
	<h1>Frequently Asked Question</h1>				
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### **What is Stress?**

STRESS is a mental and physical condition which results from pressure or demands that strain or exceed your capacity to cope. The sources of such pressure or demand are called STRESSORS.

### **What is Work Related Stress (WRS)?**

It is the conditions, practices and events at work which may give rise to stress. WRS is stress caused or made worse by work.

It should be noted that work generally provides opportunities for developing and maintaining positive mental health and well-being. There is a difference between positive stress, which is associated with a sense of challenge and excitement and negative stress which is dominated by worry, anxiety and agitation.

### **What are the effects of WRS on the individual/s?**

The effects of stress can normally be categorised as follows:

- Mental (how the mind works)
- Behavioural (the things we do)
- Physical (how the body works)
- Cognitive/Emotional (the way we think and concentrate)

It is important to note that the effects of stress differ from individual to individual. Different personality styles, gender difference, age, context, family history, emotional state, understanding of self and general social awareness will all influence each person's stress levels.

### **How should we manage stress?**

“Prevention is better than cure” the best way to deal with stress is to try to prevent it arising as far as it is reasonably practicable. Stress management training can be beneficial to increase self-awareness and learning to react effectively when we become exposed to stressful situations.

### **Personal interventions:**

There is wide ranging evidence to conclude that increasing exercise can benefit an individual in many ways including how one deals with stress. Individual employees may benefit from taking more exercise, building in more relaxation time, altering their social habits and the way they view things.

### **Work Interventions:**

When at work it may be necessary to change the work system in some way or re-engineer the work undertaken so as to reduce the exposure to the causes of stress. Risk assessment will provide the opportunity to consider what changes can be made.

### ***Do we have to complete a risk assessment?***

Yes, it is the duty of every employer, under Section 19 of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, to identify hazards and carry out a risk assessment. Stress is deemed to be hazard and it must be assessed and managed in the same way as physical hazards.

It is also important to realise that risk management is a structured step-by step problem solving approach, involving participation and consultation that can relieve stress.

### ***How do we undertake a stress risk assessment?***

Whenever possible the sharing of stress related hazards in the workplace should be encouraged. Undertaking a stress risk assessment should be approached in the same way as any other health and safety risk assessment:

- Identify the hazards (sources of stress known as stressors)
- Assess the risk (impact x likelihood (also consider number of persons who may be affected))
- Eliminate the risks (e.g. can a system of work be changed to remove stressors)
- Reduce the number of stressors or exposure to them and or limit the impact
- Review actions and level of stressors in the workplace.

Risk assessment is not a one off exercise; when determining if and what stressors are present in the workplace, it should be an integral part of the day-to-day dialogue with your employees either on an individual basis or as part of departmental meetings or following a review of an incident(s) that may have occurred. For more information, risk assessment tools and guidance please go to: <http://www.hse.ie/safetyandwellbeing>

### ***What Hazards are associated with Work Related Stress?***

Table 1 identifies some of the potential hazards associated with WRS. However a person can experience WRS as a result of other hazards that are specific to them. Upon review, there maybe evidence of a number of hazards occurring at the same time. Some of these hazards identified in table 1, can be influenced by an individual's own perception.

The Health & Safety Authority (HSA) in partnership with the States Claims Agency (SCA) has developed an audit tool, known as **Work Positive<sup>CI</sup>** (updated 2011). Work Positive<sup>CI</sup> is a survey method for assessing employee perception of different potential environmental hazards at their place of work at a particular point in time.

