University of St Andrews

Human Resources/Environmental Health & Safety Services

A Guide for employees to Stress Recognition and Reduction

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. Stress can be caused by internal or external factors to the workplace and this guide aims to provide members of staff with information on how to reduce stress and where to seek help. This guide should be read in conjunction with the Occupational Stress Policy.

A measure of pressure 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, with effective remedial action, can benefit not only the individual concerned but also the workplace.

WHAT IS STRESS?

The University adopts the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) definition of stress:

"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them"

Stress is normally experienced when a person believes that demand/pressure is exceeding their 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, personal relationships, 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 HSE define 6 key categories which are the main causes of stress within the workplace and have developed a set of 'Management Standards:' to assist with the management and reduction of stress. Full description of the 'Management Standards can be see in Appendix 1.

The following provides some examples of typical stressors at work;

Demand:

- Work overload.
- Boring/Repetitive duties.
- Inadequate resources.
- Physical environment i.e. lighting, space, temperature, disruptions etc.
- Psychological working environment: Verbal abuse, inappropriate behaviours.
- Working long hours – not taking lunch breaks/annual leave.
- People management issues.
- Inadequate allocation of work.

Control:

- Not being able to manage the demands of the job and life outside work.
- Rigid working patterns and deadlines imposed with no autonomy or control allowed.
- Conflicting work demands – from different managers or aspects of the job.
- Two way conversation and discussion not actively encouraged to discuss issues.

Role:

- Lack of clarity of job role – no job descriptions/objective setting.
- Employees unaware of polices and procedures in place to support them and to be used.
- Lack of one-one communication/meetings/feedback.

Support:

- Lack of support and encouragement from managers and colleagues.
- Lack of development/career progression opportunities.
- Lack of information sharing/withholding information.
- A working culture of encouraging long or unsociable hours i.e. seeing colleagues as weak if the don't consistently work long hours

Relationships:

- Poor working relationships with managers/teams
- Combative or confrontational communication styles
- Poor communication and information sharing
- Not dealing with complaints/disputes at an early stage

Change:

- Poor communication – uncertainty about what is happening
- Fears about job security
- Ineffective time planning of change
- Insufficient training or knowledge transfer on new systems/processes
- No consultation/engagement.

It should be noted on occasions there will be variations and increased demands on individual workloads and changes in working relationships, management style and the ability to consult or communicate from time to time, to ensure operational need is meet, which is acceptable management practice. However, if there is a continued and regular pattern of consistent stressors in the workplace, that is when action should be taken to discuss and explore the issues with your line manger, HR or Occupational Health.

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, 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, uncharacteristic behaviour.

STRESS REDUCTION/MANAGEMENT

People may experience such symptoms from time to time for other reasons than stress related matters, whether work related or personnel. However, if you find yourself experiencing a number of these conditions over a period of time, the following solutions may help:

Identify personal stressors:

If you can, work out what in particular stresses you to identify the cause of your state of stress and then explore some practical ways to minimise the cause. There may be some issues you cannot change immediately, but you can put in place coping strategies or there may be others stressors you can immediately 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 more 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.

Communicate with your manager:
If you have concerns about any aspects of your role relating to the 6 mentioned categories discuss your concerns with you managers and offer considered solutions/recommendations. Suggest innovative ways of working to reduce stressors for consideration. Early communication and intervention is key in reducing stressors.

Look Ahead:
Forward planning for stressful events can assist you, e.g. there will be certain times of the year that place heavy demands on your workload and therefore cause stress, such as Matriculation, Examinations, etc. If you are aware of a pressured time and you would like some advise on individual coping strategies to assist you through that time you can contact Janet Mackinnon – Occupation Health Advisor for confidential advise and guidance, or make enquiries with staff development our in-house training course of 'Coping in a managed way.'

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.

Trades Union – general support and advice. Information on the Trades 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.

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.

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 22 44 88

NHS Scotland - Scottish Health Information Site. Telephone 0131 536 5500. Website: www.healthscotland.com

HSE - Health and safety executive website offer solutions to individuals on how to manage stress: http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/individuals.htm

Breathing Space - This website offers self help advice and provided information on where to get support and how to deal with difficult times. http://www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk/bspace/CCC_FirstPage.jsp

Helpline: 0800 838587

Steps for Stress – This is an online guide providing practical ways of dealing with stress. www.stepsforstress.org/

UNIVERSITY CONTACT NUMBERS

Occupational Health Unit:

Janey Watt, Occupational Health Adviser, ext 2752, e-mail jw235

Human Resources

Contact Extension: 3096 or e-mail: humres@st-andrews.ac.uk

Sports Centre

Reception – ext 2190

Human Resources Web Page

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

Human Resources
April 10

APPENDIX 1 **The HSE Management Standards**

DEMANDS - includes workload, work patterns, and the work environment	
The standard is that:	Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
What should be happening / states to be achieved:	The organisation provides employees with adequate and achievabl demands in relation to the agreed hours of work. People's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands. Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees. Employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.
CONTROL - how much say the person has in the way they do their work	
The standard is that:	Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
What should be happening / states to be achieved:	Where possible, employees have control over their pace of work. Employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work. Where possible, employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work. The organisation encourages employees to develop their skills. Employees have a say over when breaks can be taken. Employees are consulted over their work patterns.
SUPPORT - includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues	
The standard is that:	Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
What should be happening / states to be achieved:	The organisation has policies and procedures to adequately support employees. Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff. Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues. Employees know what support is available and how and when to access it. Employees know how to access the required resources to do their job. Employees receive regular and constructive feedback.

http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/

RELATIONSHIP - includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour	
The standard is that:	Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, e.g. bullying at work; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
What should be happening / states to be achieved:	The organisation promotes positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness. Employees share information relevant to their work. The organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour. Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour. Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.
ROLE - whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that individuals do not have conflicting roles	
The standard is that:	Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
What should be happening / states to be achieved:	The organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the different requirements it places upon employees are compatible. The organisation provides information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities. The organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon employees are clear. Systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.
CHANGE - how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation	
The standard is that:	Employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
What should be happening / states to be achieved:	The organisation provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes. The organisation ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals. Employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs. If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs. Employees are aware of timetables for changes. Employees have access to relevant support during changes.

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