



National Health & Safety Function, CERS, Human Resources Division

Supplementary note to the HSE Policy for Prevention and Management of stress in the Work Place, 2018 for Managers and Employees on promoting employee wellbeing and prevention of stress in the workplace:

The HSE Policy for Prevention and Management of Stress in the Work Place, 2018 has outlined the roles and responsibilities of Managers and Employees. The purpose of this supplementary note is to provide additional guidance and support to **Managers (Section 1)** and **Employees (Section 2)** on the key aspects of the roles and responsibilities in promoting employee wellbeing and prevention of stress in the workplace:

Section 1- Managers Responsibilities:

Please note detailed Responsibilities of Managers are outlined in Sections 6.1 – 6.5 of the HSE Policy for the Prevention and Management of Stress in the Workplace, 2018

In addition in the context of work related stress, responsibilities include:

- Fostering a positive, supportive work environment, where good communication, support and mutual respect is the norm
- Carrying out regular risk assessments of potential stressors in the workplace, including environmental factors such as staffing levels, skill-mix issues - working closely with staff and colleagues to identify possible negative effects; record in risk register and report to senior manager if necessary
- Implementing and advocating for, if needed, appropriate interventions to address identified stressors, such as training
- Recognising signs of stress in yourself and in others
- Talking to staff members who are experiencing stress
- Being aware of the range of employee support services available and how to refer employees.

The following guidance has been prepared to support Line managers in promoting employee wellbeing and prevention of stress in the workplace:

- **Promote good communications in the workplace**

We need to focus on improving communications at every level of the HSE and between levels. This is particularly important at times of major change. Good communication with staff, based on sensitivity, awareness and confidentiality, is often key to addressing stress related issues effectively. Regular and open communication can reduce suspicion of management and improve teamwork by ensuring all staff understand and appreciate each other's role. **Regular staff meetings** lead to greater understanding of each other's perspectives, and help to foster supportive working relationships.

- **Provide clear leadership and opportunities for team building**

Good interpersonal relationships in the workplace are the most powerful way to protect against potential stressors. Where strong relationships exist between work colleagues, staff show higher levels of coping skills and are better able to identify possible solutions to problems. Providing clear leadership and working through **teams** is a very effective way to create a healthier and safer workplace and to resolve onsite issues. Staff may need training and support to participate effectively in teams.

- **Encourage staff to take part in decision-making and problem solving**

Daily work routines can suppress innovation and deplete the energy of staff and managers. If you don't make time to meet and discuss problems, things will stay the way they have always been. A regular time-slot at staff meetings dedicated to service improvements can give staff an opportunity to provide suggestions and give you the space to listen to and encourage your staff.

- **Effective recruitment and induction practices are essential**

Ensuring that people are well matched to their job will reduce the potential for workplace stress. Provide clear **job descriptions** and **role clarity** to avoid confusion and use them as a basis for measuring performance. If staff know what is expected of them and others they will be more confident in their roles.

An **induction** programme for new staff will help them to find their role within the team and carry out their duties to the necessary standards. It also reduces pressure on existing staff. As part of their induction, you should make new staff aware of policies, including those relevant to health, safety and welfare, and the various sources of help and support available within the HSE. You should also provide an induction to staff who are promoted, transferred or redeployed to your service.

- **Provide feedback on performance**

A culture where everyone's contribution is genuinely valued will help combat workplace stress. Give staff **regular feedback** on the things they are doing well, not just on the things that can be improved. A well-managed **performance management system**, linked to the staff member's job description and with agreed outcomes and timeframes, can reduce the potential for stress in the workplace.

- **Where possible, provide opportunities for flexible work practices**

Some flexibility or control of your own work significantly helps to reduce potential stress in the workplace. Examples of this include the sequence in which you carry out your work, your ability to use your own initiative or work creatively with people or tasks, the opportunity to take part in meetings and flexibility in when you can take your leave.

