

# WORK RELATED STRESS

## Information Sheet for Employees

April 2022

### Introduction

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) promotes the health and safety of people at work. We provide information on a wide variety of work related topics to employers and employees by phone, in writing and through guidance documents and information sheets such as this. This information sheet aims to help employees understand and deal with their own stress, in order to better equip them to overcome and cope with work-related stress, where it arises. *More information is available on our website at [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie).*



### What is stress?

Stress is a negative state, which involves, to varying degrees, anxiety, fear and agitation. It comes about when a demand being placed on a person by a situation, a relationship or a specific task is not easily met or the person feels he or she cannot meet the demand properly. The resulting feeling is one of disharmony, a sense of a 'block' within oneself. This sense or state gives rise to varying reactions; a stress reaction can range from mere confusion - 'what is happening to me I do not feel I am coping' - to extreme anger and hostility- 'get out of my way now or I will explode with rage'.

All areas of life can cause stress; driving for instance, is often cited as being stressful where traf-fic, bad weather, speed and hurry all play a part in making a driver stressed. Stress mainly comes from personal issues such as loss or threat of loss, fear over money problems, family traumas and/or bereavement.



Stress is often associated with a number of pressures coming about at the same time, so we are overpowered in our ability to handle them, to process them and overcome them.

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## What is Work-Related Stress (WRS)?

Work-related stress is stress caused by or made worse by work. Whereas it is sometimes easy to pinpoint the cause of stress, a lot of very tight deadlines and scarcity of equipment to do the job properly, for instance, can immediately be potentially stressful. However, other work-related stress is less easy to define and categorise. When stressed, people are not always accurate in diagnosing where their stress is coming from and whether it is from work or not.

Someone feeling very threatened in a relationship can for instance, feel stressed during the working day. The cause of the stress, however, is not the work, but it gets associated with work because it affects the person while at work, it affects their colleagues, the relationships they enjoy at work and how they do their job. So stress involves many aspects of working life; productivity, health and safety, relationships, work-life balance, attendance and workplace satisfaction.

It is not simply a matter of associating the stress felt with a time and/or place. It is important to accept that most causes of stress are in our personal lives. However, there are aspects of the work environment which are more likely to lead to stress than others, and there are ways of reacting to these which are more positive than others.

Research into WRS tells us that job resources such as a reasonable degree of autonomy, positive team climate and effective coaching can support people and buffer the affects of stressful situations by assisting them access their own personal resources, increasing self esteem and self confidence around work issues.

## How should we deal with stress?

In order to best deal with stress, we can try to prevent it arising as far as possible, as well as learning new ways to cope with it when it does arise, and finally, adopt new ways of calming ourselves and recovering from stressful times, when it is unavoidable. For all of these, it is important to understand how stress develops.

## The stress process

Stress is often associated with change, - something different happens in our lives. This new event or demand requires us to adapt, to alter our position, to try harder, move faster, behave differently. Our environment has made a **demand** of us and to meet that demand, we must shift from a previously comfortable position to a new and perhaps uncomfortable or threatening one.

We react to this new scenario by considering our abilities and strengths. This involves subjective opinions we have as to our **coping** abilities. We ask ourselves will we be able for this. Our answer depends on many factors -what we have been told are our abilities in the past, which may not be accurate, can influence us to think we won't cope with demands, when, in fact, we are quite able for them. So, confidence, previous experiences, sense of identity and learned competencies will influence our considerations at this point. If we feel that we are unable to cope with this change, or if we fear having to alter our position, this can be the first insight we get as to our changing state. We may, at this stage, feel the niggling signs of stress.

