

EMPLOYER GUIDE

# Managing Work-Related Stress

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A practical guide to identifying workplace stress risks, taking action and keeping a clear record of what happens next.

## What is work-related stress?

Work-related stress can arise when pressures or demands at work become excessive or difficult to cope with. Pressure is not automatically harmful. The concern is when work creates sustained or excessive pressure that may affect health.

**A stress risk assessment is not about diagnosing employees. It is about identifying workplace factors that could cause harm and deciding what needs to change.**

### Focus on the work

Consider how work is designed and organised, including workload, working patterns, support, relationships, role clarity and organisational change.

### Consider who may be affected

Different people may respond differently to the same pressure. The assessment should still focus on risks arising from work rather than trying to interpret individual psychology.

### Use evidence

Consult employees and consider relevant information already available to the organisation. A single survey or anecdote rarely gives the full picture.

### Act and review

Where risks are identified, record reasonable actions, assign responsibility and check whether those actions have reduced the risk.

# The six HSE Management Standards

The Health and Safety Executive identifies six areas of work design associated with work-related stress when they are not managed properly.

D

## **Demands**

Workload, work patterns and the working environment. Are expectations realistic and are there enough time and resources?

C

## **Control**

How much say employees have over the way they work, including tasks, pace and working arrangements where reasonably possible.

S

## **Support**

The practical help, information and encouragement available from managers and colleagues.

R

## **Relationships**

How people are treated at work, including conflict, bullying, harassment and unacceptable behaviour.

R

## **Role**

Whether employees understand their responsibilities, priorities and reporting lines, without conflicting expectations.

C

## **Change**

How organisational change is planned, communicated and managed, including consultation and support.

**Remember:** these areas often overlap. A workload problem may also involve limited control or poor support. Look at the job and working environment as a whole.

## Why employers need to act

Employers have a legal duty to assess and manage risks to health and safety arising from work, including work-related stress.

HSE expects employers to identify potential risks from stress and take action to manage them. Where an organisation employs five or more people, the significant findings of its risk assessment must be recorded.

Smaller employers still have to assess and manage the risk, even though the same recording requirement does not apply.

HSE 2024/25

# 22.1m

working days lost to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in Great Britain.

HSE Labour Force Survey estimate for 2024/25.

### A useful record should show:

- what risk or concern was identified
- who may be affected
- what controls were already in place
- what further action was agreed
- who is responsible and by when
- when and how the position will be reviewed

**A risk assessment is useful when it shows what the organisation knew, what it decided to do, and what happened next.**

## How to identify workplace stress risks

A good assessment uses more than one source of information. The aim is to understand where work may be creating harmful pressure and what may need to change.

### Talk to employees

Team discussions, individual concerns, employee representatives and other consultation can help explain what is happening and why.

### Use surveys carefully

Surveys can identify themes, but HSE advises that its Indicator Tool should not be used as the only source of data.

### Review workplace information

Look at absence, turnover, overtime, workload, resourcing, complaints, grievances, conflict and information arising during change.

### Look for patterns

Recurring concerns can point to a wider workplace problem. Avoid turning the assessment into an attempt to diagnose individual employees.

### Consultation matters

Employees often understand the practical causes of pressure in their work better than anyone else. Consultation can help identify underlying causes and workable solutions. Record the main themes and how employees will be kept informed.

**Data protection:** where information relates to identifiable individuals, record only what is necessary for the purpose and follow your organisation's data protection arrangements.

## When a risk is identified

Finding a risk is the starting point. The next question is what needs to change to reduce or control it.

1

### **Start with the underlying cause**

If excessive workload is the problem, focus on workload, priorities, staffing, deadlines or work design. A generic wellbeing activity does not remove a work-related cause.

2

### **Review existing controls**

Record what is already being done and whether those controls appear to be working. Do not assume an existing policy or process is effective simply because it exists.

3

### **Agree practical action**

Record the action, the person responsible, the priority, target date, how employees will be consulted or informed and how success will be checked.

4

### **Set a review point**

Actions should be revisited. The question is not only whether a task was completed, but whether the workplace risk reduced.

#### **Example: Demands**

Review workload, deadlines, staffing levels, work patterns or competing priorities.

#### **Example: Change**

Improve communication, consultation, timing, training and access to support during organisational change.

## Record, communicate and review

A stress risk assessment should create a clear record of what was identified, what was decided and whether the action taken made a difference.

### Keep a useful record

- risk or concern identified
- people or groups who may be affected
- evidence considered
- existing controls
- further actions agreed
- responsible person
- target and review dates
- progress and outcomes

### Communicate findings

Employees and relevant representatives should understand the main findings that affect them and what action is being taken. Communication also gives people an opportunity to raise further information.

### Review when needed

Review when circumstances change, new concerns arise, controls may no longer be effective, and at suitable planned intervals.

### At review, ask:

- Was the action completed?
- Has the workplace pressure reduced?
- What evidence supports that conclusion?
- Are employees reporting improvement?
- Has anything changed?
- Is further action needed?

**Completion is not the same as effectiveness. Review the outcome, not just the task list.**

## Supporting an individual employee

Supporting an individual employee and managing organisational stress risk are related, but they are not the same process.

### Individual support

#### When someone raises a concern

Speak privately, listen carefully and avoid assumptions. Ask whether work factors are contributing and what practical support may help.

Agree actions, keep appropriate records and review the arrangements. Maintain appropriate confidentiality and only share information where there is a legitimate need.

### Wider risk

#### Look beyond the individual

An individual concern may highlight a broader workplace problem. If similar issues affect others, or the concern points to workload, conflict, support or change, revisit the stress risk assessment.

Do not treat a wider organisational risk only as an individual wellbeing issue.

#### Reasonable adjustments

If a mental health condition amounts to a disability under the Equality Act 2010, the employer's duty to make reasonable adjustments may apply. What is reasonable depends on the circumstances, the person and the job. Adjustments might involve hours, workload, tasks, workspace or support arrangements.

**Important:** where an individual situation is complex, medical, employment-law or specialist health and safety advice may be appropriate.

## Practical tools and next steps

A stress risk assessment can be structured around six clear stages:

1

### **Prepare the Assessment**

Decide the scope, appoint a lead and plan how employees will contribute to the risk assessment.

2

### **Identify Risks**

Review standards, workplace evidence and feedback to identify potential stress risks clearly.

3

### **Consult Employees**

Speak with employees to understand concerns, causes and possible practical workplace improvements.

4

### **Evaluate the Risks and Decide Actions**

Review current controls, identify gaps and decide what further workplace action might be needed.

5

### **Record and Implement the Action Plan**

Record findings, assign responsibilities, set timescales and communicate agreed workplace actions clearly.

6

### **Monitor, Review and Update**

Check progress, review outcomes and update assessment when further action is needed.

**Free resources at [StressRiskAssessment.co.uk](https://StressRiskAssessment.co.uk)**

These resources provide general guidance and should be adapted to your organisation. They do not constitute legal, medical or health and safety advice.