# What is stress and why do we need to tackle it?

People often get confused about the difference between pressure and stress. We all experience pressure regularly – it creates a ‘buzz’ that can motivate us to perform at our best. ‘Stress’ itself is not a medical condition; it is clearly distinct from pressure and is defined as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them*’*. It is when we experience too much pressure and feel unable to cope that stress can result. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates the costs to society of work related stress to be around £4 billion each year, with13.5 million working days lost to stress in 2007/08. By taking action to reduce the problem, you can help create a more productive, healthy workforce and save money.

**Occupational stress can be defined as ill-health and/or adverse work performance resulting from negative reactions to factors within the workplace**. It has become recognised as a significant contributor to ill-health and sickness absence. The University considers it important to minimise such stress among its staff and is fully committed to providing a safe and healthy working environment. To that end, the University will endeavour to prevent, as far as practicable, the occurrence of occupational stress, and where such stress does occur, to provide appropriate advice and support to individuals and line management.

As an employer, **we have a legal duty to assess the risk of work-related stress and to take measures to control these risks**. The law requires that as a minimum you note down the main points about the significant risks and how you decided to address these.

There are six primary sources of stress at work:

1 **Demands** Includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

2 **Control** How much say do the people have over the way they work?

3 **Support** Includes encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

4 **Relationships** Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

**5 Role** Do people understand their role within the organisation and does the organisation ensure roles are not conflicting?

6 **Change** How is organisational change (large and small) managed and communicated?

The guidance below offers information for line managers in the event of an employee reporting occupational stress.

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| **What you must do if a member of your staff complains about being stressed:** | | |
| 1 | Treat the complaint seriously. | |
| 2 | **Meet with the individual to:** | o   **discuss the issues** |
|  |  | o   **determine the source(s) of the stress** |
|  |  | o   **create a written action plan to address these***. You may wish to use the attached Stress Risk Assessment Template Form (pages 9/10).* |
|  |  | o   **agree a review period and follow-up meeting.** |
| 3 | If the source is within your area of control, discuss with the individual how the situation might be improved. | |
| 4 | If the source is outside your control seek help from your HR Business Partner. | |
| 5 | Where necessary, consider referring the individual to the Occupational Health Service for advice (speak to your HR Business Partner for advice). | |
| 6 | Maintain confidentiality. | |

**Identifying and addressing occupational stress**

Solutions will depend on what has been identified as the main contributors to the individual feeling stressed.

Further guidance follows on:

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| o   The six main contributors to work-related stress | o   Possible management actions to consider in order to resolve issues |
| o   Possible questions to use during discussion with an employee | o   Desired State – outcomes we hope to achieve by putting an action plan in place to address issues |
| o   Potential problems to look out for | o   A blank stress risk assessment form |

