

Managers Guidance

Completing a School/Departmental Stress Risk Assessment

Introduction

This guidance is designed to help School and Department Heads, Line Managers, Stress and Wellbeing Leads and any other staff tasked to support completion of the proactive and preventative work-related stress risk assessment within University Schools and Departments.

The University has a legal duty to protect staff from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it. The measures outlined in this guidance will assist in identifying stressors with potential to cause work-related stress within schools and departments and provide practical measures to improve wellbeing and mitigate and control the risk of work-related stress.

The template risk assessment should be used as a guidance tool to assist in improving stress and wellbeing. *The simple focus here is on proactive action to prevent and mitigate stress from occurring, instead of reacting to staff subject to stress.*

Measures taken should be 'reasonably practicable' with consideration of the requirements and resources of the school/department. Not all suggested measures will be immediately achievable and may require escalation to senior leaders for evaluation and support.

Definition of Work-Related Stress

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define work-related stress as:

'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work.'

We should all be able to work within the normal demands of our job roles and reasonable pressure at work can be positive and help individuals to thrive, however, work-related stress can occur when pressure exceeds a person's capacity to cope, leading to work-related stress. Stress is not a medical diagnosis, however, where stress is prolonged, it can lead to both physical and psychological ill health including anxiety, depression and burnout. Work-related stress can also aggravate existing mental health problems, making it harder to mitigate and control.

Signs of stress

There are several signs that can identify stress as becoming a problem for individual staff or your team. Some signs might be obvious but often they are subtle, and the level of engagement between line manager and staff will affect whether these are recognised and addressed. Line Managers should proactively seek out signs of stress to address the issue effectively.

Signs of stress within teams can include:

- tension (arguments or, oppositely, avoidance and withdrawal between colleagues);
- Higher staff turnover;
- more reports of stress;
- more sickness absence;
- decreased performance and quality of output;
- more complaints and grievances; and presenteeism and/or leaveism.

Signs of stress in individual staff

A change in the way someone acts can be a sign of stress, for example they may:

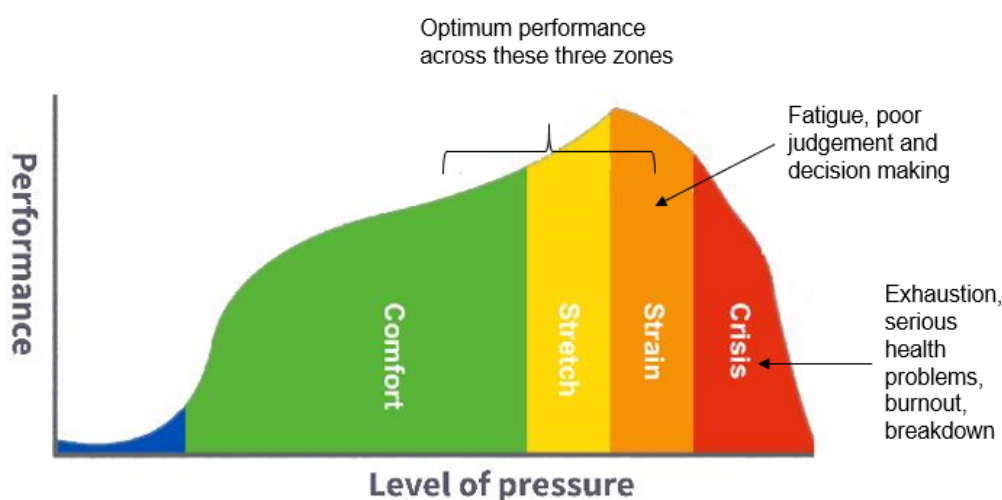
- take more time off;
- arrive for work later or stay later;
- be more agitated or nervous;
- increase their working hours/times; and
- mention their high workload.

A change in the way someone thinks or feels can also be a sign of stress, for example:

- mood swings;
- being withdrawn;
- loss of motivation, commitment and confidence; and
- increased emotional reactions such as being more tearful, sensitive or aggressive.

