

Managing Stress at Work

Health, Safety and Well-being in the Workplace

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Overview

This section explains the British Council's stress management policy and procedures.

Audience

This policy applies to UK-appointed staff. It can provide good practice guidance for country/territory TACOS and/or English and Exams/ OAS staff contracts, subject to local law and conditions.

Responsibilities

Implementing the British Council's stress management policy is a shared responsibility between:

- all staff
- line managers
- the British Council organisation at corporate level.

Policy

It is British Council's policy to encourage all members of staff to be proactive in their management of stress.

All staff

All staff must:

- Acknowledge that the management of health and stress hazards in the workplace is a joint responsibility between the organisation and the individual.
- Take personal preventative action in terms of stress management.
- Highlight to their line manager working practices and environments that, if allowed to continue, may lead to stress or other health related hazards.
- Identify any personal health risks at the earliest opportunity and seek help from their line manager, Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provider (see Related information) and colleagues.
- Avoid potentially harmful ways of coping with stress.
- Respect the needs of others and take responsibility for actions that may have an adverse effect on the health of other individuals.
- Challenge and report bad practices to the appropriate line manager.
- Ensure that annual leave and flexible working are used to good effect in reducing stress.

Line managers

Line managers must:

- Implement effective control measures, precautions, employment adjustments and training to reduce health risks.
- Properly plan for reorganisations.
- Ensure that all staff have the opportunity to receive risk assessment training using this policy and the British Council's Health and Safety intranet site

- Where possible, encourage staff to raise problems arising from work, so that, together, line managers and staff can jointly initiate appropriate action, for example, through one-to-one discussions, supervision and performance reviews and development.
- Ensure the work environment, job design and facilities, as far as is reasonably practicable, are suitable and adequate.
- Raise specific issues of stress to HR Services, or the HR Manager if overseas, as and when appropriate.

British Council

The British Council must:

- Provide guidelines and advice on working environment and practices.
- Properly plan for reorganisations.
- Ensure that, wherever possible, a risk assessment is carried out for new roles with particular stressors, for example, large project roles that require frequent travel away from home, roles with very tight and frequent deadlines or milestones, or roles with a high impact on and risk to the business and individual.
- Provide and maintain a confidential EAP
- Provide staff with opportunities for personal and career development.
- Develop and organise a programme of health and stress management briefings for all managers in how to identify, manage and risk assess health issues amongst staff.
- Have a Health and Safety Policy for all staff
- Monitor the effectiveness of the Stress Management Policy regularly.

Guidelines for dealing with stress**Background**

Stress is the biggest single health and safety problem in the workplace in the UK, according to a recent Trades Union Congress (TUC) survey. According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the UK's governing body for workplace safety, the cost of stress to British industry is £370 million a year, while the cost to society as a whole could be as high as £3.75 billion (figures from 2001 survey).

What is stress?

Stress is a part of life. We all experience some stress in response to pressures we face every day. Social scientists have devised a list of life events and rated the relative stressfulness of each. The death of a spouse rates 100 on the scale, whereas:

- getting divorced rates 73
- going to jail rates 63
- being dismissed rates 47
- trouble with one's employer rates 23
- a change in sleeping habits rates 16.

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

As the body responds to stress, the heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, and other body systems prepare to meet the threat. When a person does something active to cope with the threat, these systems return to normal. Running away or fighting (the so-called fight-or-flight reaction) are both successful ways of coping with physical threats.

Problems arise, however, when the body is prepared to cope but cannot do so. Dealing with a difficult situation, for example, can cause the body to prepare for a fight-or-flight response, but when no action can be taken, the body's systems remain over-active. Similar repeated experiences can lead to a sense of being overloaded: this is what is commonly called 'stress'.

When is stress likely to occur?

Stress can occur when demands on a person exceed that person's resources and coping abilities. When it causes problems, stress can lead to poor performance and sickness absence. This affects everyone in the organisation, from the individual who is suffering pain and distress to the teams who may have to deal with the workload of absent colleagues.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 organisations have a duty to safeguard staff health. This includes taking measures to assess risks and ensuring that staff are not unduly subjected to stress.