The UK's Management Standards have been incorporated into the HSE's risk assessment tool for use. The areas surveyed are:

- Demands
- Control
- Support
- Relationships
- Roles
- Change

**Table 1: Contextual and content factors defining the hazard of WRS (WHO; UK\*)**

<b>CONTEXT TO WORK</b>	<b>Potential Hazardous Conditions</b>
<b>Organisational culture</b>	Poor communication, low levels of support for problem solving and personal development, lack of definition of organisational objectives.
<b>Role in organisation</b>	Role ambiguity and role conflict; responsibility for people unclear.
<b>Career development</b>	Career stagnation and uncertainty, under or over promotion, poor pay, job insecurity, low social value to work.
<b>Decision latitude/ control</b>	Low participation in decision making, lack of control over work.
<b>Interpersonal relationships at work</b>	Social or physical isolation, poor relationships with superiors, interpersonal conflict, lack of social support.
<b>Home-work interface</b>	Conflicting demands of work and home, low support at home, dual career problems.
<b>CONTENT OF WORK</b>	<b>Potential Hazardous Demands</b>
<b>Work environment and equipment</b>	Problems regarding the reliability, availability, suitability and maintenance or repair of both equipment and facilities.
<b>Task design</b>	Lack of variety or short work cycles, fragmented or meaningless work, underuse of skills, high uncertainty.
<b>Workload/pace of work</b>	Work overload or underload, lack of control, over pacing, high level of time pressures.
<b>Work schedule</b>	Poorly managed shift working, inflexible work schedules, unpredictable hours, long or unsocial hours.
Extract from HSA document Work-Related Stress: a Guide for Employers * <i>Institute of Work, Health &amp; Organisations, University of Nottingham, UK.</i>	

### ***Are there any common control measures?***

Solutions that are recommended to prevent stress include:

- Ensuring employees have enough time and autonomy to manage their work
- Roles and tasks are clarified and regular constructive feedback is encouraged
- Keep employees informed about change and involve them in decision making
- Implement Policies to promote stress prevention in the workplace
- Ensure fair work distribution and rewards
- Facilitate open and two way communication between management and employees

### ***Why should we manage work related stress?***

The benefits of managing are:

- Employees will gain a greater sense of wellbeing and job satisfaction

- Managers will gain a healthier more motivated and productive workforce
- Workplaces will have improved performance, reduced accident and injury rates lower absenteeism
- Society will have lower costs and reduced burden on services

**The following FAQs have been developed with the help of the Institute of Occupational Medicine and have been taken from European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EUOSHA) Website.**

***Different things to different people:***

Stress is one of those words which everybody uses, but they often mean different things when they talk about it.

Here we will explain what we mean by stress, and show how this fits with other ways in which people talk about it.

Some people talk about being exposed to stress, as if stress is some form of demand or load – rather like the load on a steel girder. Others talk of suffering from stress as if it is an illness or response to those demands – which they might call “stressors”. Neither is wrong, just different.

***Preparing for action:***

When you are faced with physical demands, your body responds. If you have to run to catch a bus your heart rate and blood pressure will go up. You will start to breathe more quickly and deeply.

If it is a warm day your skin might flush as your body tries to lose the extra heat it is producing. Less obvious will be the release of chemical messengers (hormones) into your blood. This response dates back to when you were more likely to have to run away from a dangerous animal than run to catch a bus. If you are faced with mental demands, such as having to meet tight timescales at work, you might experience similar changes.

***Activation and Demand:***

**Activation:**

This response, which physiologists call “activation”, is potentially harmful because these hormones release the body’s reserves (to fight or run away) but, when the challenge is mental, you don’t “use up” these reserves, as there is no physical activity. Some people refer to this as “stress” or a “stress reaction”. Again, this is not wrong, just different. But it is recognised that this is just a natural response to demands placed on the body.

“Activation” occurs as a response to any demands, whether you can cope with them or not. This is not the same as “stress” as presented in this e-guide: “stress” occurs when those demands are excessive and you find it difficult or are not able to cope with them.

**Rate x Complexity = Demand:**

As a rough guide, the rate at which you have to do a work task, combined with the complexity of that task, gives you the overall demand. When the work you do is simple and unchallenging then you may be able to carry it out very quickly, almost without thinking. Such tasks are often performed better when carried out at a high rate. A more complicated task requires more concentration and effort, and is often performed better without other tasks to distract you. Too little demand, or too much demand, and task performance gets worse. We call this demand “pressure” not stress.

So, it is true to say that we all need some pressure at work – and that some people prefer or need a high level of pressure at work to perform at their best. For example, some people feel that they work better when they have a tight deadline while others prefer to get their work done well in advance.