## What are the early signs of stress?

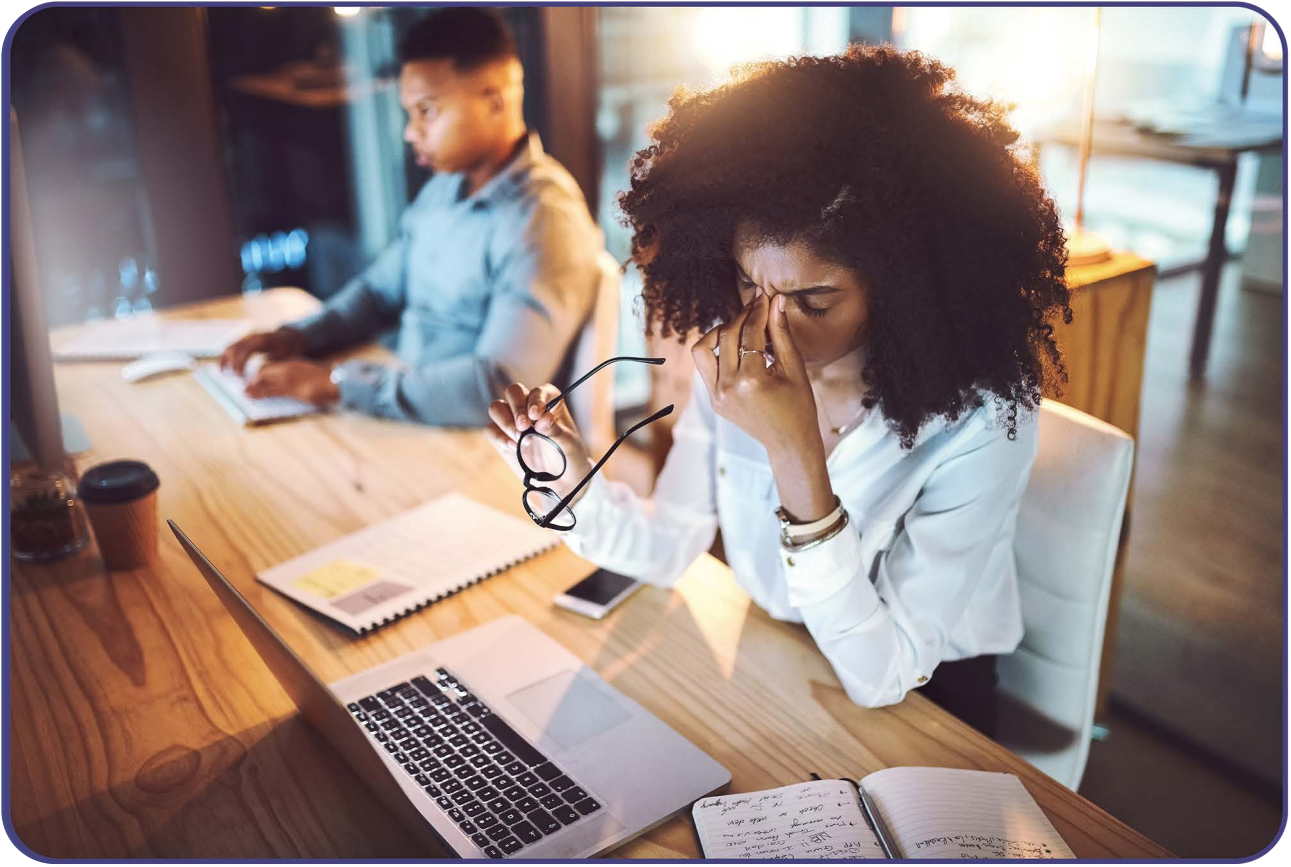
The first signs of stress are usually a combination of mental and physical symptoms, such as difficulty getting to sleep and easily awoken during the night, decrease in appetite, racing thoughts, sense of hurry generally, increased pulse rate, quick to anger/get upset and difficulty concentrating.

## How should we manage early stress?

At this stage, we have options.

Negative options include:

- Denial – pretend it's not happening, so don't consider the new demands or allow yourself think of options or choices.



- Avoidance - engage in short term soothing behaviours; excessive eating, drinking, smoking, or seek out a range of entertainments to help us remain unfocused on the demands.
- Hostile behaviour - mainly towards people associated with the new situation.
- Relaxing and enjoying leisure time when not at work – work-life balance is crucial so that stresses and strains are more easily met, regardless of their source.

Positive options are those which help us process the new demands. These include:

- Sitting down with someone else involved and making things clearer through talking.
- Agreeing or mapping a way forward which you think you can manage
- Identifying what you need to keep you stress-free and expressing this assertively
- Ensuring you help yourself by having a healthy lifestyle – sleeping and eating and exercising regularly and in line with your mental and physical needs

## Managing more serious stress

If stress is not managed at the early stage, it can worsen quickly. By reacting unhealthily to stress, we make the demands significantly more difficult to meet. For instance, by not getting adequate sleep, we are much less able to meet any demands made on us, as fatigue can be a serious factor affecting our mental health. Lack of sleep can affect our work performance and communication style and relationships at work with colleagues, which may be confused with the affects of the original source of stress. While it is advised to try to self manage stress as early as possible, where that has not occurred or you feel it is not something you can deal with, the next step is to seek help within or outside of work.



## Short term

In the short term, those who feel a work-related demand is causing them stress as outlined, and who feel unable to cope, should bring the matter to their manager or to a HR or occupational health person, or someone else appropriate, if these roles exist, formally or informally within the workplace. This should be done with a focus on looking at the cause or source of the stress and trying, together with the appropriate management representative, to reduce it and make it manageable so that you can cope with it. There may be supports you need at this time, from outside professionals, or it may be managed within the workplace.

## Longer term

In the longer term, those who have difficulty coping with change or with new demands may need to seek medical assistance from their own GP or some other form of intervention. There may be assistance available through the workplace, or through the community, through the public health system or privately. Alternative ways to learn to better cope with life events, work and non-work, can be through counselling and various registered and accredited therapy organisations.

However, it may be that you merely need to develop better communication skills so that you can ensure that you consult with your colleagues, team, department or the management at work to ensure you are clear and capable regarding what is expected of you and how you meet those expectations at work. It may be that you have too much work, that the work is not well designed and tasks need to be re-evaluated and assessed so that your stress is reduced. Very often, stress arises out of lack of consultation about a change, lack of clarity as to what is expected and therefore a faulty or unclear 'map' as to how to progress. All human beings seek progress and when we feel our progress is blocked, we are



not energised, motivated and positive – again this is associated with stress for most people, in both work and non-work situations.

## Conclusion

We all have abilities to handle different demands made of us throughout life. However, we must seek supports, both within work and outside of work, when we start to feel these demands are exceeding our abilities. Feeling stress and being distressed generally requires careful and honest consideration from each person, with the help of other competent people if needed, in order to accurately identify the true source of the problem; it's unhelpful to just accept the first seemingly obvious cause, for example a work issue, as this often masks hidden reasons for our distress and can make it more difficult to resolve. We need to interact with other people, with friends and acquaintances, colleagues and management, in order to communicate clearly, to consult where required and to better cope with challenge.

## Further Information:

Further information on work related stress is available at [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie) or by contacting the **HSA Workplace Contact Unit at 0818 289 389.**

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