Guidance on managing workplace stress
Date of Issue: July 2024

This guidance note has been developed to assist you in specific situations, it is not a policy or statutory practice.

This document can be used to assist with policy implementation but does not form part of the relevant policy. It is recommended for use alongside relevant policies and procedures.

Please contact HR Services for further advice: hrservices@hfleducation.org/ 01438 544463.

1. Introduction

Employers have a legal duty to manage the risks to employees' health and safety, including the risks arising from stress. Addressing workplace stress has numerous benefits - from a healthier and more engaged workforce to a reduction in staff turnover and sickness absence.

The purpose of this guidance is to:

- raise awareness of the organisation's duty of care to employees

- provide managers with an understanding of workplace stress and potential causes

- guide managers in addressing causes and considering relevant measures to control any risk to health from workplace stress

- promote practical steps in supporting employees who are experiencing workplace stress.

2. What is workplace stress?

Stress is defined by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them".

This definition does not portray stress and pressure as one and the same. It is widely recognised that pressure has a positive influence on performance and wellbeing if managed correctly, whereas excessive pressure can be detrimental to the mental and physical health of an employee.

Both the organisation and the employee should identify at what point pressure may become excessive and implement reasonable measures to address any detrimental impact on the health of their employees.

It is reasonable for managers to assume that in any workplace there will be periods that are more pressurised than others and that in an educational setting:

- employees should anticipate periods of increased pressure at defined times during the normal academic cycle, for example around exams

- most employees are psychologically capable of withstanding reasonable pressures at work

- sustained and excessive work pressures may lead to anxiety, depression and a poor work-life balance.

3. Potential causes of workplace stress

Stress is determined by a person's perception of a situation or stressor and therefore causes of stress differ between individuals. The HSE identifies six factors which, when spoken about openly and honestly, can help uncover the real causes of workplace stress: Demands; Control; Support; Relationships; Role; Change.

3.1. Demands

Do employees perceive they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs? This includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment. The impact of high demands can be reduced if the employee is able to have a high level of control over their work.

3.2.   Control

Do employees perceive they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and managers? Consider how much say the person has in the way they do their work. The impact of high demands and low control can be reduced by having high levels of support, either from colleagues or from you as their manager.

3.3.   Support

Do employees perceive they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and managers? Support can range from a simple conversation to an occupational health referral or a signpost to the organisation's employee assistance programme.

3.4.   Relationships

Do employees perceive they are subjected to unacceptable behaviours at work? This includes promoting positive working to manage conflict and deal with unacceptable behaviour. Relationships can be one of the biggest sources of stress, especially where there are perceptions of bullying and harassment.

3.5.   Role

Do employees perceive there to be a lack of understanding around their own role and responsibilities? This could include whether the employee understands their role, how they fit into the team and how they contribute to the wider business. Taking time to have a simple conversation often leads to clarification and a greater understanding of both the perceived problem(s) and the expectations of management.

3.6.   Change

Do employees have a perception of disengagement from organisational change? Consider how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated. Change does not have to be at an organisational level to have an impact on individuals or teams: staff turnover, new managers, or changes in the type of work or technology used by the team can be equally as stressful.

The HSE website offers an Education Talking Toolkit to help employers take the first step in starting conversations with employees about stress and mental health. Conversation templates are provided covering each of the above causes of workplace stress. This is also available on the MIND Gateway:

- https://campaigns.hse.gov.uk/go-home-healthy/work-related-stress/stress-in-education/

- https://www.hse.gov.uk/gohomehealthy/assets/docs/StressTalkingToolkit.pdf

- https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/toolkit/workplace-stress-fulfilling-your-responsibilities-as-an-employer/

4. Recognising symptoms of stress

Symptoms of workplace stress are many and varied depending on the individual and their circumstances. The below non-exhaustive list of common symptoms provides a guide to help in identifying workplace stress and general mental health conditions.

4.1 The way an employee may act

- taking more time-off work

- arriving at work later than usual

- appearing nervous and agitated

- underperforming in their role

- distracted or preoccupied behaviour that is out of character.