The home and work balance

For everyone, there are times when the demands of home and work conflict. For example, some emergencies at home can get in the way of working responsibilities, such as when a family member falls ill, a new baby arrives, or you have an urgent dental or medical appointment. At work there may also be demands which make it difficult, if not impossible, to meet the needs of home life. The job may sometimes require long hours and/or frequent travel. Relationships with colleagues may become strained. At the end of the working day, tolerance of any problems back home may be low.

Factors known to increase the risk of workplace stress are:

- poorly designed working environment
- the job: too much or too little to do, conflicting roles and responsibilities, badly designed shifts and rotas
- organisational culture: poor communication between management and staff, uncertainty over change, lack of control over workload, lack of fulfilment
- lack of career development: stagnation, pay and conditions, inadequate training
- conflicting demands of home and work
- relationships with colleagues.

Signposts for recognising stress

How can an individual recognise stress?

There are numerous signs that might indicate stress. These include:

- disturbed sleep: finding it hard to drop off to sleep, waking early, or the inability to get back to sleep
- tiredness and lack of energy, even after a night's rest
- sudden anxiety
- feeling run down; catching every cough and cold that is going around
- feeling more tearful than usual
- loss of pleasure in things once enjoyed
- changes in appetite: eating too much, or too little
- irritability and impatience; an increasingly short temper.

What can the individual do to help control or alleviate stress?

- Try to work out what is really causing stress. How much is coming from external sources and how much are you creating yourself?
- Questions you might ask yourself include:
 - Is the stress you suffer work-related or external to the working environment?
 - Do you keep saying "yes" when in reality you mean "no"? Are you late for meetings, missing deadlines? If so, you may consider learning more about being assertive, and time management.
 - Are you able to take time out to relax? If not, you might consider trying to find something you can do every day that you find relaxing and can enjoy, for example listening to music or reading while commuting, allowing time in the evenings to watch television or read a good book, having a warm relaxing bath during the evening, catching up with friends and having a laugh. Also try to ensure that you get a good night's rest to recharge body and mind.
 - Do you take moderate regular exercise, for example, a daily walk, swimming, jogging, or going to a local gym? Above all, though, it is important to take exercise you enjoy.
 - Are you eating and drinking sensibly?
- If there are situations that cannot be easily changed, is it possible to change your approach or attitude to them?
 - Do talk over your worries and concerns. If you are unable to turn to family, friends or your line manager, do consider talking to the EAP or your doctor.
 - If the stress you feel is work-related, you might ask yourself some of the following questions:
 - Are you clear about what your job responsibilities are?
 - Are you clear about what results you are expected to achieve?
 - Do you feel that you have the necessary skills to do your job?
 - Can you get the information you need in order to do the job?
 - Does the physical environment you work in enable you to do the job?
 - Do you have the authority to make the decisions which are necessary for you to do your job?
 - Do you feel that your views about what you have to achieve are taken into account?
 - Are you able to get the co-operation you need from the people in your team?
 - Are you given feedback about your job performance?
 - Do you feel your skills and abilities are valued?
 - Is communication within your part of the organisation effective?
- If you have concerns over any of the above, discuss them with your line manager (see Procedure). You can then both work towards improving the situation wherever possible and evaluating, on a regular basis, the benefit of any changes you decide to make.

How can line managers recognise stress in their teams?

- Sometimes people experience stress but their mind and body are so good at hiding it that they and others are unaware of it. In such cases the symptoms may be subtle and therefore quite difficult to recognise, but could include any of the following:
 - working endlessly without tiring
 - having little feeling or emotion (except, in some cases, an occasional outburst of anger)
 - increased use of alcohol, caffeine, cigarette or other drugs (which may suppress feelings of distress)
 - behaviour that is out of character

- an inability to relax.
- If people are under a lot of stress for a prolonged period of time, but do not feel stressed, eventually it can cause more serious and very physical symptoms, apart from the obvious one of depression. Examples of these are stomach ulcers, heart problems, allergies, skin disorders, migraine, and even arthritis, cancer and diabetes.
- As a line manager, you need to be aware that, if members of staff acknowledge being under stress, they, or others in the organisation, could interpret this as a sign of weakness, with potential damage to their career prospects. In such cases, the individual can be tempted to suppress feelings of stress.

