

ADVICE & GUIDANCE

Stress Management

1. Legal Position

Specific legislation related to the management of stress does not exist. However, there are requirements within the Health and Safety at Work etc Act (1974), and the Management of Health and Safety Regulations (1992) which established a duty for the employer to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, a safe and healthy workplace and to assess the nature and scale of risks to employees within the workplace.

It is implicit, therefore, that the employer should ensure that the employee does not suffer either undue physical or mental risk during the course of their occupation.

Whilst the legal responsibility for Health and Safety rests with the employer, head teachers will undoubtedly have delegated to them the discharge of those responsibilities within their establishment.

The recognition of stress and the application of appropriate management strategies will therefore become part of those responsibilities. (See NAHT Professional Management document PM003, paragraphs 1.2, 1.3, 1.4).

2. What is Stress?

A useful definition of stress is as follows, “A process that can occur when there is an unresolved mismatch between the perceived pressures of the work situation and the individual’s ability to cope”.

Stress related ill-health must be treated in the same way as ill-health due to physical causes. The employer, therefore, has a legal duty to ensure that the employee’s health is not placed at risk through excessive and sustained levels of stress arising from the way work is organised and the way people deal with each other and with their own work.

3. Symptoms

There are many symptoms both physical and behavioural that have been identified with high levels of stress. Some are serious ill health conditions and include high blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, depression, ulcers and thyroid disorders. Others are recognised as short-term memory loss, stomach disorders, low personal esteem and so on.

4. Who Suffers?

As the definition suggests, the amount of stress an individual encounters is directly related to the way in which they perceive the pressures placed upon them. Much, therefore, depends upon the individual's own personality, experience and motivation, as well as the support received from colleagues and managers within the workplace, as to how they will react to a potentially stressful situation.

In addition, much may also depend on the experience that people are encountering outside their workplace. If the domestic environment affords release from a stressed working environment, the employee may well be able to cope with the work stress. However, should there be a stressful situation both in the workplace and at home, it may well be that the overall stress will become intolerable.

Generally, harmful levels of stress are most likely to occur when

- pressures are prolonged and pile on top of each other;
- a feeling of entrapment occurs, where people are not able to control the demands placed on them;
- employees are confused by conflicting demands made on them.

Particular types of occupation by their very nature place especially heavy emotional demands on the employee. Clearly, the teaching profession falls into this category.

5. Identifying Stress

What do I look for?

An employee suffering from stress may exhibit some or all of the following stress problems:

- **Work performance** - There may be a general deterioration in the performance of the individual which can include wrong decision-making, poor planning and control.
- **Sickness absence** - The overstretched individual may exhibit an increase in overall sickness absence, which may fall into a particular pattern demonstrating frequent short periods of absence.
- **Attitudes and relationships** - Employees exhibiting stress related difficulties may demonstrate conflict and tension with other colleagues and a general deterioration in their relationships with others they normally come into contact with during the course of the school day. They may also demonstrate loss of motivation and commitment, which in turn may result from excessively long working hours and very little personal satisfaction in the performance of their job.

6. What Can be Done to Control Stress?

Whilst the responsibility for the creation of a safe place of work lies with the employer, it will undoubtedly fall to the head teacher to ensure the enactment of that responsibility. Strategies must be developed, therefore, to ensure that sound management prevents, as far as is possible, employees becoming over stressed.

- Attitude - The school culture should ensure that stress is not seen as a weakness in the individual and that employees suffering stress will receive support without being made to feel guilty.
- The task - The job itself must be manageable and the person's abilities, skills, and experience must match the requirements for the job. This will go a long way to ensure that the individual acquires job satisfaction.
- Periods of change - Stress often occurs during periods of change. Uncertainty should be reduced to a minimum and employees made aware of the value placed in them. They should be clear as to the job they themselves have to undertake.
- Skills training and resources must be properly distributed in order to ensure that jobs are properly and correctly undertaken.
- Open communication between employees regarding their perception of the role they have to perform, will help to identify those who may become over stressed.

7. Supporting Stressed Employees

Prevention is always better than cure. However, if an employee demonstrates high levels of stress, the employer must do all that is reasonably practicable to relieve the stress. Strategies may include:

- re-examination of the work load with a view to making beneficial changes;
- recommending a period of paid absence from school;
- suggesting support from an appropriate counsellor;
- recommending consultations with their G.P;
- directing the employee to the Occupational Health Physician.