4.2 The way an employee may feel

- withdrawn

- isolated

- loss of motivation

- loss of appetite/overeating

- emotional reactions – crying, tearful.

5. What action to take

As a manager, if you have specific concerns about an individual's wellbeing or recognise possible signs and symptoms of workplace stress, it is important that these are addressed at an early stage. Hold a one-to-one meeting or have an informal discussion with your employee to open the conversation. The following tips will guide you (see appendix 2 for words to use):

- meet in a private, confidential setting

- be clear about confidentiality, and that you have a duty as a manager to disclose information if you suspect the employee could cause harm to themselves (or others)

- use open questions when talking to the employee to help them open up. A good starting point is to simply ask them how they feel

- listen to what the employee says: do not make judgements or assume everyone deals with stress in the same way

- ask the employee whether there are any problems at work (or outside of work) impacting upon their wellbeing that they wish to talk about

- Consider and discuss a referral to Occupational Health if you feel further advice is required, particularly where mental health issues have been disclosed or are apparent

- signpost the employee to interventions which can offer further support, encouraging them to make contact and obtain further support.

The following tools used either before or during the meeting can help to open up conversation or help you frame and focus the conversation:

- Ask the employee to consider and complete the Individual Stress Assessment form (appendix 1) to help them think about what is causing them stress at work. Use this form to have a conversation about the issues and agree solutions

- Use the HSE's Education Talking Toolkit to open up the conversation as above

- Use the Mental Health First Aid England (MHFA) Address Your Stress toolkit https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/resource/address-your-stress-toolkit/?read=more to allow the employee to view stress as a natural part of working life and to focus on which parts need to be addressed specifically. MHFA England also provides a range of training to empower people to care for themselves and others so you may consider investing in this.

6. Roles and suggested responsibilities

6.1. Employee

- apply reasonable management of their own emotional wellbeing at work

- collaborate with line managers and Occupational Health professionals to agree appropriate support and reasonable management action

- raise concerns with line managers, actively proposing realistic solutions and remedies whilst applying consideration to the needs of the business

- use the individual stress assessment form (appendix 1) to list and qualify concerns.

6.2. Manager

- support individuals who submit a completed Individual Stress Assessment form (appendix 1) to report workplace stress. Ask relevant questions to identify and discuss stressors. Support early resolution where possible through short term measures such as reasonable adjustments

- complete a wellbeing action plan (appendix 3) in liaison with the employee, to record workplace stressors and document what action is already being taken to reduce the risk of stress, including what further action is required

- implement reasonable management strategies identified by the wellbeing action plan

- continually review wellbeing action plan as appropriate

- consider implementing reasonable adjustments recommended by Occupational Health professionals ensuring that they are realistic and do not cause long-term detriment.

7. Support available

7.1. Employee Assistance Programmes

Employee Assistance Program's (EAP) are employee benefit schemes available to employers as a subscription service. They are intended to help employees deal with personal problems that might adversely impact their work performance, health, and overall wellbeing. EAPs often include 24-hour telephone support for employees, trauma management, short-term face to face counselling sessions and a selection of wellbeing workshops.

A number of providers operate nationwide, and some are set up specifically to cater for the education sector. Settings in Hertfordshire can obtain a reduced subscription rate to Right Corecare (trading as Vita Health Group) via the Herts County Council

framework: www.thegrid.org.uk/schoolworkforce/wellbeing/employee_assistance.shtml

Some insurance policies (for example those covering staff absence costs) also include EAP services such as staff counselling.

