University of Reading

Managing Workplace Stress: a guide for managers

1.   Introduction

The University is committed to providing a safe and healthy working environment for its staff and recognises the importance of fostering psychological as well as physical well-being. Stress is a complex subject and the University has to deal with its effects irrespective of its source.

The purpose of this guidance is to provide managers with the information, tools and support to:
- Prevent, as far as possible, stress in the workplace
- Identify early warning signs of stress in individuals in their teams
- Effectively manage employees suffering from stress in the workplace

2.   What is stress?

The HSE define stress as:
"Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them. It arises when they perceive that they are unable to cope with those demands. It is not a disease in itself, but if stress is intense and goes on for some time, it can lead to mental or physical ill-health"

This makes a distinction between pressure, which can be a positive state if managed correctly, and stress which can be detrimental to health. Different *primary causes* of stress are distinguished as they have different potential management approaches, but they are all matters that the University is committed to addressing at work.

3.   What are the HSE Management Standards?

The HSE have provided a set of standards for managing stress in the workplace.
Demands – the Standard is that:
- employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
Control – the Standard is that:
- employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
Support – the Standard is that:
- employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

Relationships – the Standard is that:
- employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours. eg bullying at work; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns

Role – the Standard is that:
- employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

Change – the Standard is that:
- employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisation change; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

4.   Preventing stress in the Workplace

It is vital that potential sources of stress are identified at all levels and that, as far as possible, these are prevented or managed effectively. Preventing stress is key to ensure effective working of a team and to prevent long term sickness. The best way of preventing stress is to understand the people in your School, Directorate, Department or team and to manage them effectively. There are a number of tools that you can use (such as an Evaluation Form/Risk Assessment or the HSE questionnaires) at both School and Directorate level or at a team and individual level to help identify potential stressors that you can then form an action plan from.

The Health & Wellbeing pages of the website also has a Top 10 Tips for Avoiding Stress.

4.1.   Identifying stress at School/Directorate level

In order to deal with the individual issues within Directorates / Departments and in Schools the potential stressors must be identified, considered and an action plan put in place to remedy any practices which may cause potentially stress. Use the Evaluation of Work Related Stress to do this in conjunction with senior managers such as Heads of School, Heads of Directorate, Heads of Department and team leaders. (Appendix 2) The Evaluation will highlight the areas of concern and will feed into an action plan to help to improve management of work related stress.

4.2.   Identifying stress at the team and individual level

The symptoms of stress may be different in different individuals and so are difficult to recognise. Symptoms can range from anxiety and depression to effects on physical health including back pain, heart disease, headaches and alcohol and drug dependency.   Look out for changes in behaviour or uncharacteristic behaviour.

In order to identify any potential specific stressors with in specific teams, use the HSE stress indicator tool to highlight specific issues. This will involve asking individuals to complete a short tick box questionnaire. To ensure a suitable response, the return of these questionnaires will be anonymous and can be set out via an online survey managed by your HR partner or Occupational Health. The results will be sent to the individual manager to feed into their action plan and will highlight areas where staff consider issues are arising. Where staff will not have access to a PC a paper questionnaire can be used and collected anonymously.

Information on how to set up the on line system is set out in Appendix 4.

5.   Effectively managing an employee with work related stress

Managers need to take appropriate action to prevent personal injury or damage to health which could be predicted or reasonably foreseen.   Even if every step has been taken to prevent stress in the workplace,

from time to time, it may occur and the guidance below should help you to do this as effectively as possible. A simple flowchart is attached in Appendix 1 which you should work through along with the more detailed guidance below.

5.1. Meeting with an employee

Meet at early stage:
It is important that you discuss issues at an early stage with any employees in your team that you believe may be suffering with stress. You should always think about who may be the appropriate person to talk to the employee. It may be more appropriate that a colleague or your line manager should discuss the issues, particularly if you have a difficult relationship with the employee. You should be prepared for the fact that some employees may be reluctant to talk e.g. due concerns about being judged or how the situation may impact their job.

Keep the meeting informal:
To reassure the employee, it should be explained to them that your discussion is confidential. However, where issues may have a health and safety risk to the employee or colleagues then you should notify them that this will need to be discussed further. Although this should be an informal meeting, they may feel more comfortable if they can be accompanied by a colleague so be open to them bringing someone with them.

Use open questions:
Using open questions will help elicit more information about what is happening e.g.
What is causing the stress? What is the impact of the stress? How is it affecting them? What solutions do they think might help?