Promoting awareness of stress, stressors and solutions

- Always be aware of the duty of care to provide safe systems of work;

- When conducting risk assessment, work closely with staff and colleagues to identify sources of stress in the workplace and to introduce realistic and appropriate stress control strategies;
- Provide staff with opportunities to raise and discuss concerns they may have with regard to their area of work;
- Support and work with staff to identify any additional training or information that they may need to effectively and safely carry out their duties;
- Liaise with the Performance and Development Unit to access training relating to safety, health and welfare for yourself and your staff;
- Encourage and facilitate staff to avail of any stress management training provided to help them to recognise and manage their own stress;
- Address problems sensitively and confidentially when these arise. Don't let them fester;
- Be aware of the range of employee support services available and how to refer to them, for example Occupational Health, Employee Assistance and Staff Counselling. Ensure that employees in your area also have this information. Maintain appropriate levels of confidentiality at all times;
- Be attentive to staff going through stressful life events such as bereavement or separation and, where appropriate, remind staff of the supports available.

Managing stress in the workplace

1. You should ensure that, as far as it can be, the workplace you are responsible for is a safe and healthy one.
2. Be alert to signs of stress in the workplace, as detecting it and intervening early is often the key to managing stress effectively.
3. If an employee tells you that they are experiencing stress, your early response is critical to successfully addressing the issue. You should respond in an appropriate, sensitive and supportive manner.
4. Ask the employee if you can explore the issues together in order to identify the source of stress utilising the HSE Risk Assessment Form. If the workplace is the stressor, then it is important to discuss the aspects of work that they perceive to be causing the stress. Decide together what steps to take to prevent the stress from recurring. If you need guidance, contact the Employee Relations, Occupational Health, Employee Assistance or Staff Counselling Services.
5. Offer to refer the employee to Occupational Health, Employee Assistance or Staff Counselling or they may choose to self-refer to these services.
6. If you feel that the source of stress may come under our Dignity at Work policy, tell the staff member this and give them a copy of the policy and details of the 'support contact persons'.
7. Make all reasonable efforts to work with the employee to eliminate or minimise the sources of stress and to increase their ability to cope.
8. Keep a record of what you agree with the employee and have regular meetings with them to monitor the situation.
9. It is important that both of you focus your early discussions on attempts to resolve the matter by going through steps 1-8 above.

If the employee continues to report work-related stress due to an issue that comes under our Grievance Procedure, invite them to make a complaint under the Grievance Procedure in order to resolve the matter.

In this case, the employee should, with support as needed, set out in writing what they see as the source of their stress related ill-health. Alternatively, you may document the details as set out by the employee and you should both sign this record.

Be mindful of the employee's stress at all stages.

Managing stress-related absence

Employees suffering from stress will sometimes be absent on sick leave. It is essential that you manage the absence effectively and sensitively. Please follow our Managing Attendance Policy and Procedures and the specific guidance on managing stress-related absences set out below.

If you need advice and support, contact the Occupational Health Department.

1. When a medical certificate cites stress as the reason for the absence, you should respond to the employee in an appropriate, sensitive and supportive manner. You should explain to them that, as per HSE policy, you will keep in regular contact with them during their absence, and agree how best to do this.
2. Contact the employee to identify the source of stress. If the employee perceives that the cause of stress is work-related, you must work with them to identify the sources of workplace stress and find an acceptable solution. You can use the Management Standards approach (see Appendix 2) for this purpose.

Note: If the employee is attributing his/her perceived work related stress to an interpersonal difficulty with his/her line manager, a management referral to Occupational Health can be arranged and if appropriate, Occupational Health may suggest that the risk assessment be completed by an alternative Manager identified through HR.

3. Following a risk assessment, consider what steps you can reasonably take to prevent or reduce the stress from recurring.
4. You should also offer to refer the employee to the Occupational Health Department, Employee Assistance or Staff Counselling service to provide support and to identify any measures that can be taken to enable them to return to work quickly and safely. Remind them that they can also self-refer to these services.
5. You must plan an employee's return to work after a stress-related illness and be assured that they are fit to return to work. Plan the return with the employee and with specialist advice from Occupational Health, Health and Safety, Employee Relations, or employee support services, if appropriate.
6. Have regular meetings with the employee to monitor the situation. Continue to liaise closely with the employee support services referred to above, as needed.