Vita Health www.vitahealthgroup.co.uk

Education Support www.educationsupport.org.uk/EAP

7.2.   Confidential Support and Advice

Mind is a mental health charity providing advice and support to anyone experiencing a mental health problem. The Mind website provides supportive and reliable information to anyone and aims to empower people to understand their condition and the choices available to them. Mind offers an **Infoline** which provides callers with confidential help - http://www.mind.org.uk/

Mental Health at Work is an online gateway, developed by Mind, that provides employers with advice and tools needed to support the mental health of staff.   The site brings together resources, toolkits, blogs and case studies into one place. https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/

Mind in Mid-Herts provide a one-stop shop to improve emotional and physical wellbeing and have 4 offices across Hertfordshire (Stevenage, St Albans, Hertford, Welwyn Garden City). The centres offer a range of services, including self-help groups, training courses and exercise programmes https://mindinmidherts.org.uk/about-us/

Rethink Mental Illness is a network of local groups and services and expert information challenging attitudes and helping people living with conditions like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, personality disorders http://www.rethink.org/

Depression Alliance has 40 years' experience working closely with healthcare professionals and government agencies to improve local services and to ensure a healthier, happier life for those affected by depression http://www.depressionalliance.org/

Time to Change is England's biggest program to challenge mental health stigma and discrimination http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/
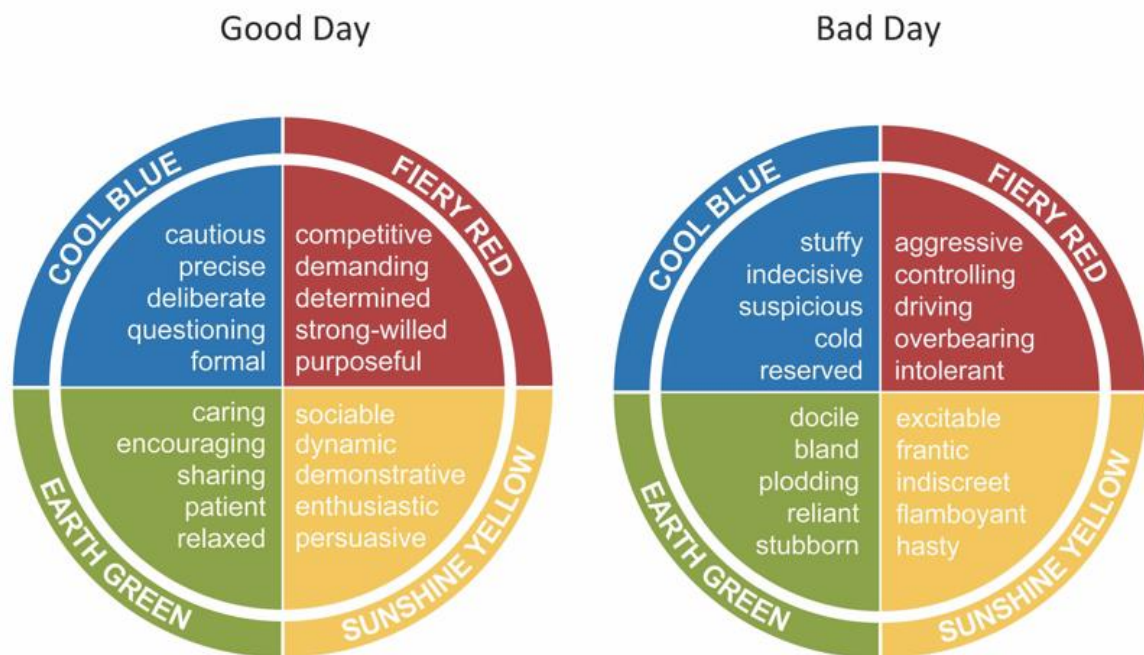
Education Support Network – provides support to all those working in the education sector, recognising that many of the issues faced in education are universal: workload, stress, student behavioral problems, work life balance. As well as a website there is a telephone helpline (08000 562 561) for crisis situations http://www.educationsupport.org.uk/

7.3.   Managing workplace stress using Insights Discovery

At the heart of workplace stress is often a failure to communicate effectively or appreciate that people see the same thing in different ways. The less we understand someone the more likely it is that our perceptions and assumptions about how they prefer to communicate will be wrong, thereby increasing the likelihood of miscommunication or friction in a working

relationship.

An effective way of understanding how others perceive situations and communicate is the Insights Discovery personality profiling tool. Using four colour energies to express preferences for style and behaviour this tool helps leaders and teams build a greater appreciation of those they work with. It aids understanding of how people prefer to behave and how pressure or stress may result in different behaviours from person to person.

