

Stress Management: Guidance for Managers

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Lewes District Council is committed to protecting the health, safety and welfare of its employees. The organisation recognises that stress can affect mental and physical health and is a health and safety matter which the organisation will address by identifying and reducing workplace stressors.

1.2 The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) draws a clear distinction between pressure, which can be a motivating factor, and stress, which can occur when pressure becomes excessive. The HSE defines stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”. Stress is a state, not an illness, and where stress lasts for only a short time there is usually no lasting effect. However, if the stress is sustained over a long period it can have a significant impact on physical and mental health, work performance and morale. The effects of stress in the workplace include increased absence, reduced morale, poor employee relations, a decline in work performance and efficiency, and higher staff turnover. Reducing and preventing work-related stress therefore brings clear benefits to the organisation as well as to employees.

1.3 A person experiences stress when they perceive that the demands of their work are greater than their ability to cope. Coping means balancing the demands and pressures placed on you (i.e. the job requirements) with your skills and knowledge (i.e. your capabilities). Stress can also result from having too few demands, as people will become bored, feel undervalued and lack recognition. If they feel they have little or no say over the work they do or how they do it, this may cause them stress.

2.0 Risk Assessment

2.1 Managers are responsible for assessing the risks arising from hazards at work, and this includes work-related stress. It is important to remember when assessing risk that everyone reacts to stress in different ways and some people are more susceptible to the effects of stress than others. It is better to identify if stress is a possible problem in the workplace and take action to reduce the risk than it is to wait for someone to be made ill and then try to reduce the impact. Managers need to take a lead role in identifying individuals, groups of employees or jobs that could be affected by stress and work to eliminate, minimise or reduce the risks working in conjunction with the Council's Health and Safety Officer.

3.0 Identifying stress

3.1 Employees have a duty to look after their own health and safety at work, and to draw problems to the attention of their managers, at an early stage.

However, managers should also be alert for signs of stress amongst their staff. The key indicator of stress may be a change from an employee's normal behaviour and/or appearance in the workplace. Identifying the signs of stress at an early stage increases the possibility that action can be taken to deal with the symptoms and the underlying causes, thus minimising the risk to the individual's health and well-being and the effects on the service area. There are a number of methods that can be used to help in identifying if stress is a problem. They will also help to identify the causes of stress.

- **Informal talks to staff**
You can try to find out the mood of individuals or the team. If people seem continually unhappy, are not themselves, or are not performing well, ask if there is a problem.
- **One to one/supervision meetings**
These offer an opportunity to have a discussion about work and to explore whether people in your team are experiencing excessive pressure.
- **Team meetings**
These can provide useful opportunities for team members to identify and share views on current issues that may be potential sources of pressure.
- **Sickness absence data**
High levels of sickness absence may indicate a potential problem. Investigate the reason for the absences. Stress related sickness absence is sometimes not reported in these terms, because people are often reluctant to admit to it.
- **Staff turnover'**
'Exit interviews' may highlight common reasons why people have decided to leave, and if work related stress was a factor.

3.2 Symptoms

Identifying the indications that someone may be suffering from stress is often difficult. Changes can occur over a period of time. Some common signs of stress include:

- Reduced performance
- Change in behaviour patterns
- Inability to meet deadlines
- Loss of motivation
- Poor concentration
- Tiredness or irritability
- Excessive drinking or smoking
- Physical decline and increased sickness absence
- Excessive mood changes or out of character behaviour
- Poor working relationships

4.0 Causes and how to manage

4.1 Stressors are the factors that can cause work related stress. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have identified six key factors that if not effectively managed are associated with poor health and wellbeing.

These are;

- The demands placed upon the employee
- The control they have over their activities
- The support available to the employee
- Working relationships within the team
- The employees role
- The management of change

The HSE's guidance on the prevention and management of stress is based on a set of 'management standards'. These define the characteristics of organisations where stress is being managed effectively.

