

**Effective stress
management policy
implementation**

Organisations need to ensure all employees are aware that it takes the management of workplace stress seriously. A key way of achieving this is to effectively implement a workplace stress policy. Not only will this help to assure employees that managers take the issue seriously, but it also provides an effective tool to identify, assess and tackle possible causes of stress in the workplace.

The policy needs to be under constant and active implementation. To ensure this, a stress at work policy group consisting of management and staff side working in partnership can help to ensure that departments are regularly assessing the risks of stress in the workplace and are taking action to address this. The group could:

- act as a focus group for best practice
- work as a discussion forum for organisational events which support the organisation to manage stress more effectively
- consult with any staff support networks that may exist within the organisation, for example, disabled employees' network, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) network, black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) network to get their insights/perspective on the implementation of the policy.

Care should be given to which parts of the policy are around process and which parts are around advice. There is a risk that guidance is seen as 'policy' in that it becomes an instruction to be followed. It may be useful to separate the document into policy and guidance:

- the policy part can deal with the process which needs to be followed to identify and manage stress
- the guidance can be around what departmental interventions can be put in place to reduce or prevent particular risks caused by specific occurrences.

Checklist: What to include in the policy

To make a strong statement and to have an effective process to identify,

Statement of intent

Include a statement at the beginning of the policy making a commitment to preventing, managing, and reducing the causes of stress.

Context

Ensure the policy reflects the legal implications of why organisations have to manage stress in the workplace.

- While there is no specific legislation on stress, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require all employees to be protected from risk and harm, so far as is reasonably practical, and for employers to assess the risks of workplace hazards. As stress can cause harm to individuals, stating the statutory requirements of organisations contextualises the need to have an effective stress at work policy.
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines on promoting mental wellbeing at work also provide context for work on stress and should be implemented by NHS organisations (NICE 2009).

Definitions

Define stress, as this is key to understanding what it is and how it can occur. Citing HSE's six management standards is key to understanding how stress can manifest and where it can be controlled in order to prevent it from causing harm.

Process for identifying stress

By following the HSE's Plan / Do / Check / Act approach all aspects of the process may be evaluated.

The risk assessment is to be reviewed on an annual basis and a year-on-year analysis on improvements and feedback for ongoing learning will provide information and reassurance to employees that management of stress at work is being discussed and actioned.

Ensure there is an effective way for identifying where stress is likely to occur. This could be through an annual audit, or through sporadic audits

Identifying priorities

Ensure that once the data has been collected, it can be assessed and prioritised to identify where the greatest risk exists.

- If the Stress Indicator Tool is used, data can be downloaded into the HSE analysis tool to produce a report.
- The policy should state the process for implementing action and ensuring progress on priorities. Procedures should be put in place to monitor and review the effectiveness of the policy.

Staff involvement in action planning

Ensure processes which look to prioritise key areas for action are agreed and implemented with staff involvement.

Once the data shows which departments and which factors are of highest concern, hold a time-out or action planning meeting with staff and their safety representatives to identify clear priorities with methods of evaluation and timescale for review.

Cascade action plans through team briefings for information and make them available to health and safety committees, workforce committees and stress at work policy groups for performance management and assurance purposes.

Available resources

Make reference to what internal and external support is available to staff who suffer from stress on an individual basis, including:

- where to go in order to seek support
- which websites can offer advice on dealing with stress
- who to speak to within the organisation. Individuals should be able to self-refer to occupational health services.

The policy should avoid giving advice on how an individual may self-diagnose stress. There is a risk that employees may think themselves as stressed, which itself becomes a source of stress.

Responsibilities

Make reference to who is responsible within the organisation for implementing and supporting the policy:

- the chief executive to reference the need for top-level support for ensuring policy practice is embedded within the organisation
- senior manager and line manager responsibilities – to implement at departmental level
- human resources – usually as the lead for the policy and to monitor effectiveness
- health and safety team – to support development and implementation of policy
- occupational health – to support the development and implementation of policy
- safety representatives – to act in a collegiate way and escalate concerns
- employees – to act in a way which ensures their behaviours do not cause stress within others.

Cross reference to policies which already exist

Ensure that the policy references other policies, such as the prevention of bullying and harassment or flexible working policies and practices. Stress is not in itself a single condition caused by a single factor.