Stress - FAQs

These FAQs have been developed to provide additional guidance to those seeking to support colleagues who are displaying signs of stress at work.

Managing the effects of workplace pressure can be difficult for even the most experienced of line managers as each case is individual and the signs and circumstances can be different for each person or group.

It is important to remember that a group of professionals are always available to assist provide the right level of support in each case. Our general medical practitioners, occupational health providers, employee assistance programme all form part of this network but central to it are the human resources advisory teams who should always be contacted in the first instance for advice.

What is stress?

The HSE define stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them"

Raymond & Wilson defines stress as "a mental and/or physical response, by an individual, to an inappropriate level of pressure whether real or perceived"

Lazarus defines stress as "a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that the demands placed on them exceed the resources the individual has available".

Unlike pressure, stress can create unhealthy biological reactions and prolonged stress can lead to both physical and mental health breakdown.

What is the difference between stress and pressure?

Perhaps the first thing is to understand the meaning of stress and pressure and differentiate between them. Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor which can help push you to achieve goals and perform better, so many people talk of positive stress but in fact they really they mean positive pressure.

Stress is a natural reaction to 'too much' pressure. This is where pressure becomes 'excessive' and demotivating. Prolonged excessive pressure is overwhelming and has a negative impact on wellbeing which can cause stress.

Why do we need a Stress Risk Assessment (SRA)Tool?

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974 employers have a legal obligation to protect, so far as reasonably practicable, the health and safety of their employees.

Stress related hazards can potentially put employees at risk of mental ill health or accidents at work and, therefore, need to be risk assessed in the same way as all other hazards found in the workplace. The principle method used in Network Rail to achieve this is by carrying out stress risk assessments (SRA). The SRA tool is designed for work related stress not personal stress.

When would I carry out a SRA?

An SRA should be completed…

- If a line manager suspects a team member is under excessive pressure and is displaying behavioural, mental or physical changes.
- If an employee discloses they believe they are affected by work place pressure or stress.
- As part of a return-to-work process following any absence relating to stress.
- Following any occupational health referral relating to work place pressure or stress
- As part of an agreed SRA plan review process

The HSE suggests managers to carry out a stress risk assessment on their team annually*

What is the process after completing a SRA?

Following an SRA, there should be agreed review dates as part of the action plan. You should:

- monitor against your action plan to ensure the agreed actions are taking place;
- evaluate the effectiveness of the solutions you implement;
- decide what further action and/or data gathering, if any, is needed.

How many times will I need to carry out the SRA?

Further assessments should take place after 6 months then at 12 months. Additional assessments may be necessary should circumstances change. Where an assessment has resulted in a low score, these should be reviewed as a minimum within 6 months as circumstances may change.

I've completed the assessment, how do I calculate the overall risk of stress?

Using the Total score for each of the six essentials control measures i.e.

Total Score = Severity x Likelihood. Add all the Total Scores and use the Potential Risk table to identify an Overall Risk Score. This score will be between 1 and 25.

The Overall Risk Table provides detail of the actions you should take by the score level. Always use the highest score

For further guidance use refer to the Stress Risk Assessment Guidance Document.

What do I do if an employee has a high score?

Current work activities may need to be stopped and/or restricted duties put in place immediately. An agreed action plan which would include substantial improvements that reduce the risk of further harm to a low to moderate level should be discussed with the employee.

An Occupational Health referral should be made immediately but no later than within two working weeks to avoid unnecessary waiting for an appointment or worsening of their condition.

What can I do as a manager to support my team?

As a manager you have a duty of care to protect, so far as reasonably practicable, the health and safety of your teams which incorporates consideration to their mental health and wellbeing. Understanding how to spot the signs of stress in your team, and then knowing what to do to reduce stress, will help you achieve this.

Refer to SRA Standard and tool, HR Online (HR Direct for Managers) also look at the Occupational Health and Wellbeing pages on Safety Central and Validium Managers guidance for support and guidance on dealing with stress..

How will I know if my team is under pressure or feeling stressed?

It's not always easy to spot however; it is likely that you will find out by being told, through one to ones, team discussions or observation. However, the HSE recommends it good practice to carry out a SRA on the whole team annually. This will help identify pressures that are current and put in place practical solutions that will help mitigate potential risks of stress.

There is information on Spotting the symptoms of stress, Handling Pressure and Managing Pressure in the workplace which provides an overview of the symptoms that a person may display. Also on www.mind.org and via our Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

I am aware of a colleague who is feeling stressed due to their work, what can I do to help?

Firstly, starting a conversation is the first stage in providing support.   Asking 'how are you' can go a long way.   There is guide on having conversations about mental health on Safety Central in the resource library section. Also look at the Time to Talk and MIND websites.

If a colleague opens up about their feelings to you, suggest that they speak to their line manager about their concerns or another responsible manager if they cannot speak with their line manager. You can also suggest that they ask their manager to carry out a SRA. In addition, you can signpost them to safety central occupational health pages, HR Online and also our EAP who can provide support and guidance.

My colleague has been taken through the stress assessment and an agreed plan of action has been put in place. They have said that no actions have been taken and they are feeling worse than before, what should I do?

Encourage your colleague to raise these concerns with their line manager in the first instance. If no action is taken by their line manager, they should escalate the matter to the next level of management.

To support their immediate wellbeing, signpost them to materials on safety central and HR online pages and our EAP. As well as advise them of the support networks such as Mental Health Champion, D&I Champions, employee support groups, their family and friends, GP as well as external organisations such as Samaritans, MIND and SANE etc. .

Should I do a stress risk assessment for an employee who has been off from work with work related stress?

Yes, this should form part of the return to work process. An action plan should be agreed that enables ease back into work and puts in place solutions that help mitigate further risk of harm (stress).

The action plan that has been put in place is not working, what should I do?

Any action plan may need fine tuning to get it right. As part of the review process, discuss and consider what changes and/or additional measures need to be put in place. You can also seek support from Occupational Health Managers/Leads and HR Direct. An occupational health referral may also be required.