### ***Coping with stress:***

#### ***Stress is when you find it hard to cope:***

Both activation and pressure are called stress by some people, but neither are what we are talking about in this FAQ as work-related stress. Stress is not activation – although the situations which lead to activation can result in stress. Stress is not pressure – although the level of pressure or demand placed on a person in the workplace can lead to stress. Instead, we experience stress at work when we feel that there is an imbalance between the demands or pressures placed on us and the resources we have available to cope with those demands.

#### ***Work-related-stress is not an illness:***

Although people talk of “suffering from stress” what they really mean is that they are suffering from the effects of stress. These effects can affect how we feel, think, or behave. Some people might feel depressed or anxious about not being able to cope. Others might find it hard to concentrate or think straight. Some might always feel tired. Despite this, they are unable to relax or sleep properly – making them feel even more tired. Others will become withdrawn or less talkative.

#### ***Stress can be caused by other factors:***

Stress might not just be caused by psychosocial risk factors at work. If you are going through problems at home it can make it harder for you to cope at work, as problems don't disappear when we get there.

Some people might start drinking alcohol or taking other drugs to help them “relax”. Although this might provide some short-term relief, it does not solve the problem and can lead to dependency or other adverse effects on physical or mental health.

So, stress at work is not activation or pressure and is not something that we need. It is something which we experience when things are not right, and we should do something about it.

#### ***What is the legal position?***

Under health and safety law (Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005), all workplaces should have, a current, operational Safety Statement which outlines the hazards and risks in that workplace and control measures put in place to eliminate or reduce them. All employers should consider any workplace hazard where there is a reasonable probability that it could cause work-related stress.

Risk assessment for stress involves the same basic principles and processes as for other workplace hazards. The hazard must be identified, the risk assessed and control measures identified, implemented and evaluated.

### ***Stress risk factors at work:***

The factors at work which can create a risk of stress and other health problems are well-known. They are referred to as psychosocial risks. Some other guides to work-related-stress or psychosocial risk assessment might present them slightly differently or use a slightly different emphasis but, in general terms they can be summarised as:

- Excessive demands - Excessive demands or conflicts in the working environment.
- Lack of personal control - Having inadequate say over how work is done
- Inadequate support - Having inadequate support from managers or co-workers
- Poor relationships (including harassment) - Being subjected to unacceptable behaviours including harassment or violence
- Role conflict or lack of clarity - Not understanding roles and responsibilities
- Poor management of change - Not being involved and informed in organisational changes

These factors can act together. For example, it is recognised that a person is more likely to experience stress due to high demands when they have little control over how they meet those demands.

### ***Myths and Facts for Employers /Managers:***

#### ***Why should employers be concerned about work-related stress?***

Managing the psychosocial risks that can cause stress is a legal obligation. Also, the symptoms of stress can have a negative impact on the performance of your workers. There is a lot of evidence that stress is the biggest cause of work-related sickness absence. It can make it harder to keep good workers and your workers are likely to be less well-motivated. It therefore makes good business sense to be concerned about it.

#### ***Why can this problem not be ignored?***

Stress can make your workers ill – or can make the effect of other illnesses worse. Ignoring stress is bad for health. It can also have a negative effect on worker performance.

There is also a lot of evidence that stress is the biggest cause of work-related sickness absence. It can make it harder to keep good workers and your workers are likely to be less well-motivated. Ignoring stress can therefore affect your business.

#### ***Is it possible to measure psychosocial risks?***

Yes, Not in the same way as you would use a noise meter, but there are tools which will help you assess the extent of psychosocial risks – or of the effects (such as stress) that these might be having on your workers. A risk assessment can help you do this, to find out more please go to [www.hse.ie/eng/staff/safetywellbeing/](http://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/safetywellbeing/)

### ***How can an employer know that stress is related to work issues and not personal life?***

Some people can experience stress because of challenges in their personal life. However, in the same way as you can't be sure that noise-induced deafness wasn't caused by disco music, or back pain by gardening or moving furniture, you can't be absolutely certain that psychosocial factors at work haven't played a part unless you make sure that you are managing these.

