

Management of Stress in the Workplace – a Manager’s Guide.

Introduction

Poor mental health, including that attributable to work-related stress, is the primary cause of employee sickness absence in the UK. It causes ill health and suffering and costs employers much in lost productivity and absence from work.

The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) defines Stress as
“the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them”

It is also widely recognised that an individual’s experience of stress is a unique one, influenced by a large number of factors which may be work-related, personal, external or indeed due to a combination of these. It is therefore unrealistic to expect that we will manage to eliminate work-related stress entirely. However, there is much we can do as an Employer to reduce its likelihood and support those unfortunate enough to experience it.

HSE emphasises, in its publication HSG218 Managing the causes of Work-related Stress <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg218.htm> , the importance of good management practice in reducing stress in the workplace. It identifies the key 6 factors influencing stress levels as being:

- Demands
- Control
- Role
- Support
- Change
- Relationships

The University of Glasgow has reflected this in its Policy for Managing Stress in the Workplace which can be found at http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_177383_en.pdf

The policy outlines the University’s commitments to the management of workplace stress, as well as identifying the responsibilities of employees and managers in implementing the policy. As a manager, you have a duty to contribute by:

Risk Assessment

Organisational Level Risk Assessment

- This is conducted as part of the bi-annual staff attitude survey by means of the HSE Stress Indicator Tool 35 question set. This is used by senior management to establish organisational trends and to develop a University Stress Management Action Plan which identifies the proposed measures to help address issues raised and suitable timescales for achievement. The question set can be found at Appendix 2 of the Policy.

Risk assessment at local level is the responsibility of the line manager of the particular unit.

Local Risk Assessment – Proactive

Risk assess activities to identify their potential to be stressful for those staff involved in delivering them. Risk assessment should be conducted for all work activities, and should be reviewed regularly and in preparation for any planned changes, as change itself is often a stressful process. Changes could range from any relatively subtle local changes to major re-organisational changes which have the potential to impact on stress levels. Guidance on conducting risk assessments for work-related stress can be found at Appendix 4 of the Management of Stress in the Workplace Policy.

Once activities or planned changes have been identified as potentially stressful, you need to identify those measures that can be taken to minimise the stress experienced by staff and to support those who, despite these measures, go on to experience stress symptoms.

Local Risk Assessment – Responsive

- This type of assessment would be carried out under circumstances where you become aware or are made aware that an employee/ employees is/are experiencing stress symptoms. This may be because of an external factor or work-related, but either way it may be possible to adopt temporary or long-term measures to assist the individual back to work if they are off sick, or alternatively to remain at work.
- This could be achieved possibly by introducing some adjustments to their normal work patterns/ activities if such adjustments can reasonably be accommodated within the service delivery requirements. Such adjustments may well come under the definition of “reasonable adjustments” under the Equality Act and advice should be taken from the Disability Service, Human Resources, Equality and Diversity Officer and Occupational Health Service as appropriate.
- If the matter is thought to be work-related and likely to be more than a temporary situation, it is particularly important to work with the individual to establish the best way to prevent a recurrence. This could be through e.g. supporting the individual through development that will enable them to respond more confidently and robustly to the stressor(s); through team-building exercises where the team dynamic is thought to be a factor or maybe through mediation where an isolated working relationship is thought to be the issue.
- There is a template to assist you with work-related stress hazard identification in the University Policy at Appendix 3.
- If you wish to conduct a responsive risk assessment for a group of employees, a team or section etc, it may be possible to run the 35 question set used within the staff attitude survey at local level. This is most productive when the employees concerned are also happy for the results to be shared and discussed with colleagues in a supportive focus group in order to identify key concerns and potential solutions.
- You may also wish to consult with your local Trades Union Safety Representative

Monitoring Sickness Absence and other indicators of stress

- The first sign that an employee is suffering from stress may be only when they are off sick and the reason given is stress-related. However, there may be other indications such as an increase in absences, particularly short duration unrelated absences or unusual last minute requests for leave; an unexplained drop in work performance; changes in behaviour at work, whether with colleagues, students or others. (See Appendix 1 of the policy for more information on recognising stress). It is important that these are addressed as soon as possible, through either the Sickness Absence Policy <http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/humanresources/policies/p-z/sicknessabsence/> or other appropriate policy, or by simply taking the opportunity to speak to the individual informally to enquire if there is anything bothering them that they need support with, in particular any specific work-related issues, and informing them of the internal and independent services available to help, such as the Employee Assistance Programme which provides short term counselling services <http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/health/staffcounselling/>, Occupational Health and the Chaplaincy Service.
- Performance management, including P&DR interviews and reviews, monitors how employees are managing with their objectives. It provides good opportunities to identify if an individual is having difficulties with workload demands, unfamiliar roles or working relationships and to agree suitable ways of considering these issues which, if left unaddressed, can become stressful.
- Complaints and grievances: If there are suggestions from staff of work conditions or colleague behaviour which the complainant is finding stressful, it is essential to follow up on these and work with all involved to find helpful ways forward, whether this is through adjustments to work patterns, team building exercises with groups of colleagues or mediation for smaller numbers of colleagues.
- Concerns raised by Occupational Health, for instance following a management referral, where workplace stress is thought to be a contributory factor to an employee's ill health. It is important to liaise with both Occupational Health and HR to address these concerns with the individual or group of individuals. Discussing issues arising that relate to the six "stress factors" mentioned at regular team meetings and spending time identifying ways to deal with problems through such measures as prioritisation, clear decision making and conflict resolution.

Good Management Practice and support in achieving this

Good management skills only come with the necessary experience, training, and support. Make sure you identify your own development needs to your manager at your P&DR interviews and reviews. Take advantage of the management and leadership development opportunities available to you through internal courses delivered by the Staff Development Service (SDS) and external training identified as appropriate through your own P&DR process Contact SDS for information on the variety and schedule of courses available.

For training, support and advice on conducting risk assessments for stress, contact the Director of Health, Safety & Wellbeing, your local HR Manager and/ or Occupational Health.

Finally remember, it is unlikely that you can be a supportive and responsive manager unless you feel confident and resilient yourself; so it is important to flag up to your own line manager if you are finding yourself feeling stressed by work pressures.

Role of the University of Glasgow Health, Safety & Wellbeing Committee (HSWC)

- The HSWC is a statutory committee of the University Court. Its role is to review the measures in place to ensure good management of health and safety within the University.
- Its membership includes a partnership of management, student and employee representatives, along with specialist advisors from SEPS, Occupational Health and Radiation Protection Services.
- The HSWC meets four times a year, and on each occasion receives statistical reports on work-related ill health and accidents. These include quarterly reports on Occupational Health referral which provide the numbers and causes of referrals, broken down no further than College Level. This helps the University to prioritise its activities to address any developing trends that the statistics may indicate.
- The HSWC also assists in the development and review of policies relating to health, safety and wellbeing, including the Policy on the Management of Stress in the Workplace, and monitors the progress of University's Stress Management Action Plan.

The minutes of the HSWC are submitted to the University Court.