



Human Resources

STRESS MANAGEMENT POLICY

Document Control			
Applies To	All employees	Intranet	
Approval/Date		Issue Date	
Author/Lead Officer	Jane Garnett/Hayley Housam	Page Content	8
Council Website		Print Run	
Distribution List		Reference Number	HR/POL/62/Version 1.0
Division		Review Date	
Document Replaces	Mental Health at Work Policy Version 1.0	Status	Draft
Document Title	Stress Management Policy Version 1.0	Version	Version 1.0
UNCONTROLLED IF PRINTED			
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1. INTRODUCTION

Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council is committed to protecting the health, safety, and welfare of employees. We recognise that workplace stress is a health and safety problem and acknowledge the importance of identifying and reducing workplace stressors.

Preventing work-related stress has advantages for both the employee and employer and this policy demonstrates the requirements in law and the Council's own commitment to managing stress in the workplace.

2 SCOPE

The Stress Management Policy applies to all employees of Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council.

3 AIM AND OBJECTIVES

- To address organisational factors which might contribute to stress or undue pressure at work.
- To promote a culture where stressors are acknowledged, where stress is not regarded as a matter of individual weakness, and where employees can talk about feeling excessive pressure without fear of recrimination.
- To provide support for employees experiencing problems in and out of work.
- To enable employees who have been absent from work for any reason to return to work with appropriate support.
- To determine patterns and factors, which might indicate stress and to respond to these with appropriate action.
- To introduce practices which are known to support employees and help them respond positively to pressure.
- To increase general awareness about mental health, stress and its effects, and coping mechanisms.
- To support employees who are suffering from or recovering from mental ill health.

4 DEFINITIONS

Stress – The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as ‘the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them’. There is an important distinction between pressure, which is acceptable where managed correctly, and stress which can be detrimental to health.

Mental Wellbeing – is the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and survive pain, suffering and disappointment. It is a positive sense of wellbeing and an underlying belief in our own and other's dignity and worth (Health Education Authority).

Mental Health problems have many causes including stresses in the workplace and in the life of employees away from work. If an employee feels in control of the level of pressure, this can lead to improved motivation, job satisfaction and performance. Excessive pressure, where people perceive they cannot cope with what is being asked of them, can have negative effects and can result in stress. Excessive stress should not be seen as an inevitable part of modern life or a sign of individual weakness. Employees suffering from stress and stress related illness, whether personal or work related, will be encouraged to seek help and support and will not be subject to unfair discrimination in any way. How any individual responds to pressure is unique to that person at that time. Managers must be sensitive to each employee and seek, where possible, to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of the individual.

5. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TACKLE STRESS?

Stress should not be seen as an inevitable part of modern life nor as a sign of weakness. Stress is not an illness, but prolonged stress can trigger mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

Other problems related to stress include back pain, indigestion, irritable bowel syndrome, psoriasis and tension headaches and other underlying health conditions.

Managers have a duty of care under health and safety law to:

- Assess possible risks to health in the workplace.
- Take appropriate action.
- Ensure that workplaces are safe and healthy.

HSE guidance makes it very clear that stress is a risk that must be both considered and managed. As a manager, you need to show that you had considered the risks and taken appropriate action. Whilst it is unlikely that you can eliminate work related stress entirely, you need to be able to show what action you have taken to reduce work related stress. It is, therefore, essential that you keep records to evidence what you have done. Please refer to Appendix 1 for further guidance.

6. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Recognising that there is a legal responsibility and duty of care for mental and physical health in the workplace, specific responsibilities rest at various levels within the Council.

Organisational

- Identify workplace stressors and ensure that risk assessments are undertaken and reviewed annually in accordance with the Council's Health and Safety Policy, in order to eliminate or control the risks from stress.
- Consult with the Trade Unions on proposed actions relating to the prevention of workplace stress.
- Provide training for managers and supervisors in good management practices.
- Assist employees to identify and manage any stressors in their lives.
- Provide confidential counselling for employees affected by stress caused by either work or external factors.
- Promote opportunities for physical activity, recognising that this has a positive effect on mental wellbeing.

Line Managers

- Managers have a legal duty to conduct risk assessment and implement recommendations within their service/s.
- Create an action plan to mitigate risk and have systems in place to monitor progress against action plan.
- Where indicated undertake individual risk assessments.
- Ensure good communication between management and staff, particularly where there are organisational and procedural changes.
- Ensure staff are fully trained to discharge their duties.
- Ensure staff are provided with meaningful developmental opportunities.
- Monitor workloads to ensure workload management mechanisms are in place.
- Monitor working hours and overtime to ensure that working hours are managed.
- Monitor holidays to ensure that staff are taking their full entitlement and where possible spread over the year.
- Attend training as requested in good management practice and health and safety.
- Ensure that bullying and harassment is not tolerated.
- Be vigilant and offer additional support to a member of staff who is experiencing stress at work or outside work e.g. bereavement or separation.

