# What can I do about stress?

## A guide for managers

## Why a guide for managers on stress?

Employee health and employee attitude surveys have identified stress as a key concern for employees. The Council is adopting the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Management Standards approach to tackle stress at a corporate level. As a line manager, you are responsible under your duty of care to make every effort to recognise stress at a local level in your employees.

The Council has a number of measures in place to help employees:

- Wellbeing at Work Policy - Mental Health
- Achievement and Development Interviews
- Bullying and Harassment Policy
- Exit Interviews
- Free 24 Hour Confidential Telephone Counselling Line
- Health & Safety Policy
- Health at work initiatives and health promotion
- Recruitment and Selection Accreditation
- Return to Work Interviews
- Sickness Absence Procedures
- Training sessions in Stress Awareness, Risk Assessment, Time Management and Assertiveness
- What can I do about stress? – An employee guide
- Work Life Balance Initiatives such as Flexible Working Hours, Job Share and Part Time Working, Career Breaks, Special Leave and Homeworking.

This is what the Council has done but tackling stress is a joint responsibility. This guide aims to provide a summary of the best advice available to help you deal with the issue of stress.

health matters

## What is stress?

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as:

*"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them. It arises when an individual believes that they cannot cope with what is being asked of them."*

Stress should not be confused with pressure. No jobs are without pressure. Every job has its own set of tasks, responsibilities and day-to-day problems. The pressures and demands placed on us are an unavoidable part of working life and we are paid to accept the reasonable pressures that go with it. A certain amount of pressure can have a positive effect and improve performance. The tasks and challenges we face often help to keep us motivated and can be the key to a sense of achievement and job satisfaction. When pressure moves from an optimum level to an excessive level and we start to think that we cannot cope with the demands placed on us, stress is likely to be the result. Stress can also occur where skills and capabilities are underutilised or undervalued.

health matters

## *Why is it important to tackle stress?*

Stress should not be seen as an inevitable part of modern life nor as a sign of weakness.  Stress is not an illness but prolonged stress can trigger mental health problems like anxiety and depression.  Other problems related to stress include back pain, indigestion, irritable bowel syndrome, psoriasis and tension headaches.

As a manager, you have a duty of care under health and safety law to:

● assess possible risks to health in the workplace
● take appropriate action
● ensure that workplaces are safe and healthy.

HSE guidance makes it very clear that stress is a risk that has to be both considered and managed.  Employees who feel that they have suffered as a result of work related stress (WRS) could bring a claim for compensation.  As a manager, you would need to show that you had considered the risks and taken appropriate action.  Whilst it is unlikely that you can eliminate WRS entirely, you need to be able to show what action you have taken to reduce WRS.  It is therefore essential that you keep records to evidence what you have done.

health **matters**

## In my role as a manager, how can I take a proactive role in preventing work related stress?

- Familiarise yourself with the Council's Wellbeing at Work Policy and the information in this guide.

- Familiarise yourself with the HSE management standards at the end of this guide and make sure that the suggested control measures are appropriately applied.

- Attend the managers' stress awareness training session advertised in the Council's Learn Gateshead Guide.

- Issue all your employees with a copy of the employee guide – "What can I do about stress?"

- Issue all your employees with the telephone counselling and information services leaflet and encourage them to use the service.

- Make use of every opportunity such as achievement and development, return to work and exit interviews, informal talks with employees, sickness absence statistics, questionnaires and surveys to alert you to possible signs of stress in individual employees. If necessary, take action to assist the employee, including referral to the Occupational Health Unit.

health matters

## How do I recognise when an individual employee is stressed?

As a manager, you know your employees and their typical behaviours and are therefore best placed to pick up on any changes in their behaviours.  Some employees may show an acute reaction to stress and in others the symptoms may appear over time and may be mistaken for other health problems.  You need to look out for typical stress signals.

## What are the typical stress signals?

Signs and symptoms of stress vary from one person to another. Typical stress signals can be categorised into behavioural, physical and emotional signals.

### Behavioural Signals
- Poor work performance including uncharacteristic errors, memory lapses and indecisiveness
- Withdrawal of interest, loss of motivation or commitment
- Poor timekeeping
- Changes in eating habits, increased smoking and/or alcohol intake
- Loss of interest in personal appearance
- Withdrawal from supportive relationships
- Obsessive behaviour and inability to relax

### Physical Signals
- Headaches, tiredness
- Muscle tension
- Breathlessness, palpitations
- Skin irritations, frequent colds, flu or other infections
- Indigestion

health matters

### Emotional Signals
- Irritability, poor concentration, difficulty making decisions
- Mood swings, tearfulness
- Loss of confidence
- Being cynical and or aggressive

Whilst these are common stress signals, the list is by no means exhaustive.

## What can I do if an employee appears to be stressed?

You must not ignore the warning signs in the hope that the situation will resolve itself without intervention.  An early and appropriate intervention is the crucial key to success.

