Talking Toolkit

Preventing work-related stress



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Introduction – For employers

The case for preventing stress:

- The law requires employers to tackle work-related stress.
- Tackling stress prevents ill health.
- Taking action on stress brings business benefits; it reduces sickness absence, boosts morale and helps improve productivity.

The earlier a problem is tackled the less impact it will have.

If you think that an employee is having problems, encourage them to talk to someone, whether it's their line manager, trade union representative, GP or their occupational health team.

Preventing work-related stress

Across Great Britain, work-related stress (stress, depression or anxiety) is a significant cause of working days lost to ill health and it impacts on significant numbers of workers, irrespective of sector or job role.

Stress affects us all at different times and in different ways. It can cause people to feel physically unwell, can cause mental health problems and can make existing problems worse.

It's important to remember that it's not an employer's or a line manager's job to diagnose or treat stress, whatever its cause. If an employee is having problems, it's important that they get help as soon as possible.

Whether an employer is a small business or a large corporation, the law requires all employers to assess the risk of work-related stress and to put steps in place to tackle those risks.

Line managers can play an important role in helping to implement these measures and there are many tools, resources and guides available to help employers in deciding what these measures should be (see pages 21 and 22).

This toolkit is designed to help line managers hold initial conversations with employees as one of part of an employer's journey towards preventing work-related stress.

By taking action employers can help create a more engaged, healthy workforce, boost productivity and save money.

Employers have reported improvements in productivity, retention of staff and a reduction in sickness absence when tackling work-related stress.

Using your Talking Toolkit

Starting the conversation is an important first step towards preventing work-related stress and developing the actions and stress risk assessment employers need to comply with the law.

The Talking Toolkit should not be used in isolation as an employer's only response if there is an existing problem with work-related stress in the organisation. It can be provided to line managers to help them start to have simple, practical conversations with employees.

The toolkit has six templates for six different conversations. Each of these has a different theme designed to get line managers and employees talking about issues which may be causing work-related stress or issues which could have the potential to become future causes if not managed properly.

For each conversation, the first sheet gives the line manager a series of questions to start discussions with an employee about the causes of stress. The second sheet helps the line manager to develop ideas for how to begin tackling causes.

There is no strict format for these conversations, or how line managers should conduct them, and the layout of the toolkit is not prescriptive. An employer could ask a line manager to hold one a week or one a month. The conversations could focus on just one topic or cover all six.

The conversations can fit into an existing one-to-one, they could be built into the next training day or a new meeting could be set up solely to talk about stress and how to prevent it.

Importantly, employers should make sure that there is time available for line managers and employees to have these conversations. The toolkit also relies on both managers and employees having an open and honest conversation.

Line managers should listen to what is being said rather than trying to offer excuses or explanations. Action points and solutions should be agreed together. The important thing is to start talking and to start planning.

The law requires all employers to assess the risk of work-related stress and to put steps in place to tackle those risks.

The Talking Toolkit can form part of an organisation's response but should not be used in isolation as the employer's only measure to prevent stress.

Conversation 1 **Demands**

Conversation 2 **Control**

Conversation 3 **Support**

Conversation 4 **Relationships**

Conversation 5 **Role**

Conversation 6 **Change**



What happens next?

The Talking Toolkit is just one step on the journey towards managing work-related stress and bringing in measures needed to address the risks and help your organisation comply with the law.

After you complete the six conversations, you should have built up a picture of the potential causes of stress in your organisation.

There are suggestions throughout this toolkit on tackling the issues. You may decide to implement the Management Standards, HSE's approach for preventing stress at work.

The approach helps identify and manage the six causes of stress at work, providing advice on how to build the business case for taking action, and how to involve the management team and all employees across your organisation to work together to tackle the problems.

The approach also advises on how and when to involve your employees in gathering information on problems by organising focus groups, surveys and working groups to identify solutions which are relevant to where you work.

Importantly, if you discover that someone is experiencing stress or a mental health problem, they should be encouraged to talk to someone, whether it's a manager, their trade union representative, GP or occupational health team.

Remember, although employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work, diagnosing and treating stress isn't their responsibility.

The 'Sources of further advice' section (pages 21 and 22) points you in the direction of other useful guides, workbooks and tools for both managing and preventing work-related stress.

Conversation One: **Demands**

How your employee should feel	• They are able to cope with the demands of their job. • They are provided with achievable demands in relation to the hours they work. • Their skills and abilities are matched to the demands of their job. • Concerns about their work environment are addressed.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team

Does your workload feel achievable? Think about which tasks take up the most time and how your organisation copes at busy times.

