



GMB **UNION** GUIDE

Work-Related Stress

A GUIDE FOR GMB SAFETY REPRESENTATIVES WORK-RELATED STRESS

What is “stress”? The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as: “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”. It is not the same as pressure. We experience pressure every day, and it motivates us to perform at our best. It’s when we experience too much pressure without the opportunity to recover that we start to experience stress.



WHY IS STRESS AN ISSUE?

Work-related stress is an issue that it's in everyone's interests to tackle. 1 in 4 British workers say they find their work either very or extremely stressful, and work-related stress accounts for more than one in every three new cases of ill-health. Each case of stress-related ill-health leads to an average of more than 6 weeks of working time lost. Last year more than 526,000 workers believed that work-related stress was making them ill. A total of 12.5 million working days were lost to stress, depression and anxiety in 2016/17. The total cost of this is estimated at more than £8.4 billion a year.

WHY IS STRESS A TRADE UNION ISSUE?

Many of these ill workers are trade union members. We know from experience that employers and the media have produced many common misconceptions:

- “British workers take too much time off sick”
- “Stress is a bandwagon – it’s the new bad back”
- “People who go off sick with stress are scroungers who are faking it”

The reality is quite different. British sick leave is low compared to most European countries, and most British employers recognise that the clear majority of sick leave is genuine. Many workers go to work when they are too ill to do so – this is known as ‘presenteeism’ - which leads to long-term sickness absence. If we genuinely want to reduce sickness absence from stress, we need to work together to create better working environments, and better manage the control of stress.

WHAT DOES THE LAW REQUIRE?

There are no specific regulations on workplace stress, but several pieces of health and safety law have provisions that include the control and management of stress. Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 specifies the legal duty of care from employers to employees. It requires employers to provide a safe place of work; safe systems of work; and information and training. This includes mental health as well as physical health and safety. The same provisions must be made for non-employees (i.e. contractors and agency staff) under section 3 of the Act. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require a number of provisions to be put into place, including a health and safety policy; suitable and sufficient risk assessments, and health surveillance. Both the policy and the risk assessments must consider risks to health from stress if the risk is significant. HSE have developed a framework by which employers can accurately assess health risks from stress – The Stress Management Standards.

WHAT ARE THE MANAGEMENT STANDARDS?

HSE has identified six key areas (or ‘risk factors’) that can be causes of work-related stress. Employers should ensure they have a thorough understanding of what these risk factors look like where you work, identify which areas may be presenting problems, and work with employees and their representatives to take action to reduce these problems. We expect managers at all levels to be aware of the management standards, and know how they operate in practice. It is vital that workers have the opportunity to discuss how they are coping with their workloads, and can express an honest opinion on the management of stress within your organisations.

WHAT SAFETY REPRESENTATIVES CAN DO?

GMB Safety Reps have certain legal rights they can use on behalf of their members. These include involvement in risk assessments looking at stress, proper consultation on any plans for dealing with stress and meaningful consultation on organisational changes that may occur due to stress.

YOUR EMPLOYER MUST ASSESS AGAINST THE SIX CRITERIA IN THE STANDARDS – HERE'S WHAT WE EXPECT FOR EACH FACTOR:

DEMANDS

This includes workload, work environment and work patterns. The accepted standard is that employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of the job; and systems are in place, at a local level, to respond to any individual concerns. To achieve this, your organisation should provide workers with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work. It should ensure that peoples' skills and abilities are matched to the job demands and that jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of the worker. Management should ensure that any concerns that employees have on their work environment are addressed.

SUPPORT

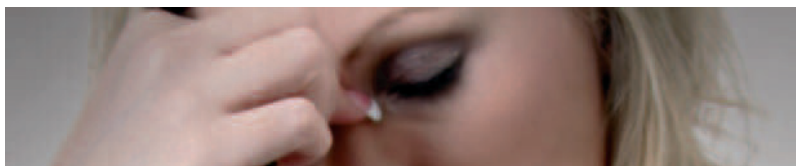
This includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation including line management and colleagues. Workers should be able to demonstrate that they receive adequate information and support from superiors and fellow workers; and systems are in place to deal with individual concerns. To achieve this, your employer has policies and procedures in place to properly support workers; systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support staff; systems are in place to enable and encourage workers to support their colleagues; workers know what support is available and how and when to access it; workers know how to get the necessary resource to do their job; and workers receive regular and constructive feedback.

ROLE

This is where people understand their role within an organisation, and management ensures that there are no conflicting roles. For this standard workers indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and systems are in place to respond to individual concerns. To achieve this, the organisation ensures that the different requirements it places on workers are compatible, and provides information to enable workers to understand their role and responsibilities; the organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon workers are clear; and systems are in place to enable workers to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

CONTROL

In effect, how much say the worker has in the way they do their job. The accepted standard is that a worker can have a say about the way they do their work, and systems are in place to respond to their concerns. To achieve this, where possible, workers should have control of the pace of work and employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative when doing their job; workers are encouraged to develop new skills to help them with challenging aspects of work; Workers are consulted over their work patterns, and have a say when breaks can be taken.





RELATIONSHIPS

This includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour. The accepted standard on this is that workers indicate that they are not subject to unacceptable behaviour, such as bullying at work; and systems are in place to respond to individual or collective concerns. To achieve this, your employer must promote positive behaviour at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness; workers share information relevant to their work; The organisation has agreed procedures and policies in place to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour; systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour; and systems are in place to enable and encourage workers to report unacceptable behaviour.

CHANGE

How organisational change is managed and communicated in the organisation. The accepted standard is workers indicate that the organization engages them frequently when undergoing any organisational change; and systems are in place to respond to individual concerns. To achieve this, the organisation provides workers with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes; the organisation ensures adequate worker consultation on changes and provides opportunities for workers to influence proposals; workers are aware of any possible impact of any changes to their jobs. If necessary workers are given training to support any changes to their job; workers are aware of timetable for changes; and workers have access to relevant support during changes.

GMB SAFETY REP'S CHECKLIST

YES NO

Do management acknowledge that stress is a workplace issue?

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Do risk assessments include stress concerns?

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Are GMB Safety Reps involved in the risk assessments?

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Do management use the HSE Management standards on Stress?

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Is there a workplace stress policy?

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Is there an open and transparent procedure for raising stress concerns?

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This list is not exhaustive and there may be a need to raise other concerns with management or involve your Regional Health & Safety Officer.

General Secretary: Gary Smith
GMB Union, Mary Turner House
22 Stephenson Way
London
NW1 2HD

Tel 020 7391 6700
Email info@gmb.org.uk
www.gmb.org.uk