## What is an appropriate intervention?

You should meet with the employee concerned but before meeting, you must be clear about what your concerns are.  You must also consider what you think the employee is likely to see as the organisational or local WRS stressors that are having a negative impact on them.  Don't forget, these stressors are set out in the HSE Management Standards at the end of this guide along with suggested control measures.

On meeting with your employee, you need to discuss the situation and work with them to identify and define the problem.  You must not make assumptions nor jump to conclusions.  It is important to listen to their thoughts, views and needs and act on them where practicable.  Try to understand the problem from their perspective and ask them what could help.  Be wary of offering more support than they want as this could be seen as interference and remember, never impose solutions.

It can be difficult getting the discussion started but it may be better to begin by framing a question positively like "What do you find satisfying about your job?" This would usually result in a negative response, which can then be explored. If you start with a negative question like "What gets you down about your job?" your employee may shrug off the question and resist further exploration.

An alternative might be to tell the employee what you have observed, "I thought you were looking tired" or "I thought you seemed a bit irritable. Was it something I said?" Remember that the issues revealed will not necessarily be work related.

Having identified the WRS stressors, encourage your employee to classify them into general, specific and task related. General WRS stressors are those that are likely to affect everyone in the service or Council as a whole. Specific WRS stressors are unique to the employee or a few of them in a section. Task related WRS stressors are those specific to the job. Try to resist the urge to advise them. If they let you do the classification, they will be less likely to share in the responsibility and do anything about the problem.

Next, help your employee to decide whether the WRS stressors are easy, possible or impossible to change. This will help to recognise what, if anything can be avoided or reduced and what has to be managed. Usually the task related WRS stressors are easiest to tackle as they may be more localised. General WRS stressors are likely to be the hardest to deal with but it will help if you can bring about an attitude change where the employee views a situation more constructively. Help your employee to list all the contributory factors that make up a particular WRS stressor that you both have identified as significant and likely to respond to intervention. Finally, determine what action you and they might be prepared to take and keep these actions under review.

health matters

## Is there anything else that I can do?

Despite following this advice, you may still find that an employee is experiencing WRS.  Make sure that you do not penalise them for feeling the effects of too much pressure. Positively encourage your employees to manage their own wellbeing and remind them of the Council's health at work initiatives. The Council does not have open access to a face to face counselling service but this can be arranged through Occupational Health where appropriate.  All employees can contact the 24 hour confidential telephone counselling service on 0800 0685 155 quoting scheme number 71484.

## What should I do if an employee is off work with a stress related illness?

As with all sickness absence, you must follow the absence management procedure and stay in touch with the employee.  With a stress related illness, it is particularly important that this is done on a personal as well as a work related basis.  Plan ahead for the employee's return to work and find out what would help them to return.

Carry out an individual risk assessment to identify any possible stressor areas. Whilst it would not be good for the individual to be given special treatment, you should assign the full range of duties but reduce the elements that were excessive and led to illness.  It may also be useful to consider a phased return or temporary part time working.  It is essential that you record your findings and keep the situation under review.  A feature of some successful court cases has been where support was identified and agreed but not put in place or where the original support was withdrawn without review.

When the employee returns, make sure that the return to work interview is held as soon as they return and they are given a proper welcome back.

health matters

## Who can I contact for further advice or information?

- Occupational Health – 0191 433 3273

- Human Resources – 0191 433 2215

- Health & Safety – 0191 433 2272

- Lancaster LifeAssist – 0800 0685 155 and quote scheme number 71484 (Free telephone counselling line)

- HSE – www.hse.gov.uk

- Council Intranet/HR/Handbooks

- Council Intranet/HR/Wellbeing at Work

- Council Intranet/HR/Work Life Balance

- Council Intranet/HR/Occupational Health & Safety

health matters

# The HSE Management Standards

The six management standards are demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. The HSE has identified what the standard should be, what the typical stressors are within each standard and has also suggested control measures.

> **Demands** includes issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment. The standard is that employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

**Typical Stressors:**

● Too much to do/too little time.

● Too little to do/job not sufficiently challenging.

● Dealing with distressed and/or emotionally demanding clients or exposure to aggressive, violent or threatening behaviour.

● Aspects of the physical working environment such as noise, vibration, temperature, ventilation, humidity, lighting, hygiene and poor ergonomic layout of workstations.

**Suggested Control Measures:**

● Adjust work patterns to cope with workload peaks and employee absence.

● Prioritise tasks, cut out unnecessary work and try to give warning of urgent or important jobs.

health matters

- Schedule work to ensure adequate and appropriate resources, fair workload allocations, along with appropriate workload monitoring.

- Avoid information overload on employees.  Good communication means ensuring that employees are succinctly informed on key issues.

- Ensure job demands are matched in terms of quantity, complexity and intensity to people's physical and mental skills and abilities and competencies.  Provide further training, development and management support as appropriate.

- Ensure new employees are suitable for the job, receive appropriate induction and ongoing, relevant training.

- Where reasonably practicable, enhance boring or repetitive jobs by job rotation, increasing the scope of the job, or increasing the variety of tasks.