Discuss work issues:
You should discuss whether work has contributed to their stress.   You should use the HSE Management Standards to identify the causes of stress. Make sure that you listen without making judgement and address their concerns seriously.

Discuss outside of work issues:
Whilst you should not put pressure on an employee to reveal issues external to work, you may suggest that it could be helpful to know about issues that are affecting them. If the employee is willing to discuss their medical care, it may be useful for you to know certain aspects of this e.g. side effects of medication which might impact on their work.

Further support for employees:
Make sure that the employee is aware of support that the University can provide such as referral to Occupational Health, Employee Assistance Programme or relevant training.

Start thinking about an action plan:
Ascertain from the employee if they have any suggestions about short term or longer term adjustments to their work that may be helpful.

If the member of staff has been/ is likely to be absent from work for a significant length of time, establish with them what, if anything they wish colleagues to be told and who will inform them.

It might be helpful to go through an outline action plan at the first meeting and then go through a more detailed action plan in a second meeting when both you and the employee have had time to reflect on the issues raised in the first meeting.   You will need to agree what will happen going forward and who is responsible for what action.

5.2. Creating an action plan

When you have met with an employee and talked through and understood the issues that are affecting them, it may be helpful to create an action plan to ensure that the situation is being managed effectively and if things need to change, that you have a clear plan for the changes (however small) to occur: e.g.

frequency of communications, adjustments and their duration, frequency of review periods, who is going to contact support services etc.

Each action plan should be tailored to an individual situation and should address an individual's needs. A template for an action plan is attached to this guidance as Appendix 2.

5.3. Professional support

There are a number of professional support and service providers within the University that can advise and guide managers on effectively managing employees suffering from stress. The responsibilities for these different services are listed in the Stress at Work Policy.
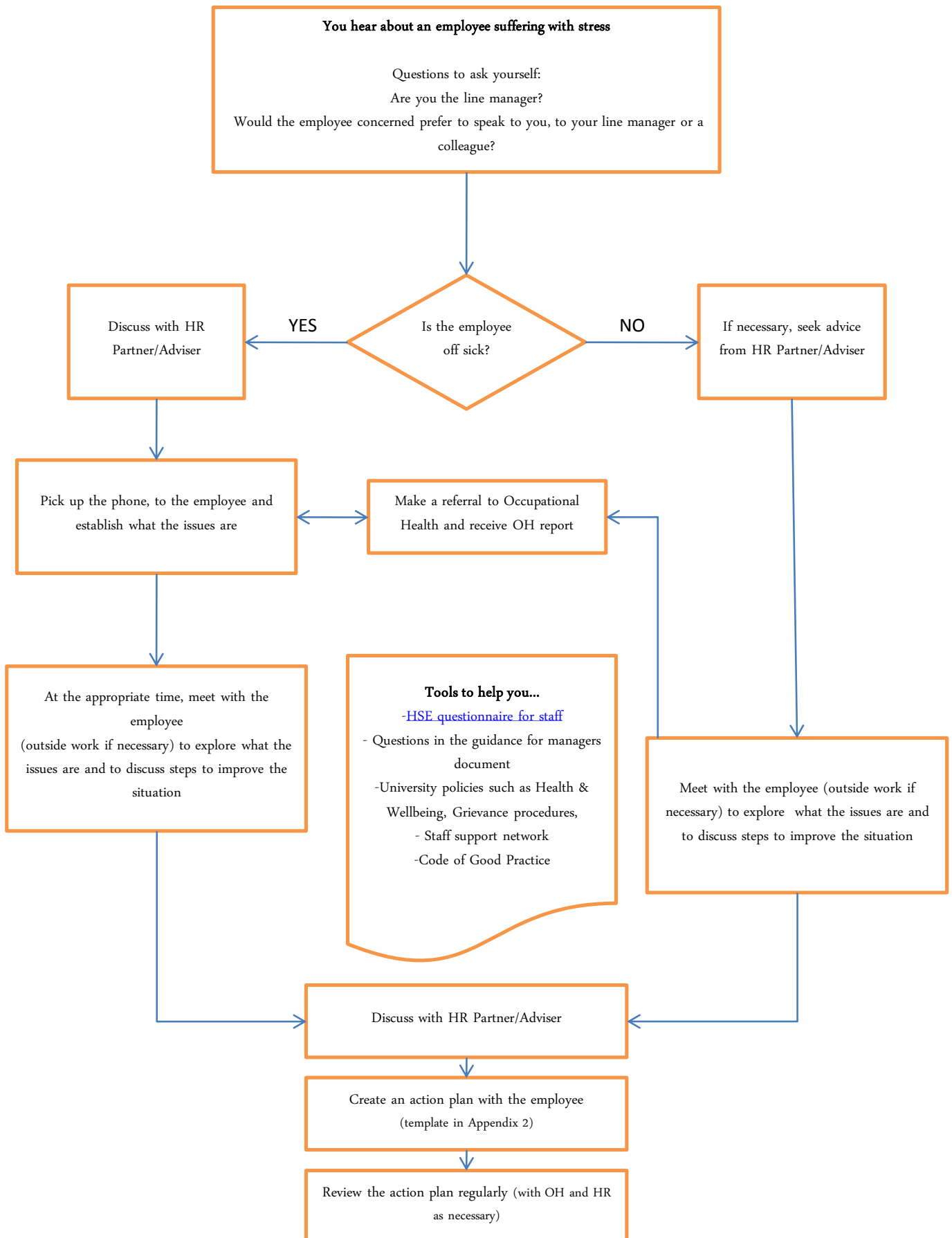
The HR Partner/Advisory team provides managers with specific support and guidance about how best to manage each individual case. They can talk through the different options available and guide you through the right approach as set out in the flowchart. They can provide advice on making a referral to Occupational Health, on the counselling support available and on the appropriate training courses available.

