Employee stress
Tips for line managers

Stress in the new normal

A recent study by The Stress Management Society found that 65% of people in the UK feel more stressed since Covid-19 restrictions began in March 2020. The main issues reported were feelings of disconnection, uncertainty and a worrying loss of control.

In the workplace, employees continue to face daily challenges that were previously unheard of. Simply going into work carries a heightened sense of risk, especially for those using public transport or working in close contact roles.

For others, remote working has blurred the boundaries between work and home, making it more difficult to switch off at the end of the day.

With employees increasingly seeking support from their line managers, how can we help to reduce the impact of stress on our people?

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Pressure vs performance

It's natural to feel stressed at times, and a little pressure can help keep us focused on our goals.

Healthy stress

Boredom — Amount of pressure → Burnout
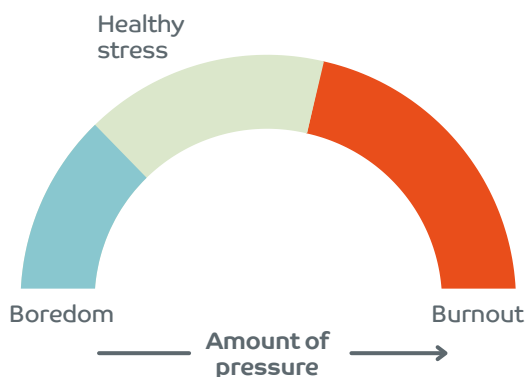
The stress curve shows that people perform best when working at – or slightly beyond – their comfort level. However, sustained stress can impact performance and eventually lead to burnout.

Dealing with change

Research by organisational psychologist Jim Bright suggests a third of us would avoid change if we could.

Our brains are wired to expect familiarity, but when our usual habits are disrupted we feel a sense of unease and uncertainty.

To help your team cope with change, encourage them to focus on the things they can control. Building consistent and healthy habits can help us feel more grounded when things get tough.

Allowing employees to share their worries and opinions can help you make small organisational changes to provide the support they need.

Westfield Health

Spotting the signs of stress

While a little pressure can help us be more productive, it shouldn't negatively impact our behaviour at work.

It's important to check in with those who may be showing signs of stress. Those closest to the employee are best placed to do this, so line managers should be aware of the symptoms and know how to respond.

Look out for these common red flags within your team which may signal that it's time to step in:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Forgetfulness
- Trouble with decision making
- Booking last-minute days off
- Worrying about routine tasks
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Short-temperedness
- Increased use of alcohol or cigarettes

Five tips to reduce workplace stress

1. Ensure managers are trained to offer support and feel confident doing so. Our health leadership training webinars offer a useful introduction, suitable for all levels.
2. Encourage employees to take time out, whether it's a long weekend or simply a lunchtime stroll to recharge.
3. Where possible, allow people time to plan ahead. This healthy habit makes it easier to deal with new situations.
4. Be honest about your own stress levels and reassure employees that they can approach you for support without judgement.
5. Keep in touch with your team and ask direct questions about their workload and stress levels in your regular catch ups.

Conversation starters to try

" How are you coping with the current situation?

How manageable is your workload at the moment?

What helps you switch off at the end of the day?

How do you feel about your current deadlines – are they realistic?

What can I do to support you? "

Useful resources and links

Stress.org.uk
The Stress Management Society
HSE Talking Toolkit: Stress
A comprehensive stress toolkit for managers
Wellbeing webinars
On topics including resilience and work-life balance
Mental Health First Aid courses
Certified training to help your people support each other