



# Workplace Stress – Practical Solutions

Stress at work can seem overwhelming. You may feel that nothing will improve unless everything changes. But our experience as occupational health advisers working in GPs' surgeries is that there are solutions:

**Talking about it.** You may need to talk to someone who is not involved in the situation.

**Finding individual solutions.** An individual solution may be enough.

**Involving others at work.** You may need to involve others at work – which could be of benefit to them as well.

**Looking at all aspects.** We can talk to you about all aspects of stress at work; financial circumstances, how you get on with other staff, employers' legal duties and more. For some problems referral to a trained counsellor or others with specialist knowledge may be useful.

**Taking time.** Solutions may take time to work out.

**Using the law.** Employers have duties under the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999* to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities; and under the *Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974* to take measures to control that risk. The

Health and Safety Executive's *Management Standards for Work-related Stress* cover the main causal factors: demands, control, support, relationships, roles and change. See <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards>

On the next few pages we give examples of what can be done, drawing on our experience of dealing with the main kinds of occupational stress.

## Workload

Many people describe the heavy demands placed on them as the cause of their problems. It is not just the demands of work but control over how the job is done which is important.

- Levels of workload should be monitored constantly and the findings carefully recorded.
- For older workers negotiation of a shorter working week or even moving to a slightly less well-paid job may be preferable to leaving work completely.
- Your employer should be advised on good employment practice.
- However, many workplaces will not make changes for a single individual. It is hard to take individual action to reduce workload when this has an impact on rate of pay.

- SOHAS can help you conduct stress surveys using standard questionnaires and produce a report showing the existence of stressors in a workplace.

## Rapid change and new appointments

Periods of rapid change at work (more work for some, less demanding work for others) imposes additional burdens on all workers and cause anxiety. Changes at work test the communication skills of managers and workers. Fear of redundancy, the threat of dismissal and uncertainty itself, all have psychological and physical effects. Risk factors for heart disease increase during periods of uncertainty.

- There is a legal duty for employers to consult with their employees about changes at work, and to maintain conditions when work is



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transferred from one company to another.

- Change without consultation which makes a worker's job impossible for them to continue in may be grounds for a case of 'constructive dismissal'. Ask us for advice on this.
- You should receive the appropriate training for any new tasks that you have to take on.
- Because of the speed of change you must have the opportunity to train to improve your skill so that you are in a stronger position if you lose your job.

## Long hours and shiftwork

The Working Time Regulations (WTR) and Road Transport (Working Time) Regulations lay down minimum standards of protection for workers called upon to work long or antisocial hours. However the 'opt-out' provision in the WTR allows workers, often on low pay, to opt to work longer hours than set down in the regulations.

We can advise on:

- How to use the Working Time Regulations and your right to opt out or back in.
- How best to cope with unsocial hours, and the medical conditions and health consequences associated with long hours and shiftworking (see our separate publication "Working Hours and Health). We also have copies of codes of practice on negotiating reduced working hours.
- We have detailed recommendations on the design of shift patterns and how to cope with shiftwork.

- The hours you really want to work can make it more acceptable to work the basic working week without paid or unpaid overtime.

## Isolation

Working alone can cause anxiety and depression. Social support at work reduces the risk of physical and psychological consequences of stress.

- Legal protection is restricted to workers at particular risk, for example working in confined spaces, working at heights or with dangerous chemical exposure.
- However general duties to protect workers' health still apply.
- Several trade unions and other groups have published helpful advice on both reducing isolation at work and coping with it.

## Bullying

Bullying is a fairly common cause of distress resulting in visits to GPs. There are straightforward things you can do.

- Record what is going on. Many employers have an anti-bullying policy. Check what it says.
- Get a letter from your GP stating that bullying is damaging your health.
- If the bully isn't controlled or removed then requests for transfers away from perpetrators are often successful.
- A more systematic approach would look at management practice and suggest procedures which could highlight and prevent bullying.
- We can provide codes of practice on bullying and support

for victims of bullying to negotiate an end to their ordeal.

- We also have experience of dealing with cases of racial and sexual harassment and can refer to specialist agencies.

## Management style

Workers for different employers carrying out the same line of work suffer different levels of stress. This is often because of differences in management style. Good supervision is beneficial to health and for your employer.

- We can help you to understand patterns of behaviour and to suggest ways of breaking them down if they are harmful.
- A letter from your GP or occupational health adviser linking your health to the psychological working environment will alert your employer that something needs to be done.

## Post-traumatic shock

Post-traumatic shock is a common consequence of incidents at work. These incidents include: near misses, severe injuries, deaths or injuries affecting other workers at work as well as accidents affecting clients, patients or passengers. In the past the psychological effects of these incidents have been neglected – patients had to cope with them without help. Assistance can include:

- **Counselling.** Those who receive counselling have appreciated it. Counselling is available in some hospital accident and emergency centres and a few counsellors have had training in post-traumatic counselling.

- **Phased return to work.** You may have problems returning to a workplace or to the kind of work in which the traumatic incident occurred. We advise patients and their GPs on reasonable steps for employers to take to make this transition as easy as possible.
- **Financial advice.** Whilst we recognise that claiming compensation can in itself cause stress, we can advise on how to make a claim under these compensation systems:
  - Post-traumatic shock. This is recognised as an industrial injury by the Department for Work and Pensions for payment of Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit.
  - Civil claims for post-traumatic shock have also been successful.
  - No-fault compensation. This should also be available for government and local authority employees or certain other workers in what were state or local authority organisations.