Impact of stress on teams

The impact of excessive stress on teamwork is also harmful, and it can damage individual work performance, team performance, working relationships, co-operation between team members and the team spirit.

The more effort team members have to expend in managing their own stress, the less they have to contribute to teamwork and mutual support.

Procedures

Note: As British Council UK has an Occupational Health Provider, the procedures for UK staff and line managers include referrals to Occupational Health services. Staff overseas may be able to access their medical scheme for such services. If not, staff should be referred to their doctor.

Members of staff

1. If, as a member of staff, you feel that work is causing you stress in some way, you must discuss this with your line manager.

You should not feel that by discussing it you are failing in any way. Stress occurs for everyone at different times in their lives. Some may feel stressed if they have little motivation in their work life and feel they achieve little, others may feel stressed by the heavy loading of jobs at certain times, travelling a lot for work and being away from their normal support groups, or for a wide variety of reasons. The important thing is to bring this to someone's attention at the earliest possible stage. If you cannot discuss it with your line manager, you can speak to another line manager, or directly to HR Services.

2. When you have discussed your situation with your line manager or another line manager, he or she will, in turn, speak in confidence to HR Services, so that all parties can work together to find ways to make the situation more manageable. The manager will also advise you to contact EAP if this is suitable for you.
3. In addition to EAP, you may consider a referral to British Council's Occupational Health Provider, your local medical scheme, if overseas, or your doctor. This can be done before you need to take any time off work and well before reaching the British Council's trigger points (see Trigger Points for Further Action). Such referrals exist so that stress can be dealt with as soon as it is identified, because early prevention is far better than struggling on with a situation that becomes increasingly untenable and affects your health increasingly severely.

Note: If you do not consent to an Occupational Health referral, your wish will be respected, but you should be aware that you may be jeopardising your opportunity of alleviating your stress as soon as possible.

4. As part of the Occupational Health referral, a risk assessment can also be carried out to assess where the stressors are and what can be done to alleviate the stress.

5. Once a referral has taken place, HR Services are sent a copy of the report and can then discuss with you and your line manager what can be done to help alleviate the stress you are under. At this point, even if you have not discussed the situation with your line manager, he or she must be brought in so you can work together to help alleviate the situation.

If you feel that another member of staff is suffering from stress, try to discuss this with the individual, or his or her line manager, or HR Services, so that help can be given.

Line managers

As line manager, you may wish to discuss the following stress-related issues with your member of staff:

- Is the stress work-related or home related? It is difficult to offer help for home situations but the member of staff may feel comfortable in discussing the situation, and that in itself can be of enormous help and value to the individual.
- Offer the EAP as this is another avenue of confidential support.
- Does the member of staff have a say in or control over how his or her work is carried out? Low levels of personal control are often related to high levels of stress-related outcomes such as anxiety, distress, irritability and health fears.
- If the stress is work-related, consider the job loading. Is there too much for the individual to cope with? Does the job description require changes?
- Are there specific times that the job loading is too much? Would occasional temporary help be of use?
- Are there other unnecessary work constraints? For example, unrealistic deadlines, staff shortages and additional performance requirements all contribute to staff overload. Other issues of concern to staff include poor leadership and management, job security and lack of recognition and career development.
- Has the member of staff received sufficient training to be able to carry out the role and responsibilities of the job successfully?
- Is the work environment adding to the stressful situation? Is there anything that can be done to adapt or change the environment? If so, then the British Council's Health and Safety Department in Global Estates must also be consulted to ensure that any changes to the environment are both possible and safe.
- Consider suggesting that the staff member talk to his or her GP about the problem.

How can risk be assessed?

The following process is a systematic but simple approach to assessing risk, provided by the HSE. This is what assessors are asked to consider for health and safety purposes; it includes physical risks as well as stress.

1. Identify the hazards: for stress, what are the stressors.
2. Decide who might be harmed, either physically or mentally.
3. Evaluate the risk of the hazards or stressors.
4. Record any significant findings from the risk assessment.
5. Review the assessment at regular intervals and note any changes, for better or worse, and act where necessary.