For a discussion about how your setting could use Insights Discovery please contact HR Services on hrservices@hfleducation.org/01438 544463.

8. Appendix 1 – Individual stress assessment form (employees)

Consider the statements and tick the answer that matches how you feel.

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	I am clear what is expected of me at work					
2	I can decide when to take a break					
3	Different groups at work demand things from me that are hard to combine					
4	I know how to go about getting my job done					
5	I am subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour					
6	I have unachievable deadlines					
7	If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me					
8	I am given supportive feedback on the work I do					
9	I have to work very intensively					
10	I have a say in my own work speed					
11	I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are					
12	I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do					
13	I am clear about the goals and objectives for my department					
14	There is friction or anger between colleagues					
15	I have a choice in deciding how I do my work					
16	I am unable to take sufficient breaks					
17	I understand how my work fits into the overall aim of the organisation					
18	I am pressured to work long hours					

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
19	I have a choice in deciding what I do at work					
20	I have to work very fast					
21	I am subject to bullying at work					
22	I have unrealistic time pressures					
23	I can rely on my line manager to help me out with a work problem					
24	I get help and support I need from colleagues					
25	I have some say over the way I work					
26	I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about change at work					
27	I receive the respect at work I deserve from my Colleagues					
28	Staff are always consulted about change at work					
29	I can talk to my manager about something that has upset or annoyed me about work					
30	My working time can be flexible					
31	My colleagues are willing to listen to my work-related problems					
32	When changes are made at work, I am clear how they will work out in practice					
33	I am supported through emotionally demanding work					
34	Relationships at work are strained					
35	My line manager encourages me at work					

If you have any additional areas of concern not covered by this form please note them here:

9. Appendix 2 – conversations about workplace stress and mental health

Questions to ask	Phrases to avoid
How are you feeling at the moment?	You're clearly struggling
I've noticed you don't seem to be your usual self; you seem to be a bit down/upset/under pressure/frustrated/angry etc. Is everything OK?	You need to drop this mood; it's affecting others within the team.
I've noticed you've been late (quite) a few times recently, is everything OK?	Your timekeeping is poor; I'll be keeping my eye on things going forward.
I've noticed your books haven't been marked in a while and you're usually great at keeping on top of this. Is everything OK?	Your performance is unacceptable at the moment.
What would you like to happen? How? Is there anything I can do to help?	What do you want?
What support do you think you might help?	We're all in the same boat here. Who do you expect to pick up the work you can't manage?
Have you spoken to your GP or looked anywhere else for support?	What do you expect me to do?

As per the Disability Discrimination provision of the Equality Act 2010, it is important to note that the employee is not required to tell you about a health condition or disability; however, you can put it to them that should they not disclose a problem, it is hard for you to make workplace adjustments around it.

It should be further noted that if you break confidentiality this could be a breach of the Disability Discrimination provision of the Equality Act 2010.

If you have concerns about your skills in handling these difficult conversations, then consider developing these skills as part of your professional development. Check the HFL website for further information on Training and Events.

10. Appendix 3 – Wellbeing action plan

Use this form to assess the level of stress to individuals whilst carrying out their day-to-day role or following a period of intensive activity or change within the setting. Review and tailor the contents of this generic wellbeing action plan to meet your setting's individual circumstances.

Record what action you are already taking to reduce the risk of stress and what further action is required. Record any other significant findings and actions required to reduce risk further where existing controls are insufficient, assigning the actions to an appropriate manager.

NB – if an individual advises that they are suffering from stress or has a period of ill health absence due to stress a separate occupational health assessment should be carried out.

