

University of St Andrews

Human Resources and Occupational Health

A Guide to Stress Recognition and Reduction

This guidance is in line with the University's responsibilities for the health and welfare of its staff and has been drawn up by members of Human Resources and Occupational Health following consultation with Heads of Schools/Units.

The University believes that the effective management of all staff will ensure the success of the organisation and will reduce work-related stress.

Where specific work practices are identified as stressors, the University will encourage the Head of School/Unit to make reasonable adjustments to reduce work place stressors.

Individuals have a legal duty to take reasonable care of their own health and that of others especially if others may be adversely affected by an individual's action. Staff are strongly encouraged to discuss, at an early stage, any stress related issues with their Head of School/Unit or the Occupational Health Adviser or a member of Human Resources.

Individuals will be expected to support colleagues who are stressed.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this guide is to provide information to all members of staff about stress, its common causes and effects and to identify actions that can be taken to lessen the harmful effects of prolonged stress.

A measure of stress can be beneficial especially when it helps to motivate and stimulate an individual, however it can become a problem if the stressors become more than a person can comfortably tolerate, thereby causing distress. The result of this is often ill health and a decrease in self-confidence, work efficiency and performance. Therefore, the early recognition of an individual's distress and with effective remedial action, can benefit not only the individual concerned but also the workplace.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is experienced when a person believes that demand is exceeding capacity to cope. Essentially, this reaction is experienced when a person finds it difficult to handle the pressures placed upon him/her. A stress reaction is an individual response and what may constitute stress for one individual may not be stressful for

another; similarly the type and severity of stress response varies from one individual to another.

CAUSES OF STRESS

There are varying sources of stress such as family concerns, workplace relationships, work you are unable to complete or are ill equipped/trained to do, financial worries, personal and family ill health, workload and ability to cope with it, etc. Even positive events can be stressful, e.g. holidays, weddings and moving house.

The following are typical stressors at work:

Physical/Environmental Conditions:

Excessive noise, uncomfortable workplace temperatures, inadequate lighting, air pollution, potentially harmful environments, lack of privacy, poorly-designed equipment/work station.

Cultural:

Poor communications, inadequate staffing levels, lack of support, inconsistent management style, too little/too much supervision, continual changes, lack of participation in workplace decision making, uncertainty about one's working future.

Interpersonal:

Social/physical isolation, poor relationships with manager/colleagues, bullying and/or harassment, frequent changes in type of leadership style.

Job Content:

Lack of variety, repetitive or fragmented work, under-usage of skills, lack of training for type of work undertaken, implementation of new technology, conflicting demands from more than one manager.

RECOGNISING STRESS IN YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Stress can present itself through a wide range of physical, behavioural and/or psychological symptoms. Common symptoms include:-

Physical

Headaches, high blood pressure, sleep disturbances, nausea, tearfulness, muscular aches and pains, susceptibility to infections with an increase in cold/flu type illnesses etc. When stress is experienced over long periods the acute stress reaction may evolve into a chronic condition with the associated concerns of persistent high blood pressure, development of digestive disorders, e.g. stomach ulcers; there is also an increased risk of strokes, and heart attacks.

Behavioural	Poor concentration, memory loss, irritability, substance abuse (i.e. increase in intake of alcohol, coffee, tobacco), lateness, an increase in absenteeism, reduced work performance, more accidents at work and at home, an inability to achieve a good performance at work despite good intentions and plans, withdrawal from usual social contacts.
Psychological	Depression, misplaced anxiety, apathy, lack of motivation, poor concentration and memory, low self esteem, fear of failure.

STRESS REDUCTION/MANAGEMENT

If any of the aforementioned relate to you, the following solutions may help reduce or make you more resilient to stress:

Identify personal stressors:

If you can, work out what in particular stresses you and explore some practical ways to minimise the cause. There may be some issues you cannot change immediately, but there may be others you can alter or avoid.

Look after yourself:

Take up exercise, you may find learning a relaxation exercise or attending a yoga class beneficial. Alternatively, you may find that vigorous physical exercise such as swimming or walking has a greater effect on you.

Plan to eat an enjoyable nutritious diet, take a proper meal break and sit down and spend time over your food.

Ensure you get enough sleep, plan a couple of early nights per week. Find ways of relaxing and “switching off,” often getting involved with a hobby/interest that demands intense focus and concentration is beneficial.

Plan your time and try to keep to schedule.

When feeling rushed you should deliberately slow down and take more time over every action than you need (or than your stressed state is making you take).

Tackle one thing at a time.

Make a list of priorities and stick to it. Do the easiest first – you get a feeling of achievement as you proceed through the list.

WHERE TO GET HELP/SUPPORT

Internally

Manager – where stress is work related, it may be beneficial to discuss your concerns with your manager in the first instance to see what solutions may be available.

Occupational Health Unit – you can self-refer to the University's Occupational Health Unit, on a confidential basis, to discuss your concerns, where you will be offered help and advice on a short or long term basis in identifying personal stressors and in identifying assistance to help deal with these stressors.

Human Resources – will, on a confidential basis, discuss with you, and advise on how to deal with issues causing stress.

Staff Development – provides a variety of courses which you may find very useful, e.g. stress recognition, relaxation techniques, vocal projections for those of you who have to undertake public speaking, time management, event management, conflict resolution, mind mapping, how to improve your memory.

Sports Centre – various activities are available to help alleviate tension and reduce stress. A personal “one to one” fitness assessment can be undertaken and assistance given to find the fitness programme that is tailor-made to suit you.

Trade Union – general support and advice. Information on the Unions can be obtained from the following web site <http://www.st-and.ac.uk/staff/org.html> or by contacting Human Resources.

Harassment Network – the network can be contacted if stress is a result of some form of harassment. There are named individuals, accessible via the Human Resources web page, or contact the harassment line on ext 3002.

Continuing Education – some people may find it beneficial to develop their skills, learning a new language etc.

Externally

General Practitioner – your own GP is a good source of advice and can often recommend remedies to assist or may refer you to a local support group/class.

Evening classes and leisure activities – for example, yoga, rambling, walking; enquire at your local council/university open association for local classes.

Friends and family - are a good source of support; try not to deal with your problems alone. Often openly expressing problems can in itself be beneficial.

NHS Helpline - provides information about what is available in your area call :
0800 33 44 88

HEBS - Scottish Health Information Site. Telephone 0131 536 5500. Website:
www.hebs.org.uk

LOOKING AHEAD

Forward planning for stressful events can assist you, e.g. there will be certain times of the year that place heavy demands on you and therefore cause stress, such as Matriculation, Examinations, etc. If you or your School/Unit is aware of these times and would like assistance to deal with them **before** they arise, small staff groups can be seen at the workplace. (Contact: Janet Mackinnon, Occupational Health Adviser)

CONTACT NUMBERS

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Sports Centre

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Human Resources Web Page

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/hr/>

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