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| **Contributors to Stress** | **Possible Questions** | **Potential Problems** | **Possible Management Action** | **Desired State (interim target 6-12 months)** |
| **Role**  The job itself or the workplace environment; ensuring that your role is clear and that there are no conflicting roles  Examples:  Low status, unclear/ ambiguous job descriptions, discriminatory practices, lack of career development; overcrowding, poor ventilation, poor temperature control, excessive noise, exposure to hazardous substances, poor performance requiring management | * **Do you:**    + **have clear expectations at work?**   + **know how to get the job done?**   + **have clear duties and responsibilities?**   + **have clear goals and objectives?**   + **know how your work fits in with the overall aim of the organisation?**   + **feel that there is any ambiguity or confusion (role conflict) in your job?** *If yes, please describe:* | * Uncertainty or change of role * Lack of understanding of others’ contribution * Lack of training * Too much or too little responsibility * Poor working environment * Excessive noise * Unreasonable time pressures or demands * Poor performance**\*** in the role leading to performance management (informal/formal)   \* *While performance management processes may cause stress for an employee it is essential to continue through to a conclusion with the process in a reasonable timeframe in order to reduce such stress* | * Strategies and Plans to be discussed at team meetings, Away days, briefings etc * Meet with all staff to clarify roles and expectations * Review the induction process; ensure the job description is accurate * Ensure they know how to get the job done, have clear duties and responsibilities, goals and objectives and understand how work fits in with the overall aim of the organisation * Establish clear targets linked to organisational goals to be achieved in clear timescales * Consider whether there are any ongoing training or development requirements | * Staff understand roles and responsibilities * Systems are in place: team meetings, sweep up meetings, appraisal * The different requirements placed on staff are compatible and clear * Information is provided to enable staff to understand their roles and responsibilities and how to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have about their role |
| **Contributors to Stress** | **Possible Questions** | **Potential Problems** | **Possible Management Action** | **Desired State (interim target 6-12 months)** |
| **Demands**  Work overload/underload, working patterns and the work environment  Examples:  Unrealistic targets, uneven distribution of workload, understaffing, favouritism, underutilising of skills, boredom  Managers should also recognise that not having sufficient work can lead to stress as a consequence of insecurity and low self-esteem | * **Are you able to cope with the demands of your job?**      * **Do you take the breaks you are entitled to at work?** * **Do you require any particular training to acquire the skills to help you do your job?** * **Are there any problems with your work environment? If yes, please describe:** | * Too much to do * Too little to do * Boring or repetitive work * Poor working environment * Unachievable deadlines/time pressures, intensive work, neglecting important tasks, fast pace of work) * Mismatch between tasks and resources * Irregular or long hours | * Demands to be discussed on a regular basis at team and sweep up meetings * Time to be allocated /protected for training including on-line training * Monitoring of early and late working and workloads within a team * Working environment to be on the agenda of staff meetings * Help employee prioritise tasks * Provide task related training/time management training etc * Increase the variety of tasks * Consider changing the way tasks are allocated * Consider giving responsibility to groups, involve other staff etc * Provide staff with achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work | * Achievable objectives are agreed with Line Managers and individuals. * Workloads monitored * Staff have no issues about their work environment and there are communication channels to raise any concerns * Where possible, staff have control over their pace of work * People’s skills and abilities are matched to the job demands and Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees * Staff’s concerns about their work environment are addressed |
| **Contributors to Stress** | **Possible Questions** | **Potential Problems** | **Possible Management Action** | **Desired State (interim target 6-12 months)** |
| **Control**  How much say you have in the way you do your work  Examples:  Inability to prioritise tasks or effect the pace of work, lack of involvement in the planning of work especially at times of change | * **How could you have more say about how your job is done? E.g. c**hoice as to break times, work speed, how and in what way work is completed, flexible working time * **How could you be more included in decision making in the team?** * **How could your skills be better utilized at work?** | * Lack of opportunity to provide input into planned change * No control over pace or content of work * Lack of job security * Irregular or long hours * Unreasonable time pressures or demands | * Encourage the involvement of staff in the planning of work, including how to address problems * Seek alternative views e.g. at times of change etc. * Hold proactive discussions with staff to identify any potential issues * Discuss Training and Development needs at appraisal * Consider job role rotation within grades * Consider all formal flexible working requests and clearly communicate the findings where the request cannot be accommodated * Consider how staff are actively involved in decision making, the contribution made by teams and how reviewing performance can help identify strengths and weaknesses | * Improved awareness of outlets for concerns * Staff have opportunities for training and development * Implementation of existing flexible working policy * Staff are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work and the organisation encourages staff to develop their skills * Where possible, staff are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work * Staff have control over the pace of their work and a say as to when breaks are taken * Staff are consulted on work patterns |
| **Contributors to Stress** | **Possible Questions** | **Potential Problems** | **Possible Management Action** | **Desired State (interim target 6-12 months)** |
| **Relationships**  Promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour  Examples:  Managerial style, confrontational approach, toleration of discrimination/ harassment, poor communication, lack of consultation, last minutism, acceptance of poor working relationships, bullying, victimisation | * **How could communication in the team be improved?** * **If you feel that you are experiencing harassment at work, what parts of the University’s Policy on Harassment could help?** | * Poor working relationships * Strained relationships at work and friction and anger between colleagues * Bullying or harassment in the workplace, whether directly experienced or witnessed * Restricted social contact * Poor communications and consultation | * Identify early signs and address them promptly and firmly * Ensure awareness and use of the University’s policies for handling grievances, unsatisfactory performance, poor attendance, misconduct and Bullying and Harassment * Provide access to training in interpersonal skills * Developing your Team * Managing People Performance * Developing Personal Effectiveness in the Workplace * Coaching Skills * Communications Skills * Directorate meetings * Directorate communications * Team building events/charity events/social events/away days | * Good interpersonal relationships between colleagues * Staff feel supported at work and receive regular and constructive feedback      * Staff know what support is available and how to access it |