Establishment:	Assessment by:	Date:
Employee ref:	Manager Approval:	Date:

What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you already doing?	What further action is necessary?	Action by whom	Action by when	Completed
Are there excessive job demands? **Workload, work patterns and work environment** **Dealing with bad behaviour** **Ofsted inspections**	**Staff** **Ill health may result anxiety, depression.** **Illness may lead to absence from work**	• Performance management process in place • Regular meetings with staff, both team meetings and one to one/ performance management which would discuss and anticipate workload. • Ensure that skills and abilities are correctly matched to job (person spec and job description) • Head / Managers monitor sickness				

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What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you already doing?	What further action is necessary?	Action by whom	Action by when	Completed
		absence data and staff turnover rates • Work environment concerns, e.g., temperature, ventilation, noise, are taken seriously and investigated • Times and lengths of meetings agreed and adhered to. A limit to after-hours meetings as far as reasonable • Staff have an opportunity to take a genuine break at lunch time • Ensure teachers and middle leaders in particular maintain a reasonable work life balance • Governing bodies have considered how they can support the headteacher in terms of work-life balance, new models of leadership, leadership time, career coaching and professional development opportunities				
Control – how much say a person has in the way they do their work	Employees Ill health (depression, anxiety) leading to absence from work.	• Staff encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work • Staff encouraged to develop new skills to help them. Undertaken new and challenging pieces of work				

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What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you already doing?	What further action is necessary?	Action by whom	Action by when	Completed
		• Staff consulted over their work patterns or changes to their work patterns • Consideration of the workload impact of each new initiative **before** it is introduced • PPA time in operation, reliable and can be completed offsite • Scope for flexible working arrangements considered				
Support – includes the encouragement and resources provided	Employees Ill health (depression, anxiety) leading to absence from work.	• Employees are supported through policies and procedures • Regular team meetings / one-to-ones to discuss emergent issues • Staff are aware of the support that is available to them • Staff receive regular constructive feedback as part of their performance management • Identification of any training needs conducted through performance management	.			

What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you already doing?	What further action is necessary?	Action by whom	Action by when	Completed
		• Staff can access CPD on a fair and equitable basis • Mentoring and coaching available where necessary • Employers have the option of buying into the Employee Assistance Programme provided by PPC Worldwide (Positive People Company). It offers online, telephone and face to face counselling on a range of personal and professional themes • Headteacher support service – confidential support service provided for headteachers				
Role – whether people understand their role and the employer ensures there are not conflicting roles	Employees Ill health (depression, anxiety) leading to absence from work.	• Staff understand their role and are suitably trained • Performance management used to help individuals clarify their role and priorities • Standards of performance agreed • New employees receive adequate induction into their role and objectives • Recruitment process in place with				

What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you already doing?	What further action is necessary?	Action by whom	Action by when	Completed
		Job Descriptions and Person Specifications • Effective system of induction for new and supply staff				
Change – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated	Employees Ill health (depression, anxiety) leading to absence from work.	• Staff made aware of why change is happening and key steps for change • Realistic timetable set out for change • Individuals directly affected are involved in the change process • Regular communication and consultation with all those affected • 'Open door' policy to help individuals who have concerns • Training provided for new / changed roles				
Relationships – promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour	Employees Ill health (depression, anxiety) leading to absence from work.	• The employer promotes positive behaviours: staff behaviour policy robust and adhered to • Discipline, grievance and bullying/harassment procedures in place and accessible to staff				

What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you already doing?	What further action is necessary?	Action by whom	Action by when	Completed
		• Managers are encouraged to deal with and staff encouraged to report unacceptable behaviour • Training provided to help staff deal with difficult situations • Identify ways to celebrate success • Explore team building exercises • Whole employer / departmental activities / events held				
Undetected / poorly managed stress **Failure to recognise signs leading to more serious ill health** **Repeated ill health through poor management**	Employees Ill health (depression, anxiety) leading to absence from work.	• All incidents of potential / actual workplace stress reviewed • Advice from HR and/or Occupational Health sought • Sickness absence policy in place and adhered to return to work • interviews held remedial action taken as appropriate • All staff encouraged to pro-actively raise issues / concerns with their manager / head • Staff awareness of available support improved e.g., counseling, occupational health, GP, employee assistance programs etc.				

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What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed and how?	What are you already doing?	What further action is necessary?	Action by whom	Action by when	Completed
		• Employer has participated in the wellbeing programme or undertaken HSE survey tool • Exit interviews held				
Assessment review date usually within one year, or earlier in the event of an incident, a change in conditions or if more frequent review is warranted			dd/mm/20yy			