Human Resources

- Provide specialist advice and awareness training on mental health and stress.
- Train and support managers in implementing Stress Risk Assessments.
- Support individuals who have been off sick with stress and advise them and their management on a planned, appropriate return to work.
- Encourage referral to the Employee Assistance Programme/ counselling where appropriate.
- Assist in monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of measures to address stress by collating sickness absence data.
- In line with the Employee Health and Wellbeing Strategy, undertake an on-line Health and Wellbeing Survey.

Employees

- Rather than feeling stress to a point where it becomes intolerable, employees are encouraged to raise issues/concerns as soon as possible with their immediate line manager, Human Resources Adviser or Trade Union Representative.
- Play their part in the identification of possible stressful situations as part of the risk assessment process.
- Take responsibility for recognising harmful levels of stress in themselves and others and seek advice and help as appropriate.
- Recognise that their own actions may sometimes cause stress in others and seek to modify their behaviour.
- Engage in counselling when recommended.
- Help minimise stress in the workplace by taking an active part in stress management initiatives.
- Help to ensure that bullying and harassment does not take place.

7. LINKS TO OTHER HUMAN RESOURCES POLICES/PROCEDURES

Other policies and procedures include:

- Stress Risk Assessment – Managers Guidelines
- Employees Concerns Policy
- Managing Health, Attendance and Wellbeing Policy
- Employee Health and Wellbeing Strategy

Additional Information for Managers

How do I recognise when an individual employee is stressed?

As a manager, you know your employees and their typical behaviours and are therefore best placed to pick up on any changes in their behaviours. Some employees may show an acute reaction to stress and in others the symptoms may appear over time and may be mistaken for other health problems. You need to look out for typical stress signals.

Signs and symptoms of stress vary from one person to another. Typical stress signals can be categorised into behavioural, physical and emotional signals.

Behavioural Signals

- Poor work performance including uncharacteristic errors, memory lapses and indecisiveness.
- Withdrawal of interest, loss of motivation or commitment.
- Poor timekeeping.
- Changes in eating habits, increased smoking and/or alcohol intake.
- Loss of interest in personal appearance.
- Withdrawal from supportive relationships.
- Obsessive behaviour and inability to relax.

Physical Signals

- Headaches, tiredness
- Muscle tension
- Breathlessness, palpitations
- Skin irritations, frequent colds, flu or other infections
- Indigestion

Emotional Signals

- Irritability, poor concentration, difficulty making decisions
- Mood swings, tearfulness
- Loss of confidence
- Being cynical and or aggressive

Whilst these are common stress signals, the list is by no means exhaustive.

What can I do if an employee appears to be stressed?

You must not ignore the warning signs in the hope that the situation will resolve itself without intervention. An early and appropriate intervention is the crucial key to success.

You should meet with the employee concerned but, before meeting, you must be clear about what your concerns are. You must also consider what you think the employee is likely to see as the organisational or local work-related stressors that are having a negative impact on them.

On meeting with your employee, you need to discuss the situation and work with them to identify and define the problem. You must not make assumptions nor jump to conclusions. It is important to listen to their thoughts, views and needs and act on them where practicable. Try to understand the problem from their perspective and ask them what could help. Be wary of offering more support than they want as this could be seen as interference and remember, never impose solutions.

It can be difficult getting the discussion started but it may be better to begin by framing a question positively like "What do you find satisfying about your job?" This will often result in a negative response, which can then be explored. If you start with a negative question like "What gets you down about your job?" your employee may shrug off the question and resist further exploration.

An alternative might be to tell the employee what you have observed, "I thought you were looking tired" or "I thought you seemed a bit irritable. Was it something I said?" Remember that the issues revealed will not necessarily be work-related.

If through the discussion you have identified stressors within the workplace, you will need to consider:

- Completing the Stress Risk Assessment
- Consider if you need to sign post the employee to appropriate support services
- Consider an in work welfare meeting and a referral to Occupational Health

During meetings where concerns over mental health are to be discussed managers should, as far as reasonably practicable, remain non-judgemental.

What should I do if an employee is off work with a stress related illness?

As with all sickness absence, you must follow the health, attendance and wellbeing Management Policy and stay in touch with the employee. As support for you as a manager, please contact the health and wellbeing team.

With a stress-related illness, it is particularly important that this is done as this allows you to plan ahead for the employee's return to work.

To support the employee to return to work you may want to consider:

- Implementing a rehabilitation plan to allow the employee to gradually increase their working hours and duties
- Complete a Stress Risk Assessment to identify the work-related stressor(s) and what additional measures can be put in place to support the employee.