

**Management behaviours  
which impact on stress at  
work**

## Management behaviours which impact on stress at work

Business Psychology Consultancy, Zeal Solutions commissioned by the NHS Staff Council, HSWG subgroup, (Zeal Solutions, 2013) looked at which management behaviours have positive and negative impacts on health and wellbeing in the workplace.

In this section, managers can use their research findings as a toolbox to reflect whether they demonstrate the positive management behaviours which impact on health and what they could do differently that would have a positive outcome.

In partnership with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and Investors in People, HSE has developed a self-assessment tool to help managers reflect on their behaviour and management style.

Managers should also consider whether unconscious bias is affecting their behaviour or decision making in any way.

### **Workplace features having a positive impact on health.**

Listed below are some of the recommended behaviours which are seen to have a positive impact on employee perceptions of support.

#### **1. Supportive management behaviour**

According to the HSE one of the six factors influencing stress at work is support. Business Psychology Consultancy - Zeal Solutions' research findings (commissioned by the NHS Staff Council), indicated that managers provide an important role in offering support. The research shows how employees look to managers for approval, appreciation, and information.

Management support was also seen as crucial at a time of organisational change, which is another of the HSE's six factors.

Recommended behaviour impact statement from research	Impact statement from research based on staff feedback

Managers should provide feedback and communicate openly on actions/ decisions taken.	“It’s not just the communication. It’s actually being honest... and answering the questions. And being open.”
Managers should use the knowledge, skills, and expertise of their staff.	“Managers should involve the team in how to find solutions to problems. Staff have a great deal of experience, knowledge and expertise that can help to make a difference.”
Managers need to consider how best to protect staff from increasing and competing demands.	“We feel like we are fighting a constant battle because there are different demands coming in from different people.”
Managers need to keep staff updated and provide a rationale for actions and decisions taken.	“Managers need to keep you updated on what’s going on, so you know what’s happening and you’re fully aware.”
Managers should be given the training as well as protected time to carry out performance reviews that are considered high-quality, effective, and supportive of staff development opportunities.	“More needs to be made of performance appraisals. This is a good source of feedback but rarely used appropriately. It is used as a tick-box exercise, but it needs to be monitored and used properly not just as a once-a-year exercise. We should also consider 360-degree appraisals, so we can appraise our managers.”
Managers should be offered training which makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in employee health and wellbeing.	“Managers need to lead by example and to be made more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others.”

## 2. Positive interpersonal collegiate relationships

Another one of the six factors in influencing stress at work, according to the HSE, was relationships. Having positive relationships builds resilience within staff. For instance, staff groups experiencing a major or critical incident can share the experience through debrief with colleagues, which helps to control and manage the stress caused by the event.

Having positive working relationships across teams is also important for building teamwork outside the department. Having trust and appreciation across specialty and department supports more effective patient care as well as generating a feeling of wellbeing within individuals. These both produce positive feelings which helps manage the perception and resilience towards stress. Once again, consultation with relevant staff support networks can also help to engender trust and confidence across the wider organisation.

Below are some recommended behaviours, which managers can implement which will increase the likelihood of people perceiving positive interpersonal collegiate relationships.

Recommended behaviour	Impact statement from research
Ensure all are aware of the true value of effective teamwork and the impact organisational change can have on performance.	“We are looking at relocating... and I think anxiety levels have just shot through the roof, because that is beyond our control, but that would be an example of such a devastating impact on team culture, because we rely on each other so much.”
Provide appropriate and tailored team training and team working events, this includes increasing the level of interaction between and within specialties.	“Teamwork is pretty good in some parts, but we need more of it. We are not trained to work in teams but just expected to be able to do this. Some people are more natural at team working than others and this should be acknowledged and managed in some way.”
Make use of pre-existing services that assist with staff	

development.	“We’ve got a mediation service which has been used quite a bit and that’s been brilliant.”
Wherever possible, ensure policies, procedures and practices are applied consistently.	“It is often because different application of policies and procedures leads to conflict between people. You find that whispering cultures start to develop and issues escalate. Some staff are treated differently. For example, some are able to obtain annual leave when they like, for others it is a great deal more difficult.”
Utilise the most appropriate medium of communication when delivering messages.	“People do everything by email now so you’re losing the personal touch... the email doesn’t portray emotions and is so impersonal.”
Managers should be offered training which makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in employee health and wellbeing.	“Managers need to lead by example and to be made more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others.”