The Health and Safety Services team provides managers with specific advice on the health and safety responsibilities with regards to managing stress in the workplace and on how to best use the stress risk assessment tools.

If you refer an employee to Occupational Health it is usual that they will make an appointment to see the employee and send you a copy of the management report after this appointment. Depending on the situation and the questions you have asked in the referral, the management report may include advice and guidance on managing an employee returning to work from sickness absence, advice and guidance on workplace adjustments and on any other issues that have been raised by either you or the employee.

You and the employee may discuss and decide that some counselling may be helpful for the employee to cope with the stress. All staff at the University have access to the Employee Assistance Programme, run by Confidential Care which is a 24/7 confidential telephone support and counselling service (www.well-online.co.uk or 0800 085 1376).

Guidance for Managers

You hear about an employee suffering with stress

Questions to ask yourself:
Are you the line manager?
Would the employee concerned prefer to speak to you, to your line manager or a colleague?

Is the employee off sick?

YES → Discuss with HR Partner/Adviser

NO → If necessary, seek advice from HR Partner/Adviser

Pick up the phone, to the employee and establish what the issues are ↔ Make a referral to Occupational Health and receive OH report

At the appropriate time, meet with the employee
(outside work if necessary) to explore what the issues are and to discuss steps to improve the situation

Tools to help you...
-HSE questionnaire for staff
- Questions in the guidance for managers document
-University policies such as Health & Wellbeing, Grievance procedures,
- Staff support network
-Code of Good Practice

Meet with the employee (outside work if necessary) to explore what the issues are and to discuss steps to improve the situation

Discuss with HR Partner/Adviser

Create an action plan with the employee
(template in Appendix 2)

Review the action plan regularly (with OH and HR as necessary)

Appendix 2

Creating a Personal Action Plan

Following a discussion regarding a stress related issue at work, it is important to capture the key elements and actions agreed to deal with the concerns raised.

This plan provides a useful framework and will help you to monitor and review how the situation progresses.

Actions agreed

Areas of concern, what needs addressing or changing?	Proposed action or activity	Who is responsible for taking this forward?	When this should be in place or completed by	Review comments

Additional Support

In addition to the specific actions agreed above, it may also be helpful to consider some broader support mechanisms. This could be in the form of appropriate in-house workshops and courses or referral to Occupational Health.

Activity agreed	Who is responsible for booking	To be completed by when?	Review comments

Review

It is important to agree from the start how frequently you will review the progress and effectiveness of these actions. This does not prevent either person from discussing the situation further at anytime in-between. The date and a brief summary of each review meeting should be kept below and an updated document provided to necessary individuals.

Appendix 3

EVAULATION OF WORKRELATED STRESS & ACTION PLAN

Evaluation date		Area evaluated:	
Person completing Evaluation			

Brief description of team and current work issues *(Use this space to note particular work issues that may cause stress i.e. peaks in work load, staff absences or vacancies, resources and funding issues.)*

    ☐   *High Peaks in work load*
 	
    ☐   *Absences are not covered or there are vacancies out standing*
 	
    ☐   *There are resources and funding issues*
 	
    ☐   *There are difficult working conditions*

Standards to be achieved	*Y/N*	*If no what further action needed to reduce risks*	*Target date for implementation and person responsible*
A. DEMANDS (includes issues like workload, work patterns and work environment)			
Management Standards - **Employee indicates that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs: and** - **Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns**			
Do you provide employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to their agreed hours of work?			
Where there are not agreed hours of work how do you ensure staff are working within their capacity?			

