

MENTAL HEALTH AND WORK-RELATED STRESS



Health and Safety Guidance Note



NFU Mutual
RISK MANAGEMENT SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

Everyone has mental health and, just like our physical health, it needs looking after to ensure we stay well. Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realises their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to their community.

Anyone can develop mental ill health during their life, just as they can a physical illness. Mental ill health does not distinguish between age, background or circumstances. People are affected by mental ill health in different ways including the length of time they experience it for.

One in four people will experience a mental health issue at some point in their life.

WHAT ARE MY LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES?

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 [Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978] and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations [Management of Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Regulations], you have a legal responsibility to help your employees if they experience mental ill health, whether work is causing the health issue or aggravating it. You must also assess work-related mental health issues to identify the levels of risk to staff. Where a risk is identified, steps must be taken to remove it or reduce it as far as reasonably practicable.

You may also have further legal requirements, to make reasonable adjustments under equalities legislation, such as the Mental Health (Discrimination) Act 2013 (Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986), Equality Act 2010 (Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) Northern Ireland) and the Human Rights Act 1998 (Northern Ireland Act 1998).

WHAT IS MENTAL ILL HEALTH AND WHAT ARE THE CAUSES?

Mental health is about how we think, feel and behave. Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health problems. They are often a reaction to a difficult life event or situation, such as bereavement, financial worries, relationship problems, housing issues, getting married, having a baby, getting a new job, but can also be caused by work-related issues. Other things also to consider include trauma, neglect or abuse in childhood, body chemistry, substance misuse, side effects of prescribed drugs, long term chronic pain and certain health conditions.

There are a variety of different conditions ranging from Depression and Mood Disorders, Anxiety Disorders, Eating Disorders, Personality Disorders, Psychotic Disorders, Substance Misuse, to Self-harm and Suicide.

While mental health problems are common, most are mild, tend to be short-term and are normally successfully treated, with medication, by a GP.

This guidance talks generally about work-related stress but where such stress is prolonged it can lead to both physical and psychological damage, including anxiety and depression. Work can also aggravate pre-existing conditions, and problems at work can bring on symptoms or make their effects worse.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF MENTAL ILL HEALTH?

The primary display of mental ill health in the workplace are stress, anxiety and depression which, although they may not be caused directly by work, could intensify it. Work-related stress and mental health problems often go together, and the symptoms can be very similar. If work-related stress reaches a point where it has triggered an existing mental health problem, it becomes hard to separate one from the other.

Early signs of mental ill health in adults and include:

- Excessive worrying or fear;
- Feeling excessively sad or low;
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning;
- Being easily distracted;
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable “highs” or feelings of euphoria;
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger;
- Finding it hard to make decisions;
- Avoiding friends and social activities;
- Talking more or talking very fast;
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people;
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy;
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or lack of appetite;
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance.
- Changes in sex drive;
- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that don't exist in objective reality);
- Inability to perceive changes in one's own feelings, behaviour, personality or paranoia.
- Overuse of substances like alcohol or drugs;
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomach aches, vague and ongoing “aches and pains”);
- Thinking about suicide or self-harming;
- Inability to carry out daily activities or handle daily problems and stress.

Spotting early signs of mental ill health and providing appropriate support plays a critical role in maintaining employee wellbeing. If people who are experiencing the early symptoms of mental ill health feel able to talk about them, particularly in the workplace, it can prevent these symptoms from developing into illness.

WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORT ARE AVAILABLE?

Common types of support are as follows.

- Medication – prescribed by a general practitioner or psychiatrist.
- Talking therapies – such as counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or psychotherapy.
- Self-help strategies – including learning mindfulness techniques and improving wellbeing through diet and exercise.
- Additional support – range from general support from family and friends, support groups, community and voluntary sector organisation who can all signposting to who can help resolve financial issues, advising on lifestyle choices etc.

WHAT IS WORK RELATED STRESS

Work related stress is described by the Health & Safety Executive as “An adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work.” It is not an illness in itself, but if stress is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental and physical ill health (e.g. depression, nervous breakdown, heart disease, etc.).