Work Performance and the Pressure Curve

The capacity to deal with pressure (stressors) varies between individuals. The below 'pressure curve' chart shows the optimum performance zone of where individual staff should ideally be for effective work performance and avoidance of becoming ill from work pressures.



Working outside of the **comfort zone** to the point of **stretch** is akin to reaching a flow state. Flow is being totally immersed in a task that requires a person's full attention and effort, fully utilising ourselves.

At the point of stretch, the body's stress response releases hormones adrenaline and cortisol, which help us perform at our best. We think more clearly, our vision is sharper, our hearing more acute and the fight-or-flight response raises our game to deal with short-term stress.

We don't want staff stretched all the time as this can lead to exhaustion and no-one can perform at their peak all day long. That's why chunking tasks and interspersing breaks is a smart work strategy. An ideal zone for work is one which **cycles between comfort and stretch**.

Risk Assessment Procedure

There are 5 main steps to completing a work-related stress risk assessment:



Step One: Identify the risk factors

This section has been completed for you within the School/Departmental stress risk assessment template, categorising the stressors/stress hazard areas aligned with HSE's Management Standard categories.



Step Two: Who can be harmed and how. Gather information and data on key stressors within your School or Department to help focus on areas as potential causes of adverse pressure and stress.

Before you start, it's helpful to gather the following types of information:

- Feedback from staff team meetings and school forums
- Feedback from staff having shared the School/Departmental Stress Risk Assessment template with them
- Staff survey results (University Stress Indicator Tool Survey, Engagement and Pulse surveys or other relevant school/departmental surveys)
- Sickness absence data
- Staff turnover rates
- Exit interviews
- Referrals to Occupational Health or Counselling
- Significant pressure points within the academic year
- Reasons for significant changes to teams

Step Three: Consult with staff, evaluate the risk assessment template guidance, identifying effective local control measures specific to your school/department.

Use the risk assessment template and guidance therein, answer the questions in each management standard area (***not all questions and measures will be applicable to your area or immediately achievable***), consider the University level overarching control measures and how they can apply to your area and identify your own more specific local control measures. You can view a list of ***example control measures*** at the end of this guidance. These will help you to answer the questions set out in the risk assessment master template, ***in addition to the listed overarching measures and HSE's Talking Toolkit***.

Important: *Remember to involve/consult staff in this risk assessment process. Staff will be knowledgeable about the stressors involved in their work and can help determine control measures to reduce the risks. Involving staff in this way will improve perceptions and feeling of managers seen to be addressing stress and taking wellbeing seriously.*



Risk assessment: Add controls
that are already being implemented

Action plan: Add controls
not yet in place

Step Four: record your findings. Complete the risk assessment and develop action plans

Record findings of your evaluation from ***step three*** in the stress risk assessment template. Once your risk assessment is complete, think about the measures you decided as needing to introduce. Add these to your action plan with suitable timescales for completion. Prioritise the areas you feel have a higher level of risk; focusing on these will have the greatest

impact. Some issues may require escalation to Faculty Executive Deans, Directors or UEB, while others are likely to be controlled locally.

The recorded risk assessment and action plan should be discussed with staff being assessed as they will be able to offer valuable insights and suggestions for additional controls or actions required.

Step Five: Monitor and review the risk assessment and action plan

Step 5 is about reviewing the measures and actions you take to tackle any identified causes of work-related stress.

Review your risk assessment and action plans annually, however, some circumstances will require a review sooner. These could include:

- increasing numbers of staff experiencing work-related stress
- increasing staff absence
- staff survey results indicating concern or an area requiring investigation
- when the team will experience, or has experienced, significant change.

Monitor: review your action plan to ensure the agreed actions and control measures are being implemented.

Decide what further action or data gathering is needed at the review stage. If the solutions are not working, what else can you do? If the solutions are working, can they be shared across other schools and departments as good practice ?

List of Example Local Control Measures

Consider measures listed below for implementation with your risk assessment. The list acts as a prompt of measures which can be introduced for improvement, these can be added to the action plan part of the risk assessment.

Demands

Standard: Staff are provided with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work. Skills and abilities are matched to job roles. Staff concerns about their work environment are addressed.