When the source of stress is not work-related

In some cases, stress may be caused by difficult life circumstances outside of work that can affect working life. You should provide support in a sensitive manner to enable the staff member to continue at work or to return from sick leave as soon as possible.

Offer to refer them to Occupational Health, Employee Assistance or Staff Counselling service. If you can, offer flexible working arrangements during a particularly difficult time. This can be of considerable help and facilitate the employee to continue at work or to return early if they are on sick leave.

Preventing and managing critical incident stress

The HSE's policy for preventing and managing stress following a critical incident or traumatic stressor in the workplace is an integral part of our overall workplace stress policy. Although only a small percentage of people who experience critical incidents will develop serious symptoms, the gravity of the impact on these people requires special care. We aim to provide such care and where possible, seek to prevent the incidents, reduce their impact, and support those affected.

This aspect of the policy relates to the exposure of employees to potentially traumatic events which are outside their normal work experience. As we need to respond to these in a qualitatively different way than normal work situations, the HSE has prepared a separate document – **Health Service Executive's Policy for Preventing and Managing Critical Incident Stress** to provide guidance to managers. You should also consult the HSE strategy for managing work-related aggression and violence in the health services.

Please note that the responsibilities outlined earlier in this document – for promoting employee wellbeing, identifying potential stressors, risk assessment and intervention – also apply to Critical Incident Stress.

Section 2- Employee Responsibilities

Please note detailed Responsibilities of Employees are outlined in section 6.6 of the HSE Policy for the Prevention and Management of Stress in the Workplace, 2018.

Guidance for Employees on the promotion of wellbeing and prevention of stress in the workplace

Research shows consistently that people who manage their stress effectively:

- exercise regularly
- have social support and make use of it
- have found ways of reducing anger and excessive worry
- are optimistic
- have a balanced diet
- avoid too much alcohol, recreational drugs and other drugs

In addition, we offer the following advice to all employees:

- Be aware of your own limitations and know when to ask for advice, help or support. In particularly stressful periods, either personal or work-related, remember that confidential

support is available through the Occupational Health service, Staff Counselling or Employee Assistance Programme.

- Manage your own personal stress. Help yourself where possible with an active lifestyle that promotes physical and mental health. This will help you to create a buffer against the negative effects of stress.
- At work, take reasonable care of your own health and safety and that of your colleagues.
- Take all reasonable steps to understand your role and responsibilities and the role of others in your department. Ask questions that will help you understand your work tasks and responsibilities. Work becomes less stressful when you are 'in the know'.
- Talk to your line manager if you have a problem and work together to find a solution. Letting a problem fester can be a major source of stress.
- Be sensitive and, where possible, supportive to colleagues who may be showing signs of stress.
- Be respectful, courteous and fair when dealing with your colleagues. Ensuring that you are not a source of stress to others can reduce general stress levels.
- Take an active part in any discussions or assessments on workplace stress and, where possible, in any training sessions provided.

Guidance for employees experiencing workplace stress

1. If you are experiencing symptoms of stress that are affecting your work, it is important that you tell your manager. Together you can explore the sources of stress (using the Management Standards approach if these are work-related) and agree any reasonable steps to address them. The sooner you discuss the problem, the sooner you can identify a solution with your manager.

Note: If you deem engaging with your line manager is attributing to work related stress (e.g. an interpersonal difficulty), a management referral to Occupational Health can be arranged and if appropriate, Occupational Health may suggest that the risk assessment be completed by an alternative Manager identified through HR.

2. Your manager may, if you agree, refer you to the Occupational Health Department or Employee Assistance or Staff Counselling services for professional support.
3. Your manager may also contact the Employee Relations Department for more information or guidance.
4. If your manager is aware that you are experiencing stress, they will give you the contact details to access employee support services.

