



# STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

A LINE MANAGER'S GUIDE



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WORKPLACE**

# INTRODUCTION

Work-related stress and poor mental health risk becoming a health and safety crisis for the UK's workplaces. While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be fully understood, mental health issues are the number one reason given for sick days in the UK. Last year, more than 17 million working days were lost as a result of stress, anxiety or depression. Two in five employees' mental health worsened during the pandemic, and yet mental health is still stigmatised, especially in the workplace.

Work-related stress and poor mental health should be treated with the same significance as poor physical health and injury. In terms of the effect it has on workers, significant and long-term stress can limit performance and

impact personal lives. No worker should suffer in silence and if we don't act now to improve workers' mental health, this could evolve into a health and safety crisis. Increasingly, it is being recognised that employers have a duty, in many cases in law, to ensure that employees do not become ill. It is also in their long-term economic interests to prevent stress, as stress is likely to lead to high staff turnover, an increase in sickness absence and early retirement, increased stress in those staff still at work, reduced work performance and increased rate of accidents, and reduced client satisfaction.

This guide takes a look at the issues, and what managers can do to help prevent stress in the workplace.



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**Health and Safety Trainer,  
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# WHAT IS STRESS?

The HSE defines stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them”.

Workers feel stress when they cannot cope with pressures and other issues. Employers should try to match demands to workers' skills and knowledge. For example, workers can get stressed if they feel they don't have the skills or time to meet tight deadlines. Providing planning, training and support can reduce pressure and bring stress levels down.

The main causes of employee stress include:

- Workloads/volume of work
- Management style
- New work-related demands or challenges as a result of COVID-19
- Non-work factors – relationship or family issues
- Non-work factors – personal illness or health issues
- Relationships at work

There is sometimes confusion between the terms 'pressure' and 'stress'. The CIPD says:

“It's healthy and essential that people experience challenges within their lives that cause levels of pressure, for example the need to make decisions quickly when faced with a dangerous situation. And up to a certain point, an increase in pressure can improve performance, such as feeling motivated to meet a deadline. However, if pressure becomes excessive, and/or continues for an extended period of time, it can become harmful to health. It's also important to remember that every individual is different and their experience of pressure, and when that can tip into stress, will vary.”

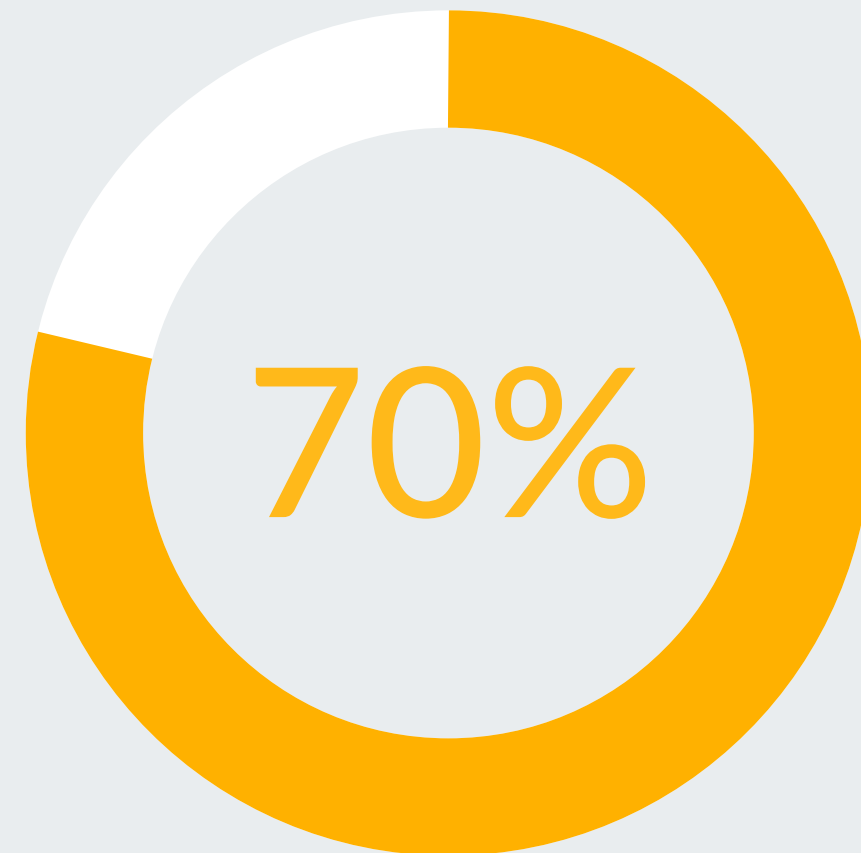
# THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

The HSE has published statistics that cover work-related ill health during 2020/21. The key headlines include:



822,000

822,000 workers suffered from work-related stress, depression or anxiety.