Do you feel the deadlines you are given are realistic? Do you often have conflicting deadlines?

Have you had the right training to carry out the core functions of your job?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation One: **Demands**

Did you know that in 2018 the Duke of Cambridge launched www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk from Heads Together and Mind? It brings together resources, training and information – providing the tools needed to make workplace wellbeing a priority. Find out more at: www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

The Chartered Accountants Benevolent Association have produced a toolkit for how people can reduce their workload to reduce stress. The tips are relevant to most workplaces and can be found by searching for 'workload' on www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

Working patterns

- Allow regular breaks, especially when the work is complex or emotionally demanding.
- Consider changes to start and end times to help employees cope with pressures outside work, like childcare or commuting.

Workload

- Hold regular meetings, both with individuals and as a team, to discuss anticipated workloads (and to deal with any predicted busy times).
- Provide training to help employees prioritise.
- Develop a system to notify employees of unplanned tight deadlines and any exceptional need to work long hours.
- Identify blocks of time to allow for genuine collaborative planning.
- If you're a team leader or supervisor, learn to say no to work if your team is already at full capacity.
- Consider the introduction of a work/life balance policy.

Environment

- Assess the risk and impact of other potential hazards and take steps to deal with them by consulting with employees and others. For example, to deal with the potential hazard of violence and aggression, you could seek advice from the police or a specialist charity.
- Provide training to help employees deal with and defuse difficult situations.
- Take steps to reduce unwanted distraction, disturbance and noise levels.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Two: **Control**

- They are consulted over the way their work is organised and undertaken, eg through regular meetings, one-to-ones, performance reviews.
- They have regular opportunities for discussion and input at the start of projects or new pieces of work.
- They are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work.
- They are consulted over things affecting their work.
- They are encouraged to develop new skills and undertake new and challenging pieces of work.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Do you feel involved in how decisions about your job are made? Think about whether you feel listened to and trusted, how you are consulted and any opportunities for input.

Do you feel your skills are used to good effect? How could your existing skills be used more effectively?

Do you feel you have a say in how your work is organised and undertaken?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Two: **Control**

TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady said: 'It's in no one's interest to have an overstretched workforce, as anxious employees are less productive and are more likely to take time off.'

Communication

- Help employees to have a say over the way their work is organised and undertaken through project meetings, one-to-ones and performance reviews.
- Hold regular discussion forums during the planning stage of new work to talk about the anticipated methods of working.
- Allocate responsibility to teams rather than individuals to take projects forward.
- Allow employees some control over the pace of their work.

Decisions

- Talk about the way decisions are made.
- Allow and encourage people to participate in decision making, especially where it affects them.

Skills and training

- Talk about the skills people have and if they believe they are able to use these to good effect.
- Talk about how people would like to use their skills.
- Consider personal development/training plans, where you ask employees to think about the skills they would like to develop.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Three: **Support**

- They receive information and support from other employees and their managers.
- The organisation has systems in place to enable and encourage managers to support their employees and for employees to support one another.
- They know what support is available and how to access it.
- They know how to access the resources they need.
- They receive regular and constructive feedback.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Do you feel that your organisation is a positive place to work and that you are valued? Think about the working environment, the support available and the opportunities to talk about support you may need.

Do you know who to talk to and where to go when you need support? Think about where you would go for help if you were experiencing an issue and whether you would feel comfortable doing so.

Do you feel there are enough opportunities to discuss any emerging issues or pressures?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Three: **Support**

Did you know that Mind offer free resources to support you and your employees' mental health at work? Wellness Actions Plans (WAPs) help you to take practical steps to ensure you are supported when you aren't feeling great.

Research from Mind shows that 30% of employees disagreed with the statement, 'I would feel able to talk openly with my line manager if I was feeling stressed.' By discussing these issues and building trust, people may feel more confident to talk about their problems – helping the organisation to tackle them early.

Support

- Hold regular one-to-one and team meetings to talk about any emerging issues or pressures.
- Include work-related stress or pressures as a standing item for meetings with employees and/or performance reviews.
- Consider buddying systems or work shadowing to improve understanding of roles across the team.
- Find examples of how people would like, or have received, good support from managers or employees.

Resources

- Share information on areas of support available with your employees like assistance programmes, charities, occupational health and external organisations.
- Talk about the ways your organisation can provide support if someone is experiencing problems outside work.

