

Guidance on the management of work related stress

What causes work-related stress?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management Standards identify six key areas of work design (below) that, if not properly managed, can lead to stress at work. The University uses these standards both within the Staff Survey and within stress assessments conducted by managers, in order to identify problem areas.

- Demands – such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
- Control – such as how much say the person has in the way they do their work.
- Support – such as the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, management and colleagues.
- Relationships – such as promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
- Role – such as whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.
- Change – such as how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Managers can use these as a framework to identify possible causes of stress and to identify reasonable actions to minimise stress. It may not always be possible to eliminate the causes of stress, but the way in which situations are handled can make a difference.

What steps can you take as a manager to prevent / reduce work-related stress?

- monitor workloads and review job descriptions to ensure staff are not overloaded;
- ensure staff get the training they need to do their job;
- monitor working hours – actively discourage a long hours culture;
- monitor holidays – make sure staff are taking their allowance;
- do not tolerate any form of bullying or harassment;
- deal with any team conflict as quickly as possible – don't let issues fester or assume they'll go away – seek help from your HR Partner;
- when planning organisational change communicate clearly and ensure staff are fully involved;
- management practices and style often contribute to work related stress – review your practice using the [HSE's Stress Management Competency Indicator Tool](#).
- cultivate a happy team – staff who are motivated, engaged, feeling good and functioning well are less likely to feel stressed. To help you with this, leadership coaching and training is available - contact Staff Learning and Development to discuss your needs;
- treat reported concerns seriously, sensitively and confidentially – staff are often reluctant to report stress for fear that it may be seen as a sign of weakness, or that they are making trouble or because they think nothing will be done about it;
- Use the stress assessment tool to help you identify problem areas.

When and how to carry out stress assessments

The [Stress Assessment tool](#) provides a framework to help managers analyse a situation using the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management Standards - six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, can lead to stress at work. The purpose is to identify reasonable steps which could be taken to reduce stress.

The Stress Assessment tool can be used either:

- as an aid to a discussion with a member of staff or a team, to help identify why they are feeling stressed;
- as an aid to think through a situation and the potential risks of stress.

It can be completed by the manager or by staff as a self-assessment tool.

Examples of the situations in which it might be useful include:

- If you are introducing changes in the workplace;
- If an individual raises concerns about their work or health;
- If the manager has concerns about one or more of their team;
- If there is conflict which is causing stress;
- If a member of staff is returning to work after a period of sickness absence due to stress;
- There may be occasions where the Occupational Health Service or Human Resources suggest that an assessment is carried out.

The assessment is purely a tool to assist managers and completed forms should be kept on file locally.

What are the symptoms of stress?

The following changes in behaviour may indicate stress:

- Physical symptoms – tiredness; indigestion and nausea; headaches; aching muscles; or palpitations.
- Mentally – more indecisive; finding it hard to concentrate; loss of memory; feelings of inadequacy; or low self-esteem.
- Emotionally – getting irritable or angry; anxious; hypersensitive; or feeling drained and listless.
- Behavioural – noticeable changes in performance; presenteeism; changes in patterns of attendance; recurrent short-term absences or long-term absence.

What to do if you identify or suspect that a member of staff is stressed

- Find a quiet space and time to talk to them.
- Explain the reason for the discussion – be objective and factual.
- Show concern and be non-judgmental. Listen to their concerns.
- Staff are often reluctant to report stress for fear that it may be seen as a sign of weakness, or that they are making trouble or because they think nothing will be done about it, - so give them the opportunity to come back to you to discuss this further at another time.
- Explore what might be done to improve the situation – consider whether there are any reasonable actions which could alleviate the stress, if necessary arrange to discuss this further when you've had a chance to consider it more. Sometimes minor adjustments to the way an individual works can make a significant difference.
- Ensure they are aware of services which can provide confidential support to them such as the Occupational Health Service, the Counselling Service or their own GP, and that they can refer themselves if they wish
- Consider whether you should refer them to the [Occupational Health Service](#) or the [Counselling Service](#) if appropriate. If they are off sick they must be referred to Occupational Health after 4 weeks or earlier if appropriate.
- Seek advice from your HR Partner.

What to do if a member of staff is off sick due to stress

If the member of staff indicates verbally or through their sickness self-certification form or their GP Fit Note that their absence is due to stress or any other related condition, it is important to discuss this with them as soon as possible.

The aim of the discussion is to establish the perceived causes of their stress, which may or may not be work-related. Stress due to personal reasons may still have an impact on the individual's ability to work. You should discuss what reasonable work-related actions might be taken to reduce further stress. The stress

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assessment tool can assist you. It can be used to guide you through the discussion. You should make a note of the causes raised by the member of staff and any actions you agree to take. You should seek advice from your HR Partner.

Sometimes minor adjustments to the way situations are handled, or the way individual's work, can make a significant difference. For example it may not be possible to alter the demands of the role, but sometimes minor adjustments can give the individual more of a sense of control over the way in which they work, or the methods of communication can make a difference to working relationships.

After discussion it may also be appropriate to refer the individual to the [Occupational Health Service](#). In all cases of this nature, if an early referral to Occupational Health hasn't already been made for any reason, then this should be arranged as soon as possible after 4 weeks of sickness absence.

Ensure that the individual is aware of the [Counselling Service](#), as they can provide support to staff in managing their stress. The Counselling Service also runs a wide range of workshops to help staff manage stress and improve their wellbeing. Staff can self-refer to these services.

On their return to work, as always, it is important to hold a thorough 'return to work interview' – [guidance](#) is available to assist you.

Links to useful guidance

[The University Counselling Service.](#)

The Health and Safety Executive – www.hse.gov.uk/stress/furtheradvice/wrs.htm

NHS - www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/understanding-stress.aspx

[University wellbeing website](#)