

# Improving health and well-being



## Delphi

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## Stress as a cause of mental ill-health

Stress as a cause of mental ill-health and how to reduce stress at work.

Stress at work is a significant contributor to mental health problems and is probably the reason behind a significant proportion of both certified and uncertified sickness absence. It can have detrimental effects on anyone; it is no respecter of grades. Potentially stressful working demands and pressures include:

- working long hours;
- insufficient work to keep busy;
- major organisational changes;
- job insecurity;
- short deadlines.

Whilst family and friends normally provide real support in times of stress, domestic issues can impinge on the work situation. These may include:

- marital problems or problems with long term relationships;
- family disputes;
- housing problems including moving house;
- financial worries.

**Reaction to stress**

It must be remembered that people react to pressure in different ways - one person's unbearable pressure is another person's positive challenge. A certain amount of pressure generally can be a positive, motivating force and can help everyone to perform effectively. Individuals vary, however, in their ability to cope with stress. If a member of staff is under too many pressures, or if they go on for too long, these can give rise to various physical and psychological signs and symptoms:

#### Physical

- headaches;
- backache;
- stomach pains;
- palpitations;
- breathlessness;
- fatigue;
- vague aches and pains.

#### Psychological

- poor concentration;
- indecisiveness;
- temporary difficulties with memory - particularly short-term memory;
- muddled thinking;
- propensity to making mistakes;
- impaired judgement;
- heightened sensitivity - the person takes offence more quickly than usual;
- irritability;
- low mood, feeling close to tears;
- anxiety;
- increasing alcohol consumption above recommended safe levels (14 units weekly for women and 21 units weekly for men);
- excessive concern about health.

Of course many people will have experienced such symptoms on occasions in their working lives without developing mental illness. However, when several symptoms occur together, last for more than two weeks and prevent or seriously hinder effective working, then there is cause for concern and probably need for a professional consultation.

#### Effects at work

Consequences as regards work may include:

- sickness absence;
- impaired relations with colleagues and the public;
- reduced performance;
- more accidents or near accidents;
- increased staff turnover.

How can good mental health be promoted?

Good mental health in the workplace can be promoted by:

- ensuring that jobs are well structured;
- creating a work environment which supports staff;
- creating an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable talking about any stress they may be feeling and about their mental health.

The line manager therefore has a key role to play.

### How to reduce stress at work

A line manager has little or no control over those factors outside work which are potentially stressful for staff nor even over major organisational changes. However, the manager can often make a positive contribution by reducing the likelihood of the harmful effects of stress developing in their staff.

Research has shown that the following job factors can have a detrimental effect on a person:

- inadequate support;
- undervalued job - the job is seen as being unimportant either by the jobholder or others within the organisation;
- uncertainty about performance because of lack of feedback or appreciation of achievements;
- low job control where the jobholder has little or no opportunity to make decisions or to plan work;
- little opportunity to develop or use all their skills;
- low or high task demands;
- insufficient variety in tasks to be done;
- poor working conditions.

In these circumstances there are a number of things that the manager can do to reduce potential job-related stress:

- setting realistic objectives, standards, and deadlines (and where there are competing deadlines, helping to set priorities);
- giving clear explanations of what is required;
- giving praise and constructive criticism;
- redesigning jobs to avoid under/overloading and to make them, as far as possible, more varied to enable the jobholder to make maximum use of their skills;
- ensuring there is clear role definition;
- delegating sufficient responsibility to the jobholder to provide a challenging but not overstressing job;
- helping people to manage their time better;
- improving communication;

and above all, being a good observer and listener. An alert manager can become aware of signs of undue stress early on. Prevention in this, as in other areas, is better than cure.

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## External related links

- [Employer's Forum of Disability \(opens new window\)](#)
- [Health & Safety Executive \(opens new window\)](#)
- [MIND \(opens new window\)](#)
- [NHS Direct \(opens new window\)](#)
- [SHIFT \(opens new window\)](#)

## Staff support

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