### 3. Positive contribution

Giving people information and feedback is central for supporting health and wellbeing in the workplace, as identified within both the role and support. Ensuring appraisals are carried out, and ensuring a balance between praise and constructive criticism, will support employees to understand and relate more effectively to their organisation.

Below are some of the recommended behaviours, with impact statements, which supports staff who took part in the research feel this adds benefit.

Recommended behaviour	Impact statement from research
-----------------------	--------------------------------

<p>sessions to acknowledge positive contributions.</p>	<p>“Although there are some improvements in places, more emphasis needs to be made on the importance of the performance appraisal system. This emphasis should not be put just on managers; all staff have a role to play here. Supervision doesn’t have to be formal it can also be informal. It becomes important that you can also chat about difficulties you are facing with colleagues who can help you to reflect and see a way through sometimes.”</p>
<p>Provide more positive feedback to staff.</p>	<p>“At the end of the day for somebody – just anybody – to come to you and say, ‘thank you.’ It’s a big word, thank you. Sometimes that’s just all you need.”</p>
<p>Ensure positive contribution is acknowledged within management development and training.</p>	<p>“At the end of the day for somebody – just anybody – to come to you and say, ‘thank you.’ It’s a big word, thank you. Sometimes that’s just all you need.”</p>
<p>Share positive feedback or customer/client satisfaction with staff.</p>	<p>“You rarely hear anything positive, all we hear is ‘we’ve had a massive complaint today’ but you rarely hear ‘we’ve had a lovely message that that says thank you very much.’ Hearing positive feedback is good for our morale.”</p>
<p>Utilise the most appropriate medium of communication when delivering messages.</p>	<p>“People do everything by email now so you’re losing the personal touch... the email doesn’t portray emotions and is so impersonal.”</p>
<p>Managers should be offered training which</p>	

makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in employee health and wellbeing.

“Managers need to lead by example and to be made more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others.”

#### 4. Participation/kept informed

Ensuring staff are kept briefed on key issues fits in with the role and support aspects of the HSE stress at work factors. The impact statements below illustrate the importance of ensuring staff have regular updates and feedback. Highlighted is the need to measure staff opinion, but to also give staff feedback on what managers plan to do with this information. This also gives an element of control, another factor regarded by the HSE as key to influencing stress.

Therefore, keeping staff up to date and working through issues identified within the annual staff survey to improve their workplace is an effective way of helping staff increase resilience against stress.

Recommended behaviour	Impact statement from research
Keep staff up to date and in the picture.	"I think if there was a bit more honesty about what was actually happening that would help. It seems as though we are given little snippets of information rather than the full picture. You often hear comments and things being said that can actually be interpreted in many different ways; it is unnerving and upsetting."
Improve access to information through web-based technology.	We have an intranet site, but it is too complicated and difficult to navigate to find anything of use or meaning.”
Hold regular feedback sessions with staff groups so views can be shared, and questions asked and answered.	“We would welcome the opportunity of meeting with senior managers at specific times throughout the year so we can raise our issues, share ideas and ask questions.”

<p>When collecting data from staff (for example, through surveys), ensure staff understand how this has benefited them.</p>	<p>“We seem to complete lots of surveys or forms but yet no one ever tells us what they are for or how they are being used or if anything has changed as a result of them.”</p>
<p>Prevent staff from hearing messages from other sources first rather than receiving information from credible sources within the organisation.</p>	<p>“There is nothing more demoralising than hearing about change in your place of work through the local paper or from other sources. We are not children, although the news is not always easy to say, we would rather know than find out through a third party.”</p>
<p>Managers should be offered training which makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in employee health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>“Managers need to lead by example and to be made more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others.”</p>

### **Workplace features having a negative influence on health.**

This section discusses where management action can have a detrimental impact on stress in the workplace. Managers should consider these suggested behaviours in a positive manner, in that taking that approach can lead to a reduction in the negative factors which can increase feelings of stress.

#### **1. Work overload**

Stress is more likely to occur when there is a loss of control in managing demand – another one of the HSE factors which is seen to influence stress. Where that is often felt most acutely in organisations is through workload pressure. Where an individual perceives that they do not have control over the workload, this increases the risk of burnout. The recommended behaviours suggest more management control in managing workflow and ensuring appropriate staffing with the required



skills, but it also recommends that staff can escalate concerns and feel they are being addressed.