Work is generally good for people’s wellbeing but can place demands and pressures on everyone at times. Appropriate amounts can stimulate and motivate; however, it is important to be able to recognise the point at which pressure on individuals becomes too excessive for them to cope with, or not demanding enough (resulting in boredom, feeling a lack of control over the job they do etc.). Stress is a natural reaction to too much or too little pressure.

UNDERSTANDING AND RECOGNISING STRESS

When the body perceives a threat, it goes into a state of high alert. This is sometimes referred to as the “fight and flight” response. The resultant release of adrenalin and other substances in the blood are invaluable if, for example, we have to fight an attacker or run from danger. Repeated triggering of this response can lead to the body being constantly in a state of alert, without the release of energy which follows a physical threat. This can result in a variety of symptoms such as:

- **Physical** – tenseness, shortness of breath, panic attacks, tiredness, shoulder and back ache, appetite disturbance, light headedness, high blood pressure, fast heartbeat, sexual problems, tingling in arms and legs, insomnia, indigestion, headaches, lower resistance to infection, rashes, sweating, stomach problems, muscle tension or pain, and dizziness etc.

- **Emotional** – anxiety, despair, depression, frustration, irritability, moodiness, anger, desire to cry, withdrawal, loss of interest and pleasure in life, rapid mood swings etc.
- **Mental** – impaired perception, lowered concentration, circular thinking, reduced problem-solving skills, judgement, indecisiveness, reduced creativity, inaccuracy, less motivation, being forgetful, not concentrating, etc.

We often increase our use of caffeine, nicotine, alcohol or drugs/medication when we are stressed. All of these are likely to make the problems worse as they stimulate the production of more adrenaline which increases the ‘fight or flight’ response. Changes in a person’s “normal” behaviour are usually an indication that someone is not coping and that they may be suffering from stress that could be work related.

A small amount of stress can be useful. It can motivate you to take action and get tasks completed. It can also make you feel alive and excited. But too much stress can cause negative effects such as a change in your mood, your body and relationship issues.

The earlier a problem is tackled the less impact it will have. If you think that an employee is having problems, encourage them to talk to someone, whether it’s their line manager, trade union representative, GP or their occupational health team.

Help for line managers to have simple, practical conversations with employees which can help prevent stress is available in the HSE’s Talking Toolkits (see below under Further Guidance).

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES OF STRESS AND WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT THEM?

The table below is a brief summary of how employment relations relate to the main causes of stress and what you can do about them to reduce the risk of work-related stress.

Main causes of stress:	What you can do about it:
Demands: Employees often become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure employees understand what they have to do and how to do it. • Meet training needs. • Consider whether working flexible hours would help employees to manage demands.
Control: Employees can feel disaffected and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve employees in the way work is carried out. • Consult employees about decisions. • Build effective teams with responsibility for outcomes. • Review performance to identify strengths and weaknesses.
Support: Levels of sick absence often rise if employees feel they cannot talk to managers about issues that are troubling them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give employees the opportunity to talk about issues causing stress. • Be sympathetic and supportive. • Keep employees informed about what is going on in the firm.
Relationships: A failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have clear procedures for handling misconduct and poor performance. • Have clear procedures for employees to raise grievances. • Tackle any instances of bullying and harassment and make it clear such behaviour will not be tolerated.
Role: Employees will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out a thorough induction for new employees using a checklist of what needs to be covered. • Provide employees with a written statement of employment particulars. • Give employees clear job descriptions. • Maintain a close link between individual objectives and organisational goals.
Change: Change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to uncertainty and insecurity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan ahead so changes can be signposted and managers and employees are prepared. • Consult with employees about prospective changes so they have a real input and work together with you to solve problems.

PROMOTING WELLBEING

By improving the health and wellbeing at work, you're not only improving workers quality of life but also helping to create a more motivated, engaged and high performing workforce - resulting in greater organisational success, whilst workers have improved wellbeing, greater morale and higher job satisfaction. It also starts to address some of the stigma associated with mental ill health and achieve early buy-in from staff. If employees are more aware of what 'wellbeing' is, what the benefits are, and how they can achieve it, they will be better equipped to look after themselves and be more sensitive to the needs of others.