5.0 HSE Management Standards

5.1 Demands

Employees can become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do.

What you can do

- Pay attention to the way the job is designed, training needs and whether it is possible for employees to work more flexible hours
- Hold regular team meetings to discuss the anticipated workload and to deal with any planned absences
- Hold regular meetings/supervision with individuals to discuss their workload and any anticipated challenges
- Provide training to help staff prioritise, or information on how they can seek help if they have conflicting priorities
- Consider changes to start and finish times to help employees to cope with external pressures (e.g. child care, poor commuting routes, etc.)
- Ensure your risk assessments for physical hazards and risks are up to date
- Encourage staff to attend personal safety training and training that will help them deal with and defuse difficult situations
- Monitor and review the workload and working hours of staff, to ensure that neither becomes excessive
- Assess and manage poor performance and attendance effectively in order to prevent unnecessary pressures on colleagues
- Provide sufficient challenge/pressure to keep staff motivated and interested in their work

- Attend to the physical environment – take steps to reduce unwanted distraction, disturbance, noise levels, where possible

5.2 Control

Employees can feel dissatisfied and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work.

What you can do

- Think about how employees are actively involved in decision making, the contribution made by teams and how reviewing performance can help identify strengths and weaknesses
- Agree ways of enabling staff to have a say over the way their work is organised and undertaken, e.g. through project meetings, one-to-ones, performance reviews
- Hold regular discussions during the planning stage of projects to talk about the anticipated output and methods of working. Provide opportunities for discussions and input
- Encourage staff to participate in decision-making
- Empower people to make decisions about the way they work

5.3 Relationships

'Relationships' - Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour. Relationships are central to our experience of being at work. How well we get on with our manager, colleagues or people we manage can have a huge impact on our physical and mental wellbeing. A failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying.

What you can do

- Good, supportive working relationships have a protective effect against stress. Managers should be supportive and employees are encouraged to be supportive of each other. Poor working relationships have the opposite effect and can be a cause of stress
- Implement the grievance and disciplinary procedure for dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- Build teams which have the right blend of expertise and experience
- Encourage staff to attend training that will help them deal with and defuse difficult situations where appropriate
- Encourage good communication and provide appropriate training to aid skill development
- Discuss how individuals work together and how they can build positive relationships
- Identify ways to celebrate success
- Encourage good, honest, open communication within the team
- Provide support for staff who work at home

- Create a culture where colleagues trust and encourage each other

5.4 Change

'Change' - How departmental/corporate change is managed and communicated. Change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to huge uncertainty and insecurity.

What you can do

- Effective communication reduces unnecessary uncertainty and prevents stress, especially during organisational change. Plan ahead so change is well organised and is not rushed, or appears to be sudden. Consult with employees so they have a real input, and work together to solve problems
- Ensure all staff are aware of why the change is happening
- Define and explain the key steps of the change. Ensure employee consultation and support is a key element of the programme
- Agree methods of communication (e.g. intranet, meetings, letters, e-mail, feedback forums)
- Ensure that staff are aware of the impact of the change on their jobs
- Provide a system to enable staff to comment and ask questions before, during and after the change
- Have an 'open door' policy to help staff who want to talk to their managers about their concerns

5.5 Role

Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles. Stress often thrives where people don't fully understand their role in a team, where they are unclear about their job description, or about the overall goals of the organisation. Employees will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them.

What you can do

- Review the induction process, work out an accurate job description and maintain a close link between individual targets and organisational goals
- Share team/department targets and objectives to help clarify team and individual role
- Agree specific standards of performance for jobs and individual tasks and review periodically
- Hold regular one-to-one meetings to ensure that individuals are clear about their role and know what is planned for the coming months
- Develop suitable induction arrangements for new staff – make sure all members of the team understand the role and responsibilities of the new recruit

5.6 Support

'Support' – Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues. Levels of sickness absence often rise if employees feel they cannot talk to managers about issues that are troubling them.