645,000 workers reported that their work-related illness was caused or made worse by the Coronavirus pandemic; 70% of these were cases of stress, depression or anxiety.

The average number of people taking stress-related leave has increased by 74% from 2019 to 2021. The increase demonstrates that stress is taking longer to recover from and must be taken more seriously by employers.

Rob Vondy, Head of Stress and Mental Health Policy at HSE, says:

*“Good communication is vital as stress affects people differently – what stresses one person may not affect another. If you don’t understand the problem or its extent, tackling it will be more difficult. Factors like skills and experience, age or disability may all affect whether an employee can cope. People feel stress when they can’t cope with the pressures or demands put on them, either in work or other outside issues. Start talking to your colleagues about any issues now – the earlier a problem is tackled the less impact it will have.”*

# WHAT THE LAW SAYS

## HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK ETC. ACT 1974

Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act places a general duty upon all employers to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees.

## THE MANAGEMENT OF HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK REGULATIONS 1999

Section 3 of the Regulations places a duty on all employers to make (and record if they have more than five employees) a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to the health and safety of their employees, to which they are exposed at work. Employers must ensure that there are proper control measures in place to avoid these risks wherever possible. Where it is not possible to avoid risk, steps must be taken to reduce them, so far as is reasonably practicable.

## THE WORKING TIME REGULATIONS 1998

Long hours and shift work can be clearly linked to stress. The Working Time Regulations 1998 provide an entitlement of:

- A maximum of eight hours of work for night shifts.
- A maximum working week of not more than 48 hours, including overtime (averaged out over a period of 17 weeks), although employees may opt out of this.
- A daily rest period of 11 hours.
- A day off every week.
- A rest break of 20 minutes if the working day is more than six hours.
- Paid annual leave of four weeks.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Work-related stress and poor mental health risk becoming a health and safety crisis for the UK's workplaces.
- > In 2021, more than 17 million working days were lost as a result of stress, anxiety or depression.
- > Work-related stress and poor mental health should be treated with the same significance as risks of poor physical health and injury.
- > The HSE defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them".
- > There is sometimes confusion between the terms 'pressure' and 'stress'.
- > Good communication is vital as stress affects people differently – what stresses one person may not affect another.
- > Long hours and shift work can be clearly linked to stress.

# CAUSES OF STRESS AT WORK

There are six main areas that can lead to work-related stress if they are not managed properly. These are demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.

## DEMANDS



Workload, work patterns and the work environment.

“My workload is increasing every week – the more I get done the more I get asked to do!”

## CONTROL



How much say the person has in the way they do their work.

“I’d prefer to work alone but I’m told I have to work in a group.”

## SUPPORT



Encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

“My manager is never here and doesn’t respond to my emails. I have no idea whether I’m doing my work correctly.”

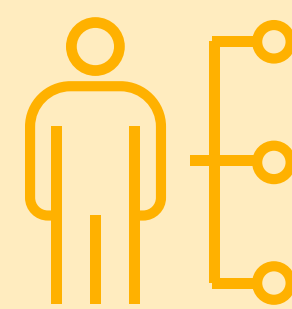
## RELATIONSHIPS



Promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

“My line manager has got it in for me.”

## ROLE



Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.

“I don’t know where my job ends and my colleague’s begins. Often we end up doing the same job twice.”

## CHANGE



How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

“I think redundancies are on the cards. Everyone’s whispering in corridors, but Management never tells us anything.”

Stress affects people differently – what stresses one person may not affect another. Factors like skills and experience, age or disability may all affect whether a worker can cope.

By talking to your workers and understanding how to identify the signs of stress, you can prevent and reduce stress in your workplace.



# SIGNS OF STRESS

If workers start acting differently, it can be a sign they are stressed. Managers should look out for signs of stress in teams and workers. Think about whether the stress could be linked to work pressure.

Acting early can reduce the impact of pressure and make it easier to reduce or remove the causes. If managers are worried that a worker is showing some of these signs, they should encourage them to see their GP. These signs can be symptoms of other conditions. If there is something wrong at work, and this has caused the problem, managers should take action.

## SIGNS OF STRESS IN TEAMS

There may be signs of stress in a team, such as:

- > Arguments
- > Higher staff turnover
- > More reports of stress
- > More sickness absence
- > Decreased performance
- > More complaints and grievances

Employers must assess the risks of work-related stress in their workplace and take action to protect workers.

