

Pressure and stress

We all enjoy a little pressure; this is motivating and can help us give our best. The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as: “The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”. Anyone can experience stress; this is not a personal weakness even though individuals react differently to stress – some are more resistant to stress or better able to cope than others.

Why pressure and stress?

Our life and our work provides us with interesting challenges, opportunities to meet people and use our skills. This is all good for us and helps keep us psychologically healthy. However, when there are too many demands on us, or when we have to face difficulties at work and/or problems at home, we can start to feel unable to cope. This can affect performance and, clearly, for anyone working in a major hazards environment, any negative impact on performance can have far-reaching, even devastating, consequences.

When we feel under stress, our performance is negatively affected and, in the long-term, our physical and mental health can deteriorate too. In the UK, stress is a major cause of absence and is often not recognised early enough and not dealt with effectively.

Do you recognise any of these signs?

If the answer to any of the following questions is ‘Yes’, then you should take action!

	Yes	No
Are you:		
1. Feeling more tense and anxious?		
2. Worrying more and feeling generally less confident?		
3. Becoming more irritable and defensive?		
4. Having greater difficulty concentrating?		
5. Feeling increasingly tired or exhausted?		
6. Having difficulty sleeping?		
7. Suffering more from headaches or migraines?		
8. Experiencing raised blood pressure?		
9. Feeling sad, ‘blue’ and lacking in energy?		
What about your team?		
10. Are you all working longer but not working as well, e.g. making more mistakes, rushing jobs?		
11. Are relationships becoming more tense: e.g. people not being as friendly or helpful?		
12. Has your safety performance been affected by an increase in mistakes and people paying less attention to what they are doing?		
13. Are people taking more time off than normal at this time of year?		

What causes stress?

There are many possible sources of stress or stressors; whether they negatively impact us or not can depend on a number of factors including our personality (e.g. our coping skills) and our circumstances (e.g. what else is happening in our life at the time).

Common work stressors	Common non-work stressors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demands (e.g. very high workload). • Control (e.g. lack of control over your work). • Support (e.g. an unsupportive supervisor). • Role (e.g. unclear objectives). • Relationships (e.g. being bullied). • Change (e.g. not being consulted about change). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor work-life balance. • Significant life changes (e.g. marriage, children). • Illness (own or among family/friends). • Bereavement. • Relationship difficulties (e.g. divorce). • Financial concerns.

CASE STUDY 1

Taking your mind off the job

"I was working offshore during a period of down-manning. One of my friends was told by his supervisor half-way through his trip that he would not be required back; he was angry but also anxious about the impact on his family. A few hours later he had a bad accident that he thinks happened as he was distracted by worrying about his finances. He came out of the lift with some heavy equipment, stepped too far back and tumbled down a flight of 30 stairs and was in hospital for several months."

What should my company do about it?

Your company has a clear responsibility under health and safety law to manage psychological health at work. Below are some examples of action to take at three levels of intervention.

Prevention	Management	Treatment
Does your company or your manager...		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have clear policies and guidelines on stress at work? e.g. a wellbeing policy, guidelines on absence management. • Regularly assess the risk of work-related stress in teams, e.g. using a questionnaire or focus groups? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to remove the stressful aspects of your work e.g. by redesigning tasks or taking pressure off/providing help? • Provide training on stress for managers? e.g. workshops on their responsibilities and how they can help teams and individuals. • Provide training for individuals, e.g. workshops to develop coping skills? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide you with access to professional treatment? e.g. occupational health, confidential counselling. • Provide effective support for stress-related absence? e.g. regular contact with the person who is absent, offering a phased return to work.



What can I do?

The responsibility to prevent, manage and facilitate treatment for work-related stress is shared between many parts of an organisation from the Board, health and safety managers, line managers and employees. You can do a lot to improve your ability to deal with pressure originating from work and personal life.

Prevention	Management	Treatment
Have you considered doing any of the actions below?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking action on your personal 'pressure points' e.g. what can you do about what causes you stress at home? What about at work - are you in the right job? • Building your resilience, e.g. developing your confidence and assertiveness, making time for non-work activities (family, hobbies etc.)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making suggestions or taking initiative to reduce your own and others' stress? • Knowing the signs of stress and how to recognise them in yourself? e.g. reviewing the checklist on page 1. • Learning some stress management techniques? e.g. relaxation, managing your thoughts, regular exercise etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding out what support you have available and how to access it, e.g. support from friends, family, talking to your doctor or a psychologist, help provided by your work?

CASE STUDY 2

Dealing with stress-related absence

Pat: "I was going through a really busy time at work, when my father suddenly died. I started to feel sad all the time and had absolutely no energy. A friend suggested I see a doctor, who said I was suffering from stress and depression and recommended I take some time off. I was worried people would think I was just weak, but HR and my manager were really supportive and helped me back to work as soon as I was well enough."

Pat's manager: "Once Pat was off with stress, my first thought was not to do anything for fear of making things worse. I contacted HR and they suggested we start regular contact to help us all understand Pat's illness. After a time, we agreed a phased return to work, with Pat starting only part-time; this helped me and the team work together to welcome Pat back."

Further reading

- The best source of information and resources for organisations and individuals is the HSE website, <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress> in particular the *Management standards for work related stress*.
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2002), *Research on work-related stress*, Cox, T, Griffiths, A & Rial-González, E.
- Work Foundation (2007), *Stress at work*, Blaug, R, Kenyon, A & Lekhi, R.
- HSE (2006), Research report RR488, *Investigation of the links between psychological ill-health, stress and safety*, <http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr488.htm>

For background information on this resource pack, please see Briefing note 1 *Introduction*.