<b>Recommended behaviour</b>	<b>Impact statement from research</b>
Understand team workload and strengths and effective management of work tasks and teams.	“Part of the solution is about managers knowing their staff, how much their staff have got on and how they are coping. Often staff are just so committed to doing a good job that they skip lunch or other breaks because time is so tight, and they don’t want to let people down.”
Support staff in terms of prioritising tasks.	“I don’t personally know which tasks I can just leave and which ones I can’t, but my manager does. It is important that they give you guidance and feedback and say ‘actually, that one’s important, get that one done, don’t do that one.’ ”
Develop a culture whereby staff feel confident about raising concerns about workload.	“It is about engendering an open culture of communication at all levels. If staff feel they can communicate when they feel work is too much, then it allows them to share their feelings rather than holding on to them which cannot be good for their health.”
Encourage teamwork and skill mix.	“Everyone should work as a team; you should all be doing your bit. It impacts on our workload because someone else hasn’t done their part.”
Review and reduce any unnecessary paperwork and administration.	"Whilst it is important to record our practice, we sometimes have to record the same information/tasks on numerous occasions. I'm sure there are ways in which the amount of

	paperwork we have to complete can be reduced a little."
Managers should be offered training which makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in employee health and wellbeing.	"Managers need to lead by example and to be made more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others."

## 2. Poor equipment and resources

Not having the right tools for the job is something which heightens the perception of stress in the areas of control, particularly where there is increased demand. It is recognised that there is always challenge in ensuring enough appropriate equipment within NHS resources, but if managed effectively, the research shows that this has a positive effect on feelings of resilience, as the impact statements below show.

Recommended behaviour	Impact statement from research
Improve access to resources and standardise resources.	"It is important for us to have the right equipment to do the job. This can range from simple bits of equipment to more complex things. Sometimes it can be difficult to access equipment; we also have different pieces/types of equipment for certain jobs which can make life very difficult and confusing."
Ensure staff are kept up to date with equipment faults, maintenance, and repairs.	"There can be a major problem, but it takes two weeks to fix and nobody tells you anything, they just don't act. There's no communication."
Ensure knowledge and learning is managed across the organisation.	"We need to get better at capturing lessons and ensuring learning is shared and acted on. Staff are very innovative and have lots of ideas on how to save resources by, for example, working smarter and more effectively."

<p>Adopt a more strategic approach to asset management.</p>	<p>"There are constant pressures across the trust to save on resources. The better the processes are for monitoring and managing our assets, the better we will be at managing and meeting our pressures to save money. This does not just apply to our hospital; this is about the NHS in general."</p>
<p>Review and reduce any unnecessary documentation administration.</p>	<p>"Whilst it is important to record our practice, we sometimes have to record the same information/tasks on numerous occasions. I'm sure there are ways in which the amount of documentation we have to complete can be reduced a little."</p>
<p>Managers should be offered training which makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in employee health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>"Managers need to lead by example and to be made more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others."</p>

### 3. Difficult home-life balance

Another area where control and demand come in to conflict is around work-life balance. Where there is a perception that work impacts on home life or prevents someone leaving on time to care for a dependent, there can be a perception that work has crossed a boundary which can lead to heightened perceptions of stress. Insisting on challenging timescales where they do not need to exist is another management behaviour which can be amended to improve the perception of health and wellbeing.

<p><b>Recommended behaviour</b></p>	<p><b>Impact statement from research</b></p>
-------------------------------------	--

	understanding of what is possible to achieve in the time we actually work. This is because those who stop when they are supposed to stop are then made to look bad.”
Ensure the impact of additional duties and/or tasks are considered appropriately.	“There is a need for forward planning, instead of dropping things on people, to have that foresight and forward planning to do the instruction correctly in the first place.”
Consider the added value or benefit of flexible working.	“There needs to be an education shift on the whole approach to flexible working.”
Empower/enable staff to feel confident about asking questions and raising issues.	“Managers need to encourage people to ask more questions. So, if someone says to you ‘it’s 4:55pm, can I have this tomorrow?’ you ask the question as to when it’s actually needed: ‘When are you actually going to use this information?’ ‘Well actually, 5pm tomorrow’ So you think, actually I can do it tomorrow morning. But sometimes people don’t feel empowered to ask someone questions.”
Managers should be offered training which makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in employee health and wellbeing.	“Managers need to lead by example and to be made more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others.”

### **Homeworking on work-life balance**

With the change in the workplace during 2020 and more employees are working from home, the HSE recommend the following key areas are reviewed on a regular basis as part of a risk assessment.

Lone working, and the importance of regular contact and information on whom to contact.

Working with display screen equipment and a home working assessment.

Stress and mental health, due to being away from managers and work colleagues, which could make it difficult to get appropriate support.