## SIGNS OF STRESS IN A WORKER

A change in the way someone acts can be a sign of stress, for example they may:

- > Take more time off
- > Arrive for work late
- > Be more twitchy or nervous

A change in the way someone thinks or feels can also be a sign of stress, for example:

- > Mood swings
- > Being withdrawn
- > Loss of motivation, commitment and confidence
- > Increased emotional reactions – being more tearful, sensitive or aggressive

A woman with long braids is shown from the chest up, looking down at a laptop. She is wearing a blue and white striped cardigan over a white top. The background is dark blue. The laptop is in the foreground, partially visible on the right side.

## LOOKING AFTER HOME AND HYBRID WORKERS

Homeworking can cause work-related stress and affect people's mental health. Being away from managers and colleagues can make it difficult to get proper support. The HSE advises that managers should put procedures in place so they can keep in direct contact with homeworkers and recognise signs of stress as early as possible. It is also important to have an emergency point of contact and to share this so people know how to get help if they need it. Fundamentally, the principles of an employer's duty of care to be met are the same, regardless of the working location of the employee. Employers have the same responsibilities for employees working at home as they do for staff in the workplace.

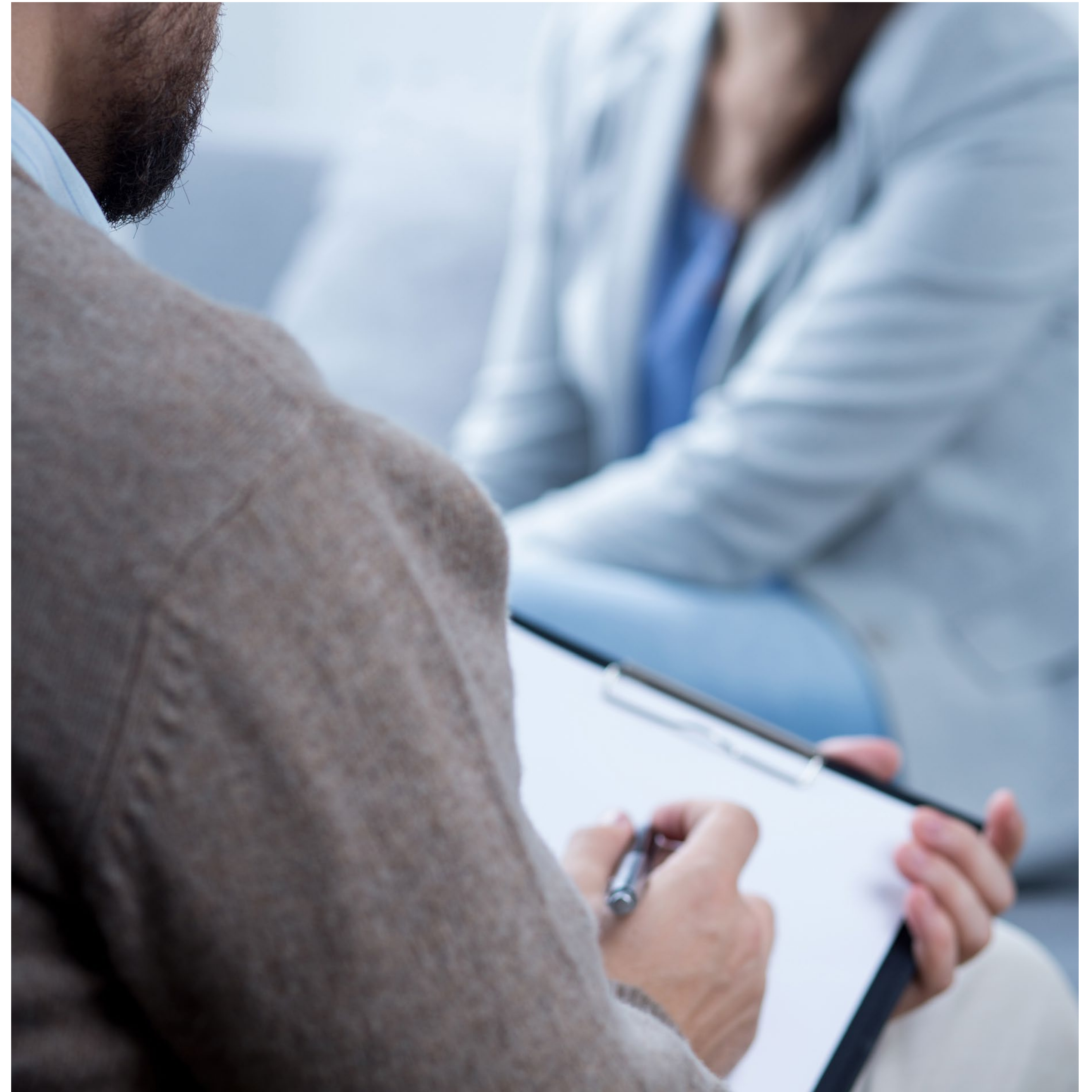
Boundaries between work and home life have become increasingly blurred for many people working from home, making it difficult to switch off. For those attending workplaces, presenteeism and leaveism are also very real issues of concern.