- Use regular meetings with teams and individual employees to discuss issues related to job demands, and to encourage employee feedback.

- Implement the findings of inspections, working groups and health and safety risk assessments to ensure that risks from physical hazards are adequately controlled or eliminated.  Where appropriate, apply the standards set out in the Health and Safety Managers Handbook:

  – Display Screen Equipment (LCS-HS-021)
  – Workplace Safety and Welfare (LCS-HS-045)

- Encourage employees to bring any concerns over health and safety issues to your attention.  If necessary, ask advice from the Health and Safety Section.

health matters

**Control** is about how much say the employee has in the way they do their work. The standard is that employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

**Typical Stressors:**

Employees lack appropriate control over how their work is undertaken.

**Suggested Control Measures:**

- Ensure an appropriate level of delegation to, and trust of, employees.
- Ensure adequate support for employees when they are undertaking new tasks and support employees even if things go wrong.
- Where practicable, enable employees to exert a degree of control over when breaks can be taken.
- Encourage employees to use their skills, initiative and any training to complete work tasks.
- Use regular meetings with teams and individual employees to discuss issues related to control over how work is carried out, and to encourage employee feedback.
- Encourage employees to make suggestions to improve their work environment and give these suggestions due consideration.

health **matters**

**Support** includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues. The standard is that employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

## Typical Stressors:

● Lack of support from managers for employees in general.

● Lack of support from managers for individual employees demonstrating symptoms of stress.

● Lack of support from colleagues.

● Not being able to balance the demands of work and life outside work.

● The particular demands on new employees or existing employees returning from long periods of absence.

● Management failure to take account of individuals' differences both in their attitudes to work and in their abilities to cope with work and non-work related pressures. Remember some individuals thrive on working to tight deadlines and others like to plan their work well ahead.

## Suggested Control Measures:

● Encourage a caring and supportive team environment.

● Hold regular team meetings.

health **matters**

- Consistently demonstrate a regard for employees and an appreciation of the value of their work and the difficulties that they face.

- Encourage employees to take their annual leave allowance.

- Ensure that all new employees attend the corporate induction event as well as receiving specific local induction.

- Ensure that new employees are also provided with appropriate skills training.

- Make new employees aware of the Wellbeing at Work Policy and the employee guide "What Can I Do About Stress?"

- Be constantly alert to signs of stress in individual employees and refer to the earlier guidance in this booklet.

- Ensure employees know how to raise concerns with you and call on your support.

- Encourage employees to seek support at an early stage if they feel as though they are unable to cope.

- Refer to the Council's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Policy if there are indications that an employee has a habitual chronic problem of alcohol or drug misuse.

- Consider work life balance initiatives such as flexible working, job share, part-time working, career breaks and special leave as a means of support for employees where appropriate.

- Carry out return to work interviews for all employees returning from a period of sickness absence.

- Ensure a supportive environment for both new employees and employees returning from long periods of sick leave or other absence.

health matters

**Relationships** includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour. The standard is that employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviour at work and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

**Typical Stressors:**

● Poor relationships with managers, peers or subordinates.

● Bullying and harassment.

**Suggested Control Measures:**

● Organise teams to ensure that they are cohesive, and have a sound structure, clear leadership and objectives.

● Hold regular team meetings.

● Encourage individuals in teams to be open and honest with each other.

● Demonstrate and encourage others in the team to demonstrate a regard for their colleagues.

● Refer to the Bullying and Harassment Policy where appropriate.

● Ensure employees are aware that inappropriate behaviour at work such as bullying and harassment of any kind will not be tolerated. Encourage employees to report any such unacceptable behaviour at work to their line manager or trade union representative.

health **matters**

**Role** is about **w**hether employees understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that employees do not have conflicting roles. The standard is that employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

**Typical Stressors:**

● Role conflict, where an employee is confronted by conflicting job demands or by tasks which they do not believe are part of their job.

● Role ambiguity, where employees do not have a clear picture about their work objectives and the scope and responsibilities of their job.

**Suggested Control Measures:**

● Ensure employees have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in their specific job by making sure that job profiles are clear and relevant and that induction takes place for all new employees.

● Set clear work objectives for the team.

● Provide clear and unambiguous instructions to your employees. Check understanding and provide timely and appropriate feedback on their performance.

● Encourage employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they may have about their role or responsibilities.

health matters

**Change** is about how organisational change is managed and communicated. The standard is that employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

## Typical Stressors:

● Poor management of change either at organisational or local level.

## Suggested Control Measures:

● Make sure employees know about proposed changes as soon as possible.

● Ensure employees understand the reasons and likely timescale for proposed changes.

● Ensure adequate employee consultation on the change programme and provide opportunities for employees to comment on the proposals.

● Ensure employees are made aware of the impact of the change on their jobs.

● Ensure employees receive effective support during the change process.

# Notes

**Gateshead Council**
Council

*www.gateshead.gov.uk*

health **matters**