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| **Contributors to Stress** | **Possible Questions** | **Potential Problems** | **Possible Management Action** | **Desired State (interim target 6-12 months)** |
| **Change**  How organisational change is managed and communicated  Examples:  Job insecurity when organisational changes could lead to a reduction in the workforce or when individuals don’t feel confident about their ability to do the job well or don’t have enough time or support | * **How could your line manager better support you during change at work?** * **How could the organisation better support you during change at work?** | * Uncertainty of future role * Fears about job security * Uncertainty of skills for new tasks * Organisational or technological change | * Ensure good communication with staff * Provide support for staff throughout the process * Maintain the timely provision and cascade of information through the management chain * Provide access to appropriate training e.g. Coping with change * Ensure appropriate management of staff affected by organisational change and staff redeployment protocol * Use a checklist for managing a change project * Plan ahead so change doesn’t come out of the blue * Work together with staff to solve problems | * Provide employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes * Provide adequate opportunity for consultation on proposed changes * Staff are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs * Staff are aware of timetables for changes * Staff have access to relevant support during changes * If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs |

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| **Contributors to Stress** | **Possible Questions** | **Potential Problems** | **Possible Management Action** | **Desired State (interim target 6-12 months)** |
| **Support**  Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the University, management and your colleagues  Examples:  Lack of resources available to do the job; lack of meetings with line manager; no encouragement or feedback given | * **How could your line manager better support you to do your job?** * **How could your colleagues better support you to do your job?** * **Do you feel you have a healthy work-life balance?** If not how could you improve this? | * Lack of support from managers and co-workers * Inability to balance the demands of work and home * lack of feedback or acknowledgement * poor or inconsistent management * Too many bosses | * Management training on policies * Team building events * Mentoring of new / junior staff * Meetings take place on a regular basis especially at appraisal * Praise given where due * Support and encourage staff, even when things go wrong * Provide supportive feedback, line manager encouragement, help with work problems, support with emotionally demanding work and when annoyed or upset * Work-life balance - investigate the possibility of flexible working and arrangements, part time work, career break etc * Encourage colleagues to provide help, support and respect to those with work related problems | * Staff feel supported at work and receive regular and constructive feedback * Good team ethos and supportive attitude * Encourage greater sharing of feedback * Staff know what support is available and how to access it |

**Employee: Department:**

**Line Manager: Date:**

| **Type of Stressor** | **Specific causes of workplace stress identified** | **Existing workplace precautions in place** | **Further action to be taken** | **Who will ensure the action is done** | **Review meeting date and outcome** |
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| **DEMANDS - *i.e. issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment*** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **CONTROL *–*** *i.e.**how much say the person has in the way they do their work* |  |  |  |  |  |
| **SUPPORT *-*** *i.e. encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, management and colleagues* |  |  |  |  |  |
| **RELATIONSHIPS *–*** *i.e. promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour* |  |  |  |  |  |
| **ROLE *–*** *i.e. whether people understand their role within the organisation and ensures there are no*  *conflicting roles* |  |  |  |  |  |
| **CHANGE** *– e.g.**how organisational change is managed and communicated in the organisation* |  |  |  |  |  |

**Date of follow-up Review Meeting: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**