## Chronic ill health causes stress

Sometimes ill health or the effects of an injury make coping with your existing work difficult. Sickness absence or failure to meet previous levels of output can lead to disciplinary procedures which add to the pressure you are under. This results in a complex pattern of physical and mental health problems.

- Speedy interventions can nip these patterns in the bud.
- The Disability Discrimination Act should be used to

persuade employers to adapt work to the individual.

- A letter from the GP or occupational health adviser will draw the employer's attention to his/her duties under the Act.

## Age Discrimination

**The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006** make direct and indirect discrimination on grounds of age unlawful. Lower pensions (in real terms) and longer life expectancy as well as pressure to cut spending on benefits have created a new demand for work for older workers. Yet the jobs available may not be suitable for older workers, creating unreal expectations and pressures. This is likely to become an increasingly common problem in the future.

- We can advise on age policies at work.
- We can tell you how work should be adapted to your needs as you get older.

## Family-friendliness

Some large employers offer a package of measures to enable workers to match their family commitments as parents and carers with the demand of work.

- We can supply details of model agreements on voluntary reduced hours, term time contracts, nurseries and creches, family leave agreements.
- There are legal rights to request flexible working hours if you have a child under 5 (under 18 if the child has a disability).

## Money

Pay, disputes about payment, and low levels of pay are a major

cause of stress. Relaxing at home allows you to cope better with work stress. Low levels of pay reduce the options workers have in their homelife, leading to higher levels of stress at home. This is a neglected aspect of occupational health which we think should be receiving more attention.

We can advise on:

- minimum wage legislation
- a redundancy package
- entitlement to benefits or pensions and refer you for further advice.

## Leaving work to avoid stress

Many workers – particularly after a long period of accumulated stress or close to retiring age can see no alternative to leaving work for good.

- You may need advice on the financial consequences of making this decision; advice on state benefits, possible redundancy terms and compensation payments.
- Workers who feel they have to leave work because of unreasonable demands placed upon them may be entitled to compensation from their employer via an Employment Tribunal.

## Heart disease and stress

Stressors at work increase risk of heart disease and influence other risk factors such as blood pressure and concentrations of cholesterol and blood clotting proteins. Your blood pressure could be lowered by moving to another job or changing the way you work.

- We will discuss with you what effect work might be having on your blood pressure.

## Compensation for stress

The high profile compensation cases publicised in the papers are the exception not the rule. Millions of workers suffer from stress at work, but no more than a handful will successfully sue their employer for civil compensation. But the threat of litigation has been effective in waking employers up to their duties.

- Notes kept in your medical records of the link between working conditions and your health problems are crucial whatever the health problem.
- Drawing an employer's attention to these links, via a medical note or more detailed letter (the text of which must be agreed with you) will often indicate to an employer the seriousness of a problem. It could even be used as evidence of the employer's awareness of the problems work was causing.
- Local authority, NHS, civil service and utility (gas, water, electricity) workers may be able to claim under no-fault schemes.

## Empowering not counselling

Our skills, developed over many years, are in showing workers what they can do to tackle problems at work. We do not provide a counselling service, though some of our staff have basic training in counselling skills.

Our aim is to work closely with counsellors, Community Psychiatric Nurses, GPs and practice nurses to work out how patients can overcome obstacles to their health at work.

## All kinds of stress

Good methods of communication and representation at work are

part of the solution to many kinds of stress at work. Workers have a legal right to representation, which we can advise on.

- Employers must carry out a risk assessment wherever workers' health is threatened. This assessment should be developed with assistance from workers and be recorded and regularly reviewed. The safety policy should state how stress is dealt with.
- GPs can put employers on notice that there is a problem that they need to deal with. Recording work-related stress on sick notes may not be sufficient to do this. A letter written with the assistance of the occupational health adviser, making clear what aspects of work appear to be involved, can make the employer aware of the seriousness of a problem for the first time.

## Solutions to problems with stress at work

There **are** legal rights which workers have and good practices which employers should attempt to follow.

### A good job too?

The best jobs allow workers the chance to match their skills and needs to the demands of the job. They are free of unnecessary danger, harassment and insecurity. They offer opportunities to influence the most important aspects of the job; the tasks, demands and rewards which the job offers, and the way in which those aspects of work match the worker's needs. A job should also offer support to individuals to help resolve their problems. The best jobs meet our need for meaning in our working lives.

## This is a checklist to see what your job is offering you:

### Do you have control over:

- Your workload?
- How fast you work?
- When you start and finish work?
- When you take breaks?

### Does your employer offer you time off for:

- Paternity leave?
- Carers' leave?
- Bereavements?
- Term time contracts?
- Does your employer allow older workers or parents with young children to reduce their working hours according to their needs?
- Are you free from bullying and harassment on grounds of race, sex or any other reason?
- Are procedures for dealing with disciplinary matters, redundancy and sickness absence dealt with fairly?
- Do you get social support from other workers?
- Do you work alone?
- Do managers foster an environment in which dialogue is encouraged?
- Are you insecure about your future employment?
- Do you get support from your supervisor or line manager?
- Do you have the privacy which you need at work?
- Have you been given the training necessary for your current job?
- Are job roles and requirements clearly defined?
- Do you have a chance to develop your skills through training or advancement in your job?
- Do you have a chance to use your creativity at work?
- Do you have an opportunity to influence decisions which affect you as an individual?
- Are you allowed to meet with other workers to discuss decisions, including pay rates, affecting you?
- Does your job have meaning for you?