This stressor can be caused by workload, work patterns or the work environment. There are different interventions that can be applied to reduce these:

Working patterns:

- a school/department workload allocation system should be in place which meets the University's Academic [Workload Model](#). Staff are aware of the model parameters and managers regularly share information with individual staff.
- allow staff regular breaks from intensive work or periods of teaching, particularly during challenging and complex periods of work.
- flexible working will help staff manage demands outside of work, such as childcare arrangements.

Workload:

- provide staff with realistic and achievable work targets, provide workload prioritisation support and organise regular meetings to discuss workload stressors and plan out timescales.
- Ensure that staff skills and abilities match the demands of the job and that they are capable of doing their jobs.
- Local training needs should be identified, and an appropriate level of training, coaching and supervision should be in place to ensure that staff are competent in their role.
- Monitor workloads to ensure that they remain appropriate.

Environment:

- to improve the work environment, assess and address the risks around violence and aggression, including effective reporting of any occurrences.

N.B. Consider any other specific or unique hazards in your school/department relating to demands. This includes the overarching control measures, measures already in place locally, or other measures that have been identified and need to be implemented (add these to the action plan section of the risk assessment template).

Control

Standard: Staff have a say and control over their pace of work (where possible), are consulted on work patterns, are encouraged to use their skills and develop new skills to support their job. Individual concerns are responded to effectively.

This stressor can be reduced through introducing interventions which give staff more control over their work, such as:

Communication:

- organise school meetings and team discussions to inform staff of planned schedule and timetable to enable them to have a say over the way their work is organised and the pace of their work.
- There should be channels of communication available for staff to raise concerns or ideas that they may have.
- Flexible and agile working patterns are considered where possible.

Decision Making:

- One-to-one meetings are in place to clarify individual workloads and agree timetables for suitable control.
- share how decisions are made and allow staff to input into the decision-making process. This will help them feel that they have more control over their work.
- As far as possible, staff have autonomy and control over their pace of work.

Skills and training:

- ask staff what additional training they would like in order to develop new skills.
- Staff are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work effectively.
- Staff are encouraged to develop resilience and new skills to help them undertake new and challenging work.

N.B. Consider any other specific or unique school/departmental hazards relating to control. This includes control measures already in place, or measures that have been identified and need to be implemented (add these to the action plan in the risk assessment template).

Support

Standard: Managers are encouraged to support their staff, with systems in place to enable and encourage colleagues to support each other. Staff know what support and job resources are available and how to access it. Staff receive regular and constructive feedback.

There are ways in which the University can support staff when carrying out their job roles:

Communication:

- Managers should ask staff how they can support them and include stress management as a standing agenda item to discuss any support requirements.
- One-to-one meetings are held with all staff with managerial support in mind.
- support and feedback from their line managers, and the chance to discuss any additional resource or training requirements.
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage staff to support their colleagues.

Resources:

- Share information on support available to staff inside and outside of work.
- Staff are made aware of support and resources available to them and how to access these (staff counselling, employee assistance, Togetherall service, wellbeing champions, mental health first aiders, people services support, occupational health service, sports membership, classes and initiatives, etc).

Training:

- School/departmental induction training and information is in place.
- School/departmental training needs are identified, and a sufficient level of training is provided to staff.
- Performance review process is in place for all staff, with staff development opportunities.

N.B. Consider any other specific or unique local hazards relating to support. This includes control measures already in place, or measures that have been identified and need to be implemented (add these to the action plan in the risk assessment template).

Relationships

Standard: Staff indicate that they are not subject to unacceptable behaviours with systems in place to respond to individual concerns. Positive behaviours are sought to avoid conflict and ensure fairness. Policies and procedures are in place to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour. Staff are encouraged to report unacceptable behaviour, and managers are encouraged to deal with it effectively.

The prominent cause of this workplace stressor is unacceptable behaviours. There are clear interventions that can be used to address negative behaviours and promote positive behaviours and relationships that should be followed:

Policies and procedures:

- There is a written policy in place for dealing with unacceptable behaviour and procedures for reporting it.
- Ensure all staff understand the policy and that managers know how to handle unacceptable behaviours.