Training

- Regularly consult with people to ensure training is up to date.
- Offer access to counsellors or training in basic counselling skills.

Environment

- Assess the risk of physical violence and verbal abuse by consulting with employees and others, such as the police and charities.
- Provide training to help employees deal with and defuse difficult situations.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Four: **Relationships**

- They are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours such as bullying or harassment at work.
- The organisation promotes positive behaviours at work.
- The organisation has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour.
- The organisation has systems in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour.
- The organisation has systems in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Have you experienced or witnessed unacceptable behaviour at work? Do you feel satisfied with how was this dealt with?

Do you feel that honest, open communication is encouraged in your organisation?

Do you feel that you know where to go and what to do if you experience or witness unacceptable behaviour? Do you feel confident that steps will be taken to stop this behaviour?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Four: **Relationships**

The 'Sources of further advice' section (pages 21 and 22) includes links to HSE's free stress risk assessment template, example risk assessments on stress written for small businesses and links to Acas guidance on bullying and Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) guidance on harassment.

In 2016/17, on average, 24 working days were lost for every case of stress, anxiety or depression caused or made worse by work.

- Have an agreement with employees and senior leaders on which behaviours are unacceptable.
- Have a written policy for dealing with unacceptable behaviour and procedures for reporting incidents.
- Regularly communicate these policies and procedures to employees and make sure that they are understood.
- Have a confidential system for people to report unacceptable behaviour.
- Encourage good communication and provide training to help, such as listening skills, confidence building and assertiveness.
- Encourage and provide opportunities for employees to socialise together.
- Make sure that you are providing the same level of support and communications for employees who work in isolation like lone workers or those in separate locations.
- Find ways to celebrate success.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Five: **Role**

- They understand their role and responsibilities.
- The organisation provides information to enable them to understand their role and all of their responsibilities.
- The requirements the organisation places on them are clear.
- They are able to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities through the systems that the organisation has in place.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Do you feel clear on what your responsibilities are?

Are you clear on what your performance objectives are and what success looks like for you, your area/department and the organisation? Do you feel that they are achievable?

Do you feel you understand how work is structured in your department and in the wider organisation? Do you know who is doing what and why and how your role fits in?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Five: **Role**

Did you know that stress, anxiety and depression caused or made worse by work accounts for more than half of all the working days lost to sickness absence in Great Britain

Mind and Time to Change's toolkit, 'Tackling stress in the workplace: what you can do' brings together different organisations' resources on work-related stress. To find out more, select 'Toolkits' at www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk

New starters

- Give all new employees a thorough induction into your organisation and its policies and procedures. Include details of where to get support or who to speak to about stress.

Communication

- Provide clear work objectives.
- Define work structures clearly so that all team members know who is doing what and why.
- Hold regular one-to-one meetings to ensure people are clear about what is planned for the coming months.
- Agree specific standards of performance for individual tasks and review regularly.
- Hold regular team meetings to enable employees to discuss any issues.
- Display departmental/ organisational targets and objectives.
- Introduce or revise job descriptions with the involvement of the employee to ensure the core functions and priorities are clear.

Role

- Introduce personal work plans which are aligned to the objectives of the team/ organisation.
- Introduce or revise job descriptions to ensure the core functions and priorities are clear.
- Review job descriptions regularly, especially following change, and discuss training/ retraining regularly too.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Six: **Change**

- The organisation engages with them frequently when undergoing change.
- They are provided with timely information, enabling them to understand the reasons for proposed changes.
- They are consulted on changes and provided with opportunities for them to influence proposals.
- They are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their job and, if necessary, they are given training to support any changes in their job.

Go through the following questions with your employee or team.

Do you feel that your organisation handles change well?

Do you feel you are properly consulted when changes are made which affect you and your role?
Do you feel the reasons for the change are explained well?

Do you feel that you are involved in the planning process when changes are made?

What improvements or support could be put in place to help with any of the issues you have talked about? Think about you, your line manager, your organisation.

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes

Conversation Six: **Change**

Never underestimate the effects of 'minor' changes. Seemingly small changes can have a big impact on people's ways of working, their morale and level of work-related stress.

Consultation

- Define and explain key steps of changes being made.
- Consult employees early and throughout the change process.
- Build in consultation and support as key elements of any change process.
- Involve employees in the planning process.
- Provide a system for employees to comment and ask questions before, during and after the change.
- Review how the change will impact on departmental and individual objectives and workloads.
- Include training/retraining needs as part of your change process.

