



Employment Guide: Stress in the Workplace

Note: This publication is intended to provide general guidance only. It does not constitute legal advice and should not be relied upon as doing so.

Advisory Officers, at the Employment Relations Service, can offer confidential and free advice on all aspects of employment law and employment relations.

Overview

Work-related stress can be described as an increase in pressure, over and beyond a person's ability to cope or their perceived ability to cope. It is a common cause of absence amongst staff and can be caused by a number of work-related issues. For example:

- Long hours
- Inability to cope/overloading
- Inability to perform
- Poor working relationships
- Bullying and harassment
- Changes in circumstances
- Poor communication
- Not suited to the role
- Poor management

However, stress can also be caused by factors outside of the workplace including:

- Bereavement
- Financial worries
- Difficult personal or family circumstances

Staff absence is likely to have a negative impact on the employer and colleagues of the affected employee. Stress can, for example, lower morale, lower productivity and cause shift rostering problems.

Recognising Stress - Signs & Symptoms

There are many symptoms which might indicate that an employee is suffering from stress, but most involve an adverse change in the employee's behaviour, productivity or level of attendance. Examples would include:

- Mood swings/depression
- Being withdrawn

- Anxiety
- Self-harming
- Paranoia/obsessiveness
- Lacking clarity of thought
- Sickness patterns/reduced attendance
- Substance dependency/misuse
- Aggression
- Presenteeism

Whilst stress itself is not an illness, if left unchecked, the effects of stress have the potential to lead to physical or mental ill-health.

Employer Responsibilities

Employers have a duty of care towards their employees and a general duty to provide a safe working environment and to safeguard the health of employees. This includes taking reasonable steps to identify and reduce risks which may lead to work-related stress.

An employer may not be discharging his/her duty of care if it can be shown that an employee has suffered significant work-related stress and that the employer knew about, or could have reasonably foreseen a problem arising, and should have prevented or minimised the risk.

Ways to Alleviate or Manage Stress in the Workplace

Conducting a work-place risk assessment to identify the potential for stress in a given work role can assist employers in minimising and managing any potential effects, allowing employers to comply with their duty of care.

Good lines of communication between management and staff are essential to managing stress in the workplace.

Employees who feel that they are suffering from stress can benefit from telling their employer or manager how they are feeling, so that the employer has an opportunity to provide support and work with the employee to find practical ways to address the problem. If an employer suspects that stress is affecting an employee or is approached by an employee with concerns, the following practical steps may assist:

1. Arrange and hold a meeting with the employee at a mutually agreed time to seek to identify the causes of stress and identify potential ways to support the employee to alleviate or ease the situation.
2. Consideration could be given to agreeing temporary or permanent changes including:
 - Reorganisation of duties

- Changes to working hours (reduction or alteration of start and finish times)
- Changes to the level of responsibility
- Change of role
- Time off to deal with external factors causing stress

3. Agree a review and monitoring system to check how the employee is coping and ensure that any changes assist and do not hinder the situation.

Having robust policies and procedures in place helps to identify and deal with problems at an early stage, thus minimising the risk of work-related stress becoming an issue (see Employment Guides relating to 'Discipline and Grievance at work' and 'Bullying and Harassment' on the Employment Relations Service website:

<http://www.gov.gg/employmentrelations>).

Useful information

There are many sources of information which provide useful insights into work-related stress, its causes and prevention. The following links may be useful:

MIND Mental Health Charity (Guernsey Branch): Advice and guidance for People suffering from mental health problems -

<http://www.guernseymind.org.gg/>

Health and Safety Executive: 'Work related stress, together we can tackle it'

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/>

Acas: information on stress in the workplace and employer / employee

rights - <http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/g/c/Stress-at-work-advisory-booklet.pdf>

Other Publications

Publications can be downloaded from the website on a wide range of employment relations matters including local employment legislation and best practice guidance on other employment related matters.

Contact Information

For further advice

- **Check** www.gov.gg/employmentrelations
- **Email** employmentrelations@gov.gg
- **Contact the Employment Relations Service**, Edward T Wheadon House, Le Truchot, St Peter Port, Guernsey, GY1 3WH
- **Call us on** 01481 732583