Create a wellbeing strategy which centres around the whole person and promote this to staff. Mental health is one element of wellbeing alongside others such as physical, financial and emotional wellbeing. At the organisation level, for example, you should consider putting in place policies, structures, coaching and appropriate processes to cope with an employee's physical and / or mental ill health as it should arise, including the training and appointment of mental health first aiders. However, it is equally important that management observes what is happening on a day-to-day basis at work, and to keep a close eye in particular on the interaction between the workers, colleagues and management.

STRESS RISK ASSESSMENT AND HSE MANAGEMENT STANDARDS

As detailed above, you as the employer have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it. As with other types of risk assessments, if you have fewer than five employees you don't have to write anything down, but it is useful to document it anyway, so you can review it later, for example if something changes.

For most people this does not need to be a big exercise – just note the main points about the significant risks and what you decided. The HSE has developed a stress risk assessment template with some example completed stress risk assessments which you may find useful (see Further Guidance below). We have included a Stress Risk Assessment Guidance Checklist below to also help you complete your stress risk assessment. There is also an individual stress risk assessment questionnaire that your staff could complete to identify any areas of concern.

You may also find HSE's Management Standards helpful, which are freely available from the HSE website (see Further Guidance below).

The standards help identify and manage the six areas of work design, mentioned in the table above, which can affect stress levels – demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. The implementation process detailed on the HSE website is supported by a workbook which provides tips, advice and guidance from people who have gone through the process of implementing the management standards.

FURTHER GUIDANCE

- HSE website "Work Related Stress" www.hse.gov.uk/stress/
- INDG430 How to tackle work related stress – a guide for employers on making the Management Standards work: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg430.pdf
- HSE Talking Toolkit: www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/stress-talking-toolkit.pdf
- Mind: How to implement the Thriving at Work mental health standards in your workplace: www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4659/how-to-implement-the-thriving-at-work-mental-health-standards-final-guide-online.pdf
- Mind: How to promote wellbeing and tackle the causes of work-related mental health problems www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4662/resource3_howtopromotewellbeingfinal.pdf
- Mind: How to be mentally healthy at work: www.mind.org.uk/media/6843/how-to-be-mentally-healthy-at-work-2020.pdf
- NHS Mental health and wellbeing: www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/

STRESS RISK ASSESSMENT GUIDANCE CHECKLIST

Guidance on hazards and control measures to consider when undertaking a stress risk assessment.

EXISTING WORKPLACE CAUSES OF STRESS		CONTROL MEASURES TO CONSIDER
WORK DEMANDS	<p>How much work is there?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are staff comfortable with the amount of work they are expected to do? • Are there set time scales for workload – are these too much/too little time to achieve? • Is the intensity of the workload too great for individuals? • Is there consistency and clarity in the job role – do the team members have to provide work to different groups of staff? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If insufficient resources, seek guidance from management or help employee with advice on priorities. • Consider renegotiating deadlines if able. • Ensure workloads can be adequately covered when staff are absent. • Adjust work patterns to cope with peaks (need to be fair and agreed with employees). • If people are ‘under-loaded’, think about additional tasks/responsibilities. • Develop personal work plans to ensure that staff know what their job involves.
	<p>Are they able to do their job?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have they received appropriate training in order that they can do the role effectively? • Is there adequate supervision? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review training needs. • Devise systems to keep training records up to date to ensure employees are competent and comfortable in undertaking the core functions of their job. • Identify competency requirements for the role.
	<p>Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do employees feel comfortable in raising concerns? • Do the employees feel that they are kept informed about current business needs/developments/reasons for actions taken? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage staff to talk at an early stage if feeling that they are unable to cope. • Take time to talk to the team regularly & update them on business aspects. • Take time to understand the challenges the team are facing. • Discuss ways of sharing work sensibly and agree way forward. • Lead by example.
	<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any issues regarding the work environment that is impacting on how effectively employees can do their role? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure risk assessments are up to date. • Consider environmental factors that may impact on efficiency of work demands.