Communication

- Start communication early and, as far as possible, make it a two-way conversation.
- Explain what the organisation wants to achieve and why it is essential that the change takes place.
- Explain the timescales of changes and how changes will impact directly on them.
- Have an agreed system for communicating to employees why a change is happening.
- Have agreed methods of communication (such as meetings, notice boards, letters, email and feedback forms) and their frequency.
- Don't rely on a single communication route – most people may have access to a PC in work but what about those who don't, or those who work off-site?
- Make sure that employees are aware of the impact of the change being made on their jobs. Talk about the potential need for (re)training.

Agreed action plan

Set a date to revisit these proposed changes



Sources of further advice

This Talking Toolkit can form part of your organisation's response to preventing work-related stress. If people you work with are experiencing stress, they should be encouraged to talk to someone, whether it's a manager, their trade union representative, GP or an occupational health team.

Samaritans provide confidential, non-judgemental emotional support for people experiencing feelings of distress.

Telephone: **116 123** (24 hours a day, free to call)

Website: **www.samaritans.org**

Stress

HSE's guidance on work-related stress: www.hse.gov.uk/stress

Mind has guidance on stress and how to manage it: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/what-is-stress/

Healthy Working Lives (Scotland) provide information and guidance on tackling stress in the workplace: https://www.healthyworkinglives.scot/workplace-guidance/mental-health/Pages/stress-at-work.aspx

Mental health

The government commissioned Lord Stevenson and Paul Farmer to review the role of employers supporting individuals with mental health conditions. Their 'Thriving at Work' report sets out 'Core Standards' that the reviewers recommend employers of all sizes can and should put in place. You can read the full report at: www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/resource/thriving-at-work-the-stevenson-farmer-review-of-mental-health-and-employers

Mind's free Wellness Action Plans are an easy, practical way of helping people to support their own mental health at work: https://www.mind.org.uk/workplace/mental-health-at-work/taking-care-of-your-staff/employer-resources/wellness-action-plan-download/

Business in the community, in partnership with the UK Health Security Agency has created the Mental Health for Employers Toolkit, to help them build a culture that champions good mental health: https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/mental-health-for-employers-toolkit/

Heads Together and Mind's website brings together resources, training, information and tools to make workplace wellbeing a priority: www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/

Training opportunities available online can help improve awareness about mental health and develop key skills. If you're based in Scotland, you can access NHS Health Scotland's Mentally Healthy Workplaces course: https://learning.publichealthscotland.scot

Healthy Working Wales is a Welsh Government programme helping employers support people in Wales to stay fit and healthy so they can remain in employment, or return to work following a period of ill health. They offer free resources on mental health and stress: https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/healthy-working-wales/

Mind Cymru runs the Time to Change campaign for Wales: https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/mind-cymru-campaigns/time-to-change-wales/

Violence, bullying and harassment or discrimination

HSE guidance on ways to prevent, manage and respond to complaints of inappropriate behaviour: https://www.hse.gov.uk/violence/

Acas advice – Bullying and harassment at work: a guide for managers and employers: https://www.acas.org.uk/handling-a-bullying-harassment-discrimination-complaint

CIPD advice – Harassment and bullying at work: https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/emp-law/harassment/factsheet?IsSrchRes=1

EHRC has advice on tackling discrimination and harassment: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en

See Me in Work (Scotland), Preventing unlawful discrimination – A checklist for employers: http://www.seemescotland.org/media/7643/employers-checklist.pdf

See Me in Work (Scotland), Understanding stigma: https://www.seemescotland.org/stigma-discrimination/

Tools and templates from HSE

HSE's stress indicator and analysis tools can be used to assess the level of work-related stress within your organisation.

An action plan template can be used to plan how your organisation will tackle the identified stressors.

The tools and template are available at: https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm

Stress risk assessment examples of how smaller organisations can approach risk assessment: www.hse.gov.uk/stress/risk-assessment.htm

Further information

For information about health and safety, or to report inconsistencies or inaccuracies in this guidance, visit www.hse.gov.uk. You can order HSE priced publications at https://books.hse.gov.uk

HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops.

This publication is available on the HSE website at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/talking-toolkit.htm

This guidance is issued by the Health and Safety Executive. Following the guidance is not compulsory, unless specifically stated, and you are free to take other action. But if you do follow the guidance you will normally be doing enough to comply with the law. Health and safety inspectors seek to secure compliance with the law and may refer to this guidance.

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