#### **4. Work-related aggression and violence**

Violent and aggressive incidents are the third biggest cause of injuries reported under RIDDOR from the health and social care sector. Employers and employees should work together to establish systems to prevent or reduce aggressive behaviour.

Being treated with dignity and respect is a key to managing stress in the workplace. Staff are likely to have less resilience if they are subjected to behaviour which they feel undermines their sense of value and self-worth.

Employers have a duty of care to protect staff from threats and violence at work. Having a clear risk-based management approach on how staff report violence at work enables data to be built up identifying trends, providing opportunity for feedback. Where further action is required, it enables employers to provide follow-up support, and where required criminal proceedings against the individual. These steps could enable staff to feel they will be protected from disrespectful behaviour.

The following publications provide further guidance:

- NHS violence prevention and reduction standard.
- NHS Wales anti-violence collaborative obligatory responses to violence in healthcare.
- NHS Wales anti-violence collaborative key documents.
- Scotland Health workforce.

It is important to recognise that feedback to employees on any reports encourages employees to continue to report issues as they will feel their concerns have been noted and recognised.

Recommended behaviour	Impact statement from research
<p>Heighten awareness of the organisational response to tackling work-related violence and verbal abuse and aggression.</p>	<p>“More needs to be done in terms of the organisation’s response to violence and aggression. We know that letters are sent to patients, but the organisation needs to make staff more aware of the action it is taking to deal with this issue.”</p>
<p>Assess staff needs for workplace aggression and violence management training and ensure training is available to all staff and is well attended.</p>	<p>“We are provided with conflict resolution training every three years as it is mandatory. However, you quickly lose the information you were taught. We also need to have more appropriate levels of training that help to tackle the problems – for example, internally staff need to be aware of the impact they have on each other. It is about being aware of each other’s perceptions.”</p>
<p>Making greater use of the court system/prosecutions/behaviour orders against aggressors and where successful prosecutions have occurred, ensure staff are aware of this.</p>	<p>“If it’s actual physical violence they should be taken through the court system rather than an individual having to take it through the civil courts. It should be organisational... it’s the way the law works though, as opposed to the way the organisation works.”</p>
<p>Improve public education about the impact of workplace aggression and violence.</p>	<p>“As a trust, we don’t actually publicise ‘what’s happening’... we don’t work particularly well with the press.</p>
<p>Raise awareness of the importance of</p>	

<p>management support when dealing with workplace aggression and violence.</p>	<p>“They’ve got better nowadays in terms of management coming in and seeing how you are... but that’s only up to local security management (LSM) level, there’s nothing above that. It is important that staff feel they have the support and backing of their managers. Managers are important for helping staff to deal with incidents as well as trying to work out what happened and how it might be avoided in the future.”</p>
<p>Managers should be offered training which makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in employee health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>“Managers need to lead by example and to be made more aware of the impact of their behaviour on others.”</p>

## **Burnout**

Burnout is a term often used when talking about overwork and stress. It can occur when experiencing long periods of very demanding workloads that typically include long and stressful hours. Staff suffering from burnout often experience lower energy levels, difficulty dealing with others and may have some trouble completing tasks on the job, in part because they find it difficult to concentrate. They may also experience feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and isolation. Burnout can have a detrimental impact - not only the individual but for the organisation and service users as it can lead to absenteeism or extended time away from work in order to recover from physical and mental exhaustion. If pro-active measures are not taken to prevent burnout, employers run the risk of losing highly committed and skilled employees.

## **Supporting return to work**

Organisations should support individuals to work towards a return to work following a spell of absence with stress, anxiety or depression or any other mental health condition. A flexible approach may be required, specifically to extending a phased return period for longer than a standard policy

allows. This can include the exploration of modified shifts, reduced and flexible hours. When supporting a phased return, the NHS Terms and Conditions of Service handbook (Annex 26) makes provisions for staff to receive their normal pay.

You should explore whether the individual's existing duties could be reduced or amended (temporarily or permanently, taking into account the needs and wishes of the individual) to facilitate a return to work. Conversations to explore how duties may be adapted to enable individuals to work from home for a specified period may be required. Temporary changes should be reviewed intermittently in consultation with the worker and occupational health to consider a return to normal duties.

Stress can affect all levels within an organisation from clinical to non-clinical staff.

Work related stress is not limited to clinicians and professionals. Initial findings from a 2021 Health Foundation study on the health and wellbeing of lower paid NHS staff on Band 4 or below, found higher rates of workplace stress, sickness absence, along with job insecurity, discrimination and working more than one job.