Are people's skills and abilities matched to their job demands?			
Are jobs designed to be within capabilities of employees? If yes, how?			
Are employees' concerns about their work environment addressed?			
Do you have regular 1-2-1 meetings with your staff?			

Standards to be achieved	Y/N	Further action needed to reduce risks	Target date for implementation and person responsible
B. CONTROL (how much say employees have in the way they do their work)			
Management Standards - **employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work; and** - **systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns**			
Do you discuss the pace of work regularly with staff in 1-2-1 meetings?			
Do your staff have a regular PDRs?			
Is there a training plan in place for each member of your staff?			
Do you discuss and			

encourage your staff to attend internal and external training courses to help them develop?			
Do your staff discuss work patterns and breaks with you?			
Do you allow flexibility in the way that staff complete their work?			

Standards to be achieved	Y/N	If no what further action needed to reduce risks	Target date for implementation and person responsible
C. SUPPORT (*includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues*)			
Management standards - **employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns**			
Are you kept well informed about University issues that could cause stress to you or your team?			
Do you have an "open-door" policy/ make yourself available for staff to discuss issues with you?			
Do you pass on information to your team from senior management? If so how? Do you run regular team meetings?			
Do staff come to you with concerns? Do you ensure you react to these concerns?			
Have you ensured that your staff are working in a			

safe and comfortable environment?			
Do you know where to find HR and HSE policies to support employees? Eg: Code of Good Practice, Health and Well-Being Policy			
Have you and managers within your team had management and development training?			
Do you discuss possible causes of stress?			

Standards to be achieved	Y/N	Further action needed to reduce risks	Target date for implementation and person responsible
D. RELATIONSHIPS (includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour)			
Management standards - **employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, eg bullying at work; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns**			
Are you aware of HR policies and guidance on discipline, grievance, mediation and the Code of Good Conduct? Have these policies been implemented?			
Have you made your staff aware of HR equal opportunities policies on bullying and harassment and the Code of Good Conduct?			

Do you explore concerns raised by employees?			
Do you encourage an open working environment in your teams?			
Do you have an "open-door" policy?			
Do you discuss issues with your line manager and seek advice from HR where necessary?			

Standards to be achieved	Y/N	If no what further action needed to reduce risks	Target date for implementation and person responsible
E. ROLE *(whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person*			
Management standards - **employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and** - **systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns**			
Do you have a team structure and do your employees know what this is?			
Do your staff know and understand their roles and how they fit with others?			
Are job descriptions clear, accurate and kept up-to-date?			

Do you hold regular meetings with your staff (1-2-1 and PDR's)			
Do you hold regular team meetings? (If yes how often?)			

Standards to be achieved	Y/N	If no what further action needed to reduce risks	Target date for implementation and person responsible
F. Change (How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation)			
Management standards - **employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and** - **systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns**			
Are you informed about changes that might affect you or your team?			
Do you inform staff of any proposed changes to their area of work?			
Do you consult with your staff on any changes?			
Do you feed back decisions and information about change to your staff?			
Do you know what support is available for staff who are going through change?			

Do you ensure that employees have access to relevant support during times of change?			
Are employees given training to support any changes to their jobs?			

Action Plan

(Include general improvements i.e. Management training, regular one to ones with employees, awareness of all University policies)

Date:		Area Evaluated:	
Person Completing Evaluation			

Number	Action required	Date and who to complete the action

Appendix 4

On Line Questionnaire

As part of the evaluation of work related stress an online questionnaire to identify potential stress issues in individual Departments or Schools is available for use. The questionnaire will produce anonymous results and give an indication of where the main issues are within your area.

This information will be fed into the HSE Stress indicator tool and you as a manager will have access to the results.

What you have to do:

1) Contact your HR partner / Advisor regarding the questionnaire
2) Your HR partner / Advisor will forward you a link which you / your head of School / head of Department need to send to all staff with a covering e-mail
3) The raw anonymous data will be forwarded to HR and they will send a report to you with areas of good practice and areas where further action is needed.

Paper based survey

The questionnaire is available in a paper format and can be distributed to staff and then collected anonymously. This will involve entering data into the system manually this can be done by your HR partner. However where ever possible the online questionnaire would be the preferred option.

The questionnaire can be down loaded from the HSE website:

http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/pdfs/indicatortool.pdf

10 April 2018