



Work-Related Stress



Introduction

This section describes work-related stress, what employers can do to prevent it impacting on their workplace and what employees should do to prevent it affecting their health and well-being.

As an employer, you have a duty to ensure, as far as you reasonably can, that workplace activities do not put employees under undue pressure leading to stress. In addition, small businesses cannot afford the costs of absences and under-performance due to stress and the increased likelihood of errors and accidents associated with stressed employees. Litigation is another fallout of work-related stress and increased insurance premiums can also be a consequence.

What is stress?

Stress is a feeling, an emotional state of fear and threat, with physical, mental and behavioural consequences.

Words cannot easily describe the experience of stress and it is best illustrated by giving examples. People may mean different things when they use the word, but there is a general acceptance that being stressed is damaging to health and impacts on our behaviour in a negative way. People perform better when they are motivated, challenged and encouraged, rather than when they are threatened – directly or indirectly – by aspects of the workplace that are over demanding in some way.

What is the experience like?

The experience of being stressed can be illustrated with an example.

Having a 'near miss' in a traffic situation or being involved in a car crash brings about a physiological and psychological reaction in most people. The feelings are of shock, a sudden, unexpected change in the immediate environment, loss of control and sense of displacement. Feelings that are aroused immediately after such shocks are part of the body's and the mind's response to the stressful situation. A stress reaction can involve an increased heart beat, dry mouth, sweaty palms, voice alteration, muddled-up thinking, fearfulness, becoming easily upset and fainting.

How do people react after stressful events?

There can be many varied reactions to a stressful event. One may want space to 'calm the nerves', or want to keep talking about it, or want to never talk about it, or choose to stay at home more, or, in the case of a road traffic accident, decide never drive, cycle or walk that pathway/roadway again.

These are just some of the symptoms – physical (within the body), emotional (how we feel) and behavioural (how we behave) – associated with stress.

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Is there more than one type of stress?

There are two types of stress. Acute stress is the type described above, it comes on quickly after a shocking event. Often this type of stress does not last long and is treated with rest, support, talking, professional help if needed and a healthy approach to recovery.

Chronic stress is ongoing, building up over time. The symptoms can be very similar to those of acute stress, but as they occur gradually due to 'slow motion', accumulated threats, we are not as aware that our physiology has altered. We may not notice our increased heart beat, tendency to anger, emotional exhaustion and/or altered behaviour. This type of stress can be the result of pressures, from work or outside work, not dealt with or dealt with in harmful, unhealthy ways.

What is meant by work-related?

Work-related means either caused by or made worse by work. If something is caused by work, there should be evidence that:

- It began occurring after a period of being at work.
- It occurs soon after being at work or during work.
- It does not occur after other activities.

If stress is caused by work, then some aspect of the work, the tasks or broader job roles that the person has must be identified as a cause. You cannot presume a cause, as people differ. Also, the individual's competency at doing that job or performing in that environment may be the issue. When something within the workplace is

identified as having led to the person feeling emotionally drained and trying in vain to fight an ongoing source of pressure, action should be taken to remedy the situation, as far as possible.

Where stress is not essentially caused by work but is made worse by work, there is a certain level of responsibility on the employer as well as on the employee. The cause of the stress has to be addressed by the employee, while the employer needs to make an attempt to remedy the work-related aspects. This should prevent any negative impact on performance, health and safety and motivation within the workplace. If, for instance, an employee is temporarily suffering stress from a family situation, that employee may be less well equipped to handle difficult customers, and alternative tasks could be assigned to him or her for a limited period. Addressing such issues requires open, realistic communication between employees and employers.

What are my responsibilities as an employer?

You have a duty of care to do what is reasonable to ensure that no harm comes to employees.

Where stress is concerned, this duty means that you must be confident that there is nothing about the workplace, about how things are done there and how people are treated there that a reasonable person could not cope with. The legal proof rests on whether an act is 'reasonable'. The test for 'reasonable' is usually within the remit of judges in the courts and they use the term to indicate what a person of sound mind and average insight would

take to be acceptable. An employer cannot ensure that no employee will feel stressed and employers are not obliged to ensure this. Rather, the obligation is to do something to safeguard people and where people are still not safe (i.e. where they report that they are suffering stress) to address that by assessing the source of the stress, eliminating it, reducing it or protecting from it, as appropriate.

What can I do to prevent work-related stress?

You should make sure that:

- No employee's workload is so high that he or she will have to consistently work overtime.
- No employee has to be at the receiving end of harassment or degrading behaviour from colleagues or managers and that everyone in the workplace treats others with respect and courtesy, even if they do not 'get along'.
- No employee has to work in an environment which is unsafe and in which they would be worried about accidents.
- Employees are trained so they can do their jobs.
- Everyone knows what their core job is.
- There is a fair system of reward in place across the business.

Employers should carry out assessments for all known hazards. Where stress is a hazard, a risk assessment process called 'Work Positive' is available from the HSA. It will indicate the main hazards in your business (as reported by employees at that point in time), compare your organisation with other organisations and assess your stress profile over time. Work Positive is

a short questionnaire available for download at no cost. Case studies and further information are also available on the HSA website.

What should I do if I receive a report of work-related stress?

You should sit down with the employee or group of employees concerned and ask, or find out in some other way, what it is about the workplace that is causing the stress. If there is a clear 'cause', then you must decide whether the cause is valid.

For example, if an employee who feels stressed by over work has been asked to work just one hour overtime a week and otherwise has the same workload as his or her four colleagues, then the cause is not likely to be the work, but the person's ability to cope.

If the cause of an employee's stress is strained relationships and your investigation ascertains that nobody speaks to that person and he or she is isolated and ridiculed, then it would be reasonable to conclude that the behaviour of others at work is the source of the stress. In this case, all staff should be reminded of the company policy on dignity and respect and training should be given on how behaviours affect others. Guidelines should be set in place for all employees on the expected level of politeness, manners and agreeableness within your organisation so that nobody is isolated or demeaned.

What should be done after the initial assessment?

First, support the person – listen and ensure they are made aware that the matter has been assessed and will be addressed in a timely fashion. Set out for them the action to be taken in eliminating the source of their stress.

Then ensure that company procedures on how people behave are followed, lead by example and make sure managers let all staff know that nobody is to be isolated or ridiculed and sanctions will apply should this occur again. Thereafter, monitor the situation on a weekly basis, engage with the employee, offer support (formal or informal) for a specified short-term option and remind all employees through bulletins, meetings, email or otherwise, that appropriate behaviour towards others is important in the workplace.

Do employees have a responsibility to ensure that stress does not affect their health and well-being?

Employees need to take heed of how they behave and how their coping skills impact on the workplace. It is helpful to provide simple information for staff, so they can reduce the effects of stress for themselves and avoid unhealthy reactions.

When a person feels pressurised, they can turn to unhealthy behaviours, avoid work colleagues and friends, stop exercising, resort to eating fast food and skipping meals or overeating.

These are called secondary effects and are not caused directly by the stress but are caused by how we each react to stress. Employees have a responsibility to monitor and manage their own reactions to stress and consequent behaviours and choices.

Contacts/References

See Section 17 of this Toolkit for the Work Positive questionnaire. See the HSA's website (www.hsa.ie) for copies of:

- **Work Positive stress audit tool.**
- **Work Positive case studies.**
- **Stress at Work – OPSH in Figures** (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009). Website: www.osha.europa.eu.

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