Control long working hours – Avoid working excessively long hours over extensive periods of time; working excessive hours may become counterproductive in the long term.

Learn to relax – Regular periods of relaxation during short breaks from the daily routine of work are essential to help you manage workplace pressure effectively. Develop a method which is suitable for you and try to plan and take a holiday at appropriate intervals.

Enjoy a healthy diet – Always find time to eat a sensible, balanced diet and cut down on fatty foods or those which contain excessive sugar or salt.

Get enough sleep – Establish a regular sleeping pattern, which will help you maintain your energy and motivation to meet the challenges of work.

Take regular exercise – Regular exercise, particularly in a sport you enjoy, is an effective way to reduce physical and mental tension. (Always consult your doctor before you begin an exercise programme if you are over 40, or if you have any concern regarding your health.)

Plan leisure activities – Plan your leisure time and maintain a hobby or other interest outside work.

Avoid excessive alcohol or drugs – Never turn to alcohol or drugs as a substitute for effective measures for stress control.

14. What Should I Do if I Feel Unable to Cope with the Pressure I am Under?

First, you should discuss this with your manager so that you can try to work together to resolve the key causative issues involved by identifying the immediate and root causes and then formulating an action plan to reduce the level of stress you are experiencing.

If these measures have been discussed and implemented but you are continuing to feel under excessive stress then you should inform your manager who may refer you to an independent occupational health professional for confidential, independent assistance and advice.

15. Useful References

Stress Management Policy
Stress Risk Assessment Form
Employee Assistance Programme
Wellbeing+

A number of development resources about stress are available on My Learning Centre and OU Knowhow, which can be accessed from the University's Intranet under the A to Z of websites.

STRESS RISK ASSESSMENTS PROCESS