### ***Is stress a real illness?***

Stress is not an illness itself, but it can result in illness or make existing problems worse.

### ***If you can't stand the heat – stay out of the kitchen:***

It is important to understand the difference between the pressures and demands of work, and stress. Clearly it is important for workers to be aware of the demands that will be made of them and, as long as these are reasonable, that should not be a problem.

However, to use the example given, there is a difference between recognising that cooking requires heat and so a certain amount of heat tolerance is to be expected and allowing the kitchen to get so hot that it places people at risk of heat-related illness.

It is important to recognise that what is stressful for one worker may not be stressful for others. This is why it is important for workers to raise any concerns they have to see if there are any steps that can be taken to reduce the risk. However, sometimes a worker might find the nature of the job they do particularly stressful.

- **We all need stress to keep us on our toes**
- **We all need some stress**
- **Workers need some stress to work effectively**

We don't need stress, we need demands or pressure. Workers need some demands to work effectively, to keep them alert and motivated to do their job successfully (and some need more than others). Too much can reduce overall performance and, if the worker is unable to cope with the challenges they face, this can lead to stress-related ill health or further reductions in performance.

### ***Why should a worker be encouraged to tell me about stress in them or others?***

It is important that you reassure workers that they can come to you when they have issues they would like to discuss and reassure them that these discussions will be in confidence to encourage them to speak out. Clearly, they might want to speak to you if they feel that work factors are causing or contributing to their stress or that of a colleague. A person who is experiencing stress due to problems at home might feel that this is affecting their work.

It is a good idea to raise awareness of the problems that stress can bring, whether it is work or non-work-related and to encourage workers to speak out, before it gets too serious. Being affected by stress can be seen as a weakness and people can be reluctant to admit that they are having problems.

### ***What should I do if a worker complains about being stressed?***

First of all listen to them even if the main source of stress is outside of work as it can still have an impact on work performance. Try to identify the source(s) of the stress, so that you can have discussions on how best to reduce and manage these.

### ***Myths and Facts for Workers:***

#### **How do I distinguish between work pressures and stress that is bad for my health?**

You need some demands or pressure to work effectively, to keep you alert and motivated to do your job successfully. You might feel that you work well under pressure and prefer that to not having enough to do (some people find not enough pressure boring and stressful).

However, if you find that the level of pressure is making it hard for you to do your job properly, that you have to cut corners and take risks to get the job done, then that is not good. If things don't improve you might feel that you can no longer cope with the level of pressure – and that is when feelings of stress can arise.

Sometimes it is not a change in the work demands that leads to this, but increased demands or problems at home which take more of your time and attention and result in a sense of stress at work.

#### ***Is it my fault or a weakness that I experience work-related stress?***

No. We are all different and we all have different levels of tolerance of the challenges that are placed on us – in the same way as some people are made ill by chemicals at work whilst others are not.

#### ***What are my responsibilities in terms of psychosocial risks at work?***

As a worker you have a responsibility to look after your own health and to present yourself as fit for work. You also have a duty to be aware of possible risks to the health and safety of yourself and others in the workplace and to raise any concerns you may have with your employer.

Stress is possibly one of those risks and you should not regard it as any different to other risks at work such as faulty safety guards or extractor systems not working properly. Stress can decrease your concentration and affect decision-making, resulting, for example, in accidents at work.

Effective steps to reduce the risk of stress at work often involve making changes and you should also cooperate with your employer, working together to identify possible solutions and applying them to your work.

#### ***What is my employer responsible for?***

In the same way as you have to play a part in safeguarding your own health and safety, your employer has similar duties not to expect you to perform work that can present avoidable risks to your health and safety. As part of those duties your employer is required to be aware of psychosocial risks at work and take steps to manage these to minimise any risk.



As with other risks to your health and safety, you and your employer need to work as a partnership, working together to identify possible solutions and applying them to your work.