Organisations must address any issues that could be creating a culture where staff feel they are expected to work when ill or feel it's the only way they can stay on top of their workload. Employers need to ensure that line managers are aware of the risks of presenteeism and being 'always on'. Managers should assess individual and team workloads to make sure they are reasonable, set clear expectations about taking breaks, and act as good role models for healthy working practices, such as taking time off when sick.

# COMMUNICATION

The HSE has produced guidance on talking to employees about managing stress. It advises:

- > Have **regular keep-in-touch meetings or calls** with your workers.
- > **Talk openly with workers** about the possibility of them becoming stressed or mentally unwell. HSE's talking toolkit on preventing work-related stress will help you have conversations about raising worries or who people can go to for help.
- > **Involve workers** in completing stress risk assessments so they can help identify potential problems and solutions.
- > **Keep workers updated** on what is happening so they feel involved and reassured.
- > **Talk to people about fatigue.** Make sure they take regular breaks and encourage them to take leave – set working times to make sure people aren't working too long.
- > **Share information and advice about mental health** and wellbeing with your workers.
- > **Consider an occupational health referral** if someone starts to show signs of stress or anxiety so they can talk through ways you can support them.
- > If you have an **employee assistance programme**, encourage your workers to use it to talk through their issues in complete confidence.



# CONCLUSION

We've lived and worked through challenging times and now we're returning to a different world of work. Organisations face a range of health and wellbeing management issues, and stress is a key concern.

Managers should think about reassessing risks for a workforce with a blend of homeworking,

office working and somewhere in between. This could include more fluid work arrangements in the office, including hot-desking, and finding other work spaces that suit all workers. At a strategic level, Boards need strategies for resilience and business continuity. The 'healthy hybrid' will become the norm, with stress management top of the agenda.

## Further training and support from International Workplace

[IOSH Managing Occupational Health and Wellbeing](#), brought to you by International Workplace, is the management training solution to help you address issues such as stress and wellbeing effectively and ensure your teams remain happy, healthy and productive. All of the information in this guide has been taken from the course, which is available via eLearning or as a one-day virtual classroom course.

Find out more at

[www.internationalworkplace.com/iosh-training/managing-occupational-health-and-wellbeing](http://www.internationalworkplace.com/iosh-training/managing-occupational-health-and-wellbeing)

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > There are six main areas that can lead to work-related stress if they are not managed properly. These are demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.
- > If workers start acting differently, it can be a sign they are stressed.
- > Acting early can reduce the impact of pressure and make it easier to reduce or remove the causes.
- > Employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it.
- > Homeworking can cause work-related stress and affect people's mental health.
- > All managers should be given the skills to support employees with mental health issues.

# SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

[www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/stress-factsheet](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/stress-factsheet)

[www.hse.gov.uk/stress/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/)

[www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm)

[www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/health-well-being-work](http://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/health-well-being-work)

[www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-wellbeing-work-report-2021\\_tcm18-93541.pdf](http://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-wellbeing-work-report-2021_tcm18-93541.pdf)

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG212](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG212)



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## IOSH Managing Occupational Health and Wellbeing

eLearning | Virtual Classroom

### THE COURSE COVERS:

**A healthy company:** understand how to manage the health and wellbeing of workers and have more effective discussions regarding their health needs.

**Health risk management:** explore what health management is and why it makes good business sense to manage occupational health and wellbeing in the workplace.

**Fitness for work:** understand non-related physical and mental health conditions and how this impacts employees' fitness for work.

**Wellbeing:** How wellbeing adds value to the organisation and how to promote healthy lifestyles and positive mental health to enable a healthy workplace culture.

To find out more about the course, visit

[www.internationalworkplace.com/iosh-training/managing-occupational-health-and-wellbeing](http://www.internationalworkplace.com/iosh-training/managing-occupational-health-and-wellbeing)  
or call 033 210 1995.