Communication:

- Effective communications are in place to support work relationships. Mediation is used to help to resolve behavioural conflict.
- All staff are aware that bullying and harassment is unacceptable and know where to go to report any concerns.
- Opportunities are created for staff to socialise together to improve personal and working relationships.
- Workplace successes are celebrated, such as delivering an important project together and individual staff achievements to promote positive behaviour.
- Managers can lead by example in communicating positive workplace behaviours that their colleagues should adopt.

N.B. Consider any other specific or unique school/departmental hazards relating to relationships. This includes control measures already in place, or measures that have been identified and need to be implemented (add these to the action plan in the risk assessment template).

Role

Standard: Staff understand their role and job responsibilities from adequate information and communications. So far as possible, requirements placed on staff are compatible and clear. Systems are in place to enable staff to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

This stressor is mostly caused by staff with conflicting roles, staff unsure of their role and how they fit into the wider school or department. There are several ways to intervene and reduce stress caused by this uncertainty, such as:

New staff:

- ensure new starters have a thorough induction process into the University and their school/department with understanding of whom to contact if they need more support with their role.

Change of role:

- where staff need to change or vary roles, provide suitable and sufficient information and training for them.

Communication:

- provide clear work objectives and structures to ensure that staff understand what they are doing and why.
- One-to-one meetings and regular performance reviews also help to remind staff of their role's purpose within the University.
- Explain and communicate school/department objectives to help clarify team and individual roles.
- A clear line of reporting is also vital in allowing people to raise concerns.

Individual roles:

- review job descriptions and training opportunities with staff regularly.
- Drawing up personal work plans that are aligned with team objectives can help staff better understand their role.

Clarity of role:

- Staff should know their role with clear, unambiguous job descriptions.
- Procedures should be in place to update job descriptions/roles when appointing a new member of staff to that role or when there are significant changes to the role.

N.B. Consider any other specific or unique school/departmental hazards relating to relationships. This includes control measures already in place, or measures that have been identified and need to be implemented (add these to the risk assessment template).

Change

Standard: Staff are provided with timely information to enable them to understand reasons for proposed changes, with adequate consultation and opportunity for staff to influence proposals. Staff are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs and are given training to support any changes as necessary. Staff are aware of timetables for change and have access to relevant support during change.

Change can be highly stressful and can create uncertainty and insecurity among individual staff. Lack of consultation and communication are the biggest contributors to this stressor, but these can easily be addressed as below:

Planning:

- any change needs to be planned and properly managed from the beginning of the process. This gives staff time to understand the impacts on their role and adapt to the changes at the start.

Consultation:

- Ensure that staff are consulted at an early stage and throughout the change process, explaining why the changes are being made, benefits, timescales, and the potential impacts on the school/department.
- Staff are provided with opportunities to influence proposals before change happens.
- To significantly reduce this cause of stress, provide a system for staff to ask questions and raise concerns during the change process.

Communication:

- communicate with staff on the change process as early as possible, ensuring it is a two-way conversation.
- Use multiple communication methods to ensure everyone understands why the change is happening.
- Staff are supported by their managers to access relevant support during change.
- Trade Union representatives and staff representatives are consulted on proposed changes.
- School/departmental change related training needs are identified, and a sufficient level of training is provided (provide details of what, who when etc).

N.B. Consider any other specific or unique school/departmental hazards relating to change. This includes control measures already in place, or measures that have been identified and need to be implemented (add these to the action plan in the risk assessment template).

Summary - Remember to:

- Involve school/departmental staff in developing the risk assessment and action plan. Staff involved in their own work are well placed to understand adverse stressors and identify the most appropriate measures to control the risk.
- Communicate the risk assessment and action plan to staff once complete.
- Use the action plan, and control measures columns in the risk assessment template to record additional measures needed, assign owner/responsibility and track progress.
- Review the school/departmental risk assessment and action plan annually (or sooner).
- Contact People Services/Health and Safety for further advice as necessary.