EXISTING WORKPLACE CAUSES OF STRESS		CONTROL MEASURES TO CONSIDER
Control	<p>Are staff enabled to have their say?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do staff feel that they are involved in deciding what work they do, and when and how they do it? • Is the work repetitive or do the staff have a variety of activities to complete? • Is the working time flexible? • Can staff decide when to take breaks? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider giving staff more control by enabling them to plan their own work, make decisions on how their work should be completed, where possible. • Vary tasks if repetitive to make day more interesting. • Allow staff to decide when to take a break. • Consider making working hours flexible.
	<p>Skills and abilities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do staff feel that their skills are being used appropriately? • Is there room to develop new skills for employees if they wanted this? • Does the work require initiative? Do staff feel that they are encouraged to use it? • Do staff feel that they are considered when planning the work? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees may feel more enriched if able to use a variety of skills to get tasks completed. • Ensure you understand an employee's skills and utilise that to full potential. • Consider how employees can be part of work planning – assign projects/give objectives and goals.
	<p>Supervision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is work regularly monitored? Do employees feel this is too much/ too little • Do managers meet with staff to see how work is going? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only monitor employees' output if essential. • Encourage employees to share with managers how work is going and raise any concerns at an early stage.
Support	<p>How supportive are you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do staff feel they are being offered adequate managerial support with new work issues, everyday work issues or personal issues if needed? • Do staff feel that they are supported by their colleagues? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give support and encouragement to staff, even when things go wrong. • Encourage staff to share any concerns with you. • Hold regular team meetings to discuss and pressures/issues. • Hold one-to-one meetings to talk about any emerging issues/pressures. • Ask staff how they would like to access managerial support – open door/agreed one-to-one sessions etc. • Ensure induction programmes are undertaken for new staff. • Review on-going training needs. • Guide staff if there are conflicting priorities.

EXISTING WORKPLACE CAUSES OF STRESS		CONTROL MEASURES TO CONSIDER
Support (continued)	Team/working time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do staff feel that you support a healthy work/life balance? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage staff to take their annual leave at regular intervals. Ensure staff have appropriate meal breaks in a working day. Consider flexible working hours if staff have domestic difficulties/commitments.
	Listening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well do you listen to your staff? How well do your staff think you listen to them? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure you listen and agree a plan of action when staff are discussing issues with you. Encourage staff to do their bit - identify problems and then listen to them - agree a way forward. Identify if there are any supportive measures available through the organisation if an individual is experiencing personal issues - find other resources e.g. counselling/occupational health/fit for work advice/human resources.
Relationships	Relationships within the team/ Unacceptable behaviour <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there any issues concerning workplace relationships/conflicts within the team? Are there problems with bullying/harassment? Are there policies where staff can raise concerns about another member of staff? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure there is an effective bullying/harassment /disciplinary/grievance policy in place so that situations can be managed if they arise. Agree and implement procedures to prevent or quickly resolve conflict at work - mediation can assist if necessary. Set up a confidential reporting system to enable the reporting of unacceptable behaviour. Communicate the policies so all employees aware of process as well as the consequences if policies are breached.
	Does the organisation care? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the employee feel that the organisation as a whole (managers and colleagues) are caring/trusting? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop ways of encouraging team achievements and recognising the contributions of all team members. Develop skills in the team for listening/coaching/mentoring if appropriate. Identify ways to celebrate success.
Role	Role ambiguity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are staff clear about what is expected of them? Do staff have a clear plan of work which is agreed with their manager? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make sure staff have clear job descriptions and clear job plans which enables them to understand exactly what their role is. Encourage staff to communicate at an early stage if unsure about aspects of their role/nature of a task.