What you can do

- Give employees the opportunity to talk about the issues causing stress, provide a sympathetic ear and keep them informed
- Be clear about the role, responsibilities and expectations of staff
- Ensure that staff receive sufficient training to undertake the core functions of their job
- Identify an individual's training and development needs, especially when an employee is taking on a new or changed role
- Have an open and understanding attitude to what people say about the pressures of their work and look for signs of stress
- Hold regular one-to-ones to talk about any emerging issues or pressures
- Hold regular team meetings to discuss service area pressures
- Ask how employees would like to access managerial support such as 'open door' policies, agreed times when managers are able to discuss emerging pressures, coffee break and chat
- Talk about the support which can be provided if someone is experiencing problems outside of work such as flexible working, occupational health referral and HR advice
- Use constructive feedback in circumstances when change is required
- Provide constructive, supportive advice during performance appraisals
- Enable phased return to work after long-term sickness absence
- Hold regular team meetings
- Deal sensitively with staff experiencing problems outside work

6.0 Managing meetings where an individual is feeling stressed

6.1 Staff may be subject to pressures both inside and outside the workplace, and it is a priority where stress is suspected to identify the source of the employee's stress, and establish whether work-related issues are involved. In some cases the stress may be a combination of work and personal pressures.

6.2 Early intervention and action will reduce the likelihood of the individual becoming ill and needing to take sick leave, and will increase the likelihood of a successful outcome for both the individual and the department. If a member of staff is thought to be suffering from stress or at risk of stress, the line manager should arrange to meet the person to discuss the issues on a confidential basis with a view to identifying and addressing the causes of workplace stress. The individual may be accompanied by a work colleague or union representative, if they choose.

6.3 Individuals are more willing to admit that they are suffering from stress if they can expect to be dealt with sympathetically.

At the meeting the manager should:

- Provide a supportive environment in which the staff member feels able to discuss problems and worries
- Identify in discussion with the staff member the source(s) of stress
- Agree a plan of action both to relieve stress points in the short term (e.g. by providing additional support/training, or reassigning a particular piece of work), and to address the underlying causes in the longer term
- Where it is not possible to remove the stressors, assist the staff member to develop more effective coping strategies, for example through training, or counselling support
- Assess the impact of any special arrangements on other staff to ensure that they are not themselves subjected to undue stress as a consequence
- Monitor and review the situation regularly with the individual, and adjust the action plan as required

6.4 When discussing work-related stress managers should consider the following:

- Make sure that sufficient time is spent clarifying what the problem is. It is important to be as specific as possible as this will help in the development of effective solutions
- Ask how this area of work activity became a problem? What happened? Has it always been a problem? If not, what has changed?
- What would be the mechanisms for introducing suggested improvements? Who will take the work forward? Who needs to be involved? What are the first steps? How will you monitor progress?
- Is the problem a one-off? Is an intervention really required? If it is, how will suggested solutions solve identified problems?
- It is important not to take on too many actions. You may need to prioritise
- Contact HR and the Council's Health and Safety Officer for support and guidance

6.5 Stress caused by circumstances outside of work

Where an employee is facing problems in his or her personal life, these problems may affect the employee's ability to work effectively. If work performance is affected this will need to be addressed with the employee. In such cases, it may be helpful to discuss what help can be made available (for example counselling service, special leave, temporary adjustments to duties,) to enable the employee to return to effective working.

7.0 Sickness Absence

7.1 Increased or more frequent absence may indicate an underlying stress problem. Managers should follow the attendance management policy and use the opportunity of return-to-work interviews to discuss stress-related problems when appropriate. Where an absence is stress-related, an early referral to Occupational Health is essential. Managers should always seek advice from HR in cases of stress, anxiety and/or depression.

7.2 It is important to manage an employee's return to work after a stress-related absence, whether or not it was related to work. A meeting should be held prior to return or on the first day back following absence to discuss any intervention, adjustment to workload responsibilities or additional support which may be required.