Your employer is obviously not responsible for any stress caused outside work. However, it can be helpful for you to talk to your employer if you are experiencing stress from personal circumstances as they may be able to support you during difficult times and help you to continue to work if you are finding this difficult.

### ***I thrive on stress:***

No, you might feel that you need some demands to keep you alert and well-motivated to do your job successfully, but that is pressure, not stress.

Although some pressure can be good, too much can reduce your overall performance and if any additional problems appear (at work or home), you may find yourself no longer able to cope with the level of pressure. This can lead to stress-related ill health or further reductions in your performance at work. It can also have a bad effect on your home life.

### ***Who can get stress?***

Anybody can be affected by stress. As with other risks to your health, such as noise or chemicals in the workplace, different people are affected to a different extent. Being affected doesn't indicate any weakness – in the same way as developing noise-induced hearing loss doesn't mean that you have weak ears.

### ***Real men don't get stress:***

Gender has nothing to do with being affected by stress. Men might be less likely to admit to experiencing stress (or not being able to cope) because they see it as a weakness. This says more about their attitude than any extra resilience or mental strength.

This is a particularly important point because, if such men develop stress-related problems, they are more likely to see this as a failure or weakness on their part – and feel even worse as a result. They are also less likely to report that they are experiencing problems, until those problems become too bad to hide.

### ***Why is it important for me to tell my employer about stress outside work?***

There are a lot of reasons why it is a good idea. If you are suffering from a stressful home life this might make it harder for you to tolerate the pressures of your job – putting you more at risk of serious health problems if work and home stresses combine.

It is also possible that stress at home is having a bad effect on your performance at work. Your employer might think that you are not working so carefully and your work is becoming of a poorer quality. In some cases this might put your job at risk.

If your employer is aware that you are having serious problems he/she might not be able to help you directly (although he might know of sources of help) but he/she is more likely to understand and to help you during your difficulties (and help himself at the same time by improving your work).

### ***Can stress be cured?***

Stress is not an illness, and so doesn't need a cure. However, stress can have effects on your body such as raising your blood pressure which can lead to other illnesses (or make them worse) and these might require treatment.

As with many other problems, catching (and dealing with them) early is usually best, before they become too serious. Common mental health problems, such as depression or anxiety are common health impacts of stress. Most workers who experience these health conditions recover fully once the causes are dealt with.

### ***Isn't stress just part of any job?***

Every job has some degree of pressure involved, however when this pressure becomes too much and the demands become too much for a worker to cope with then it can result in problems. Factors such as poor management practices or poor work organisation can increase this pressure and increase the possibility of stress-related problems. Different jobs will seem more or less stressful to different people depending in part on the individual and their resistance or resilience to stress factors.

### ***Are some people more likely to suffer from stress than others?***

We are all different and we all have different levels of tolerance of the challenges that are placed on us – in the same way as some people are made ill by chemicals at work which others do not have a problem with. What causes stress for one person may not have the same effect on others. This will make some people more likely to suffer from stress than others, but should not be seen as a weakness. It is not easy to tell who will be affected, especially when non-work pressures are taken into account.

### ***I am off work with stress and my employer wants me to come back to work quickly – is this a good idea?***

There is evidence that, with any illness, the longer you stay off work the harder it becomes to go back. This is also the case with stress. You should not go back to work until you feel ready to do so, but you do not need to feel completely well before you do. However, if your stress is due to psychosocial risk factors at work then you should tell your employer so that they can try and change these before you return.

#### **Additional Information:**

Policy for Preventing and Managing Critical Incident Stress; A Guide for Managers, HSAG 2012/3

Policy for Prevention and Management of Stress in the Workplace; A Guide for Managers, HSAG 2012/2

Integrated Employee Wellbeing and Welfare Strategy 2009 – 2014

HSE's Staff Engagement Improvement Plan, July 2015

Dignity at Work: Anti-bullying, harassment and sexual harassment policy and procedures, 2009. Revision

**Legislation:**

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005

Further advice on this topic and other health, safety and welfare issues can be found on the HSE website visit: [www.hse.ie/eng/staff/safetywellbeing/](http://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/safetywellbeing/)