EXISTING WORKPLACE CAUSES OF STRESS		CONTROL MEASURES TO CONSIDER
Role (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are staff encouraged to talk to managers at an early stage if unclear of priorities of task to be undertaken? • Are staff struggling with multiple/conflicting roles? • Do they understand how their role fits into the overall business aims? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet with staff so they are clear about what is expected of them. • Review work plans at least annually – check if they understand what is expected of them if roles change. • Give guidance/advice on any work conflicts – you may need to negotiate if expected to meet deadlines for different projects. • Display team targets/objectives to help clarify the role of individuals and organisation aims.
	<p>New staff members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it clear what new staff members need to know when they start work? • Are new staff members told where they can go for help? • Do new staff members understand how they can achieve the competency levels required to be able to work unsupervised? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure new staff members receive a comprehensive induction to their role. • Make sure other staff understand the role and responsibilities of the new recruit.
Change	<p>Change Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do staff feel that they receive adequate and regular communication and consultation about organisational change? • Do staff feel they understand why organisational change needs to occur? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate regularly and at all stages when change is likely to/in the process of occurring. • Ensure you communicate even if there is nothing to tell – sometimes it is easy for people to think the worst if nothing is said. It is better to communicate that there is no news to tell at present than say nothing at all. • Communicate new developments quickly to avoid the spreading of rumours. • Where possible, involve employees in the change management process/get their ideas so that change is accepted more readily. • Consider the impact of change on each role and ensure this is clarified so that there are no role ambiguity issues arising.

INDIVIDUAL STRESS RISK ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Please read and consider the following questions and circle your answer.

PLEASE SELECT FROM: 1 = NEVER, 2 = SELDOM, 3 = SOMETIMES, 4 = OFTEN, 5 = ALWAYS		
1	I am clear what is expected of me at work	1 2 3 4 5
2	I can decide when to take a break	1 2 3 4 5
3	Different groups at work demand things from me that are hard to combine	1 2 3 4 5
4	I know how to go about getting my job done	1 2 3 4 5
5	I am subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour	1 2 3 4 5
6	I have unachievable deadlines	1 2 3 4 5
7	If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me	1 2 3 4 5
8	I am given supportive feedback on the work I do	1 2 3 4 5
9	I have to work very intensively	1 2 3 4 5
10	I have a say in my own work speed	1 2 3 4 5
11	I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are	1 2 3 4 5
12	I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do	1 2 3 4 5
13	I am clear about the goals and objectives for my department	1 2 3 4 5
14	There is friction or anger between colleagues	1 2 3 4 5
15	I have a choice in deciding how I do my work	1 2 3 4 5
16	I am unable to take sufficient breaks	1 2 3 4 5
17	I understand how my work fits into the overall aim of the organisation	1 2 3 4 5
18	I am pressured to work long hours	1 2 3 4 5
19	I have a choice in deciding what I do at work	1 2 3 4 5
20	I have to work very fast	1 2 3 4 5
21	I am subject to bullying at work	1 2 3 4 5
22	I have unrealistic time pressures	1 2 3 4 5

PLEASE SELECT FROM: 1 = STRONGLY DISAGREE, 2 = DISAGREE, 3 = NEUTRAL, 4 = AGREE, 5 = STRONGLY AGREE		
23	I can rely on my line manager to help me out with a work problem	1 2 3 4 5
24	I get help and support I need from colleagues	1 2 3 4 5
25	I have some say over the way I work	1 2 3 4 5
26	I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about change at work	1 2 3 4 5
27	I receive the respect at work I deserve from my Colleagues	1 2 3 4 5
28	Staff are always consulted about change at work	1 2 3 4 5

PLEASE SELECT FROM:

1 = STRONGLY DISAGREE, 2 = DISAGREE, 3 = NEUTRAL, 4 = AGREE, 5 = STRONGLY AGREE

29	I can talk to my manager about something that has upset or annoyed me about work	1 2 3 4 5
30	My working time can be flexible	1 2 3 4 5
31	My colleagues are willing to listen to my work-related problems	1 2 3 4 5
32	When changes are made at work, I am clear how they will work out in practice	1 2 3 4 5
33	I am supported through emotionally demanding work	1 2 3 4 5
34	Relationships at work are strained	1 2 3 4 5
35	My line manager encourages me at work	1 2 3 4 5

Do you have any additional concerns?

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