

SMALL BUSINESS GUIDES: MANAGING STRESS AT WORK

What is Stress at Work?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define stress as: *"the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them"*.

Work-related stress is not an illness, but it can contribute to serious emotional and physical health problems. As well as anxiety and depression, stress has been associated with heart disease, gastrointestinal illnesses, headaches, insomnia, hypertension, high blood pressure, back pain, compulsive behaviours and substance misuse.

Signs of work-related stress are many and varied, but include: long and short periods of sick leave, poor punctuality, lethargy and disinterest, lack of concentration, loss of motivation, aggression, losing interest in work and colleagues, sensitivity to criticism, lying to cover up mistakes, reduced self-esteem, lack of attention to personal hygiene or appearance.

Employers have a legal responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees, which includes minimising the risk of stress-related illness.

What can cause Stress at Work?

There are many causes, but common factors include heavy workloads, lack of control in the way work is done, insufficient support and encouragement, feeling undervalued, conflict with colleagues or managers, job insecurity, pace of change, unclear roles and responsibilities and impact of other life pressures.

What practical steps can Managers take?

1. Identify workplace issues that might have an adverse effect on health and work performance. The HSE's stress indicator tool covers six areas: *demand* (eg workloads), *control* (eg levels of autonomy), *support* (eg from manager), *relationships*

(eg with colleagues), *role* (eg levels of responsibility) and *change* (eg adequate consultation) <http://www.hse.gov.uk/STRESS/standards/pdfs/indicatortool.pdf>

2. Develop a safe and caring work environment that: respects and accommodates differences and diversity; rewards attitude, effort and performance; invests in training and development.
3. Give freedom to employees to self-direct aspects of their work and encourage them to take ownership of the work they do.
4. Actively promote wellness at work - leading by example (eg take regular breaks, work flexibly, offer free health assessments and medical cash plans, encourage healthy behaviour and exercise, turn off mobile devices out of hours, avoid long hour cultures).
5. Monitor absence rates, hours worked and holiday bookings to check employees are utilising their entitlements and help identify those who may be showing signs of stress.
6. Encourage open two-way communication to ensure employees are: kept informed and updated; give and receive feedback; consulted and included in decisions, where appropriate.
7. Develop an open and trusting work culture, so that employees can approach managers in confidence to discuss their concerns and access help if required.
8. Seek support from occupational health experts and obtain additional information and support from the government-funded: Fit for Work initiative <http://fitforwork.org/>
9. Consider offering appropriate help to individuals via employee assistance programmes or counselling services.

If you would like further information about managing stress in the workplace or want to discuss a specific issue, call me on: 01952 246612 or email: kay@kayhealdhr.co.uk