

STRESS AT WORK

How Together can help

Together is a leading national charity working for wellbeing: that means we support people with mental health needs to get what they want from life and to feel happier. We do this by:

- running a range of services across the country
- campaigning and doing research
- educating local communities about their own mental health needs.

In everything we do we are inspired and guided by the hopes and wishes of the people we support.

To find out more about our work, how we could help you, or how you could support us, please contact us at the address below, or visit our website.

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Stress at work: a growing concern



Since stress-related absence can ultimately damage lives as well as impacting on business, it is vitally important for employers to understand the issues involved, take steps to safeguard the health of their workforce and retain people within their job roles.

Unfortunately, all too often, employers fail to treat those who burn out sensitively, leading to further health problems and absenteeism. And stress represents just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the human and economic toll caused by mental distress. People with conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder often have to fight for acceptance at work despite being able to make a valued contribution.

Together is committed to enhancing the wellbeing of people who use services and the communities in which they live. We focus on all aspects of day-to-day life. And that is why we are concerned about wellbeing in the workplace. We know that, if left untreated, stress and anxiety symptoms can turn into more serious mental distress that requires the involvement of the health and social care system.

Stress is spreading rapidly among the UK workforce. Globalisation and a long-hours, workaholic culture are being blamed for the rise of 'hurry sickness': a 2005 study¹ found that the number of Europeans who felt they had to work at high speed and to tight deadlines increased between 1995 and 2000, while stress-related sickness and disability absence also rose.

Indeed, the number of people forced to leave their job is high: thirty-four per cent of respondents to a Mind survey of people with psychiatric diagnoses claimed they had been dismissed or forced to resign from a job because of a mental health problem.² And people who are off work long term find it difficult to re-enter the workforce, which undermines their confidence and self-esteem. Lacking a meaningful role is not conducive to recovery, so individuals with mental health needs are frequently caught in a vicious circle.

What we mean by stress

We need a certain amount of 'good' stress to thrive, and the fight-or-flight adrenaline reaction is what stimulates activity, competition and achievement – all attributes that are valued in the workplace.

Of course, meaningful activity is essential for good mental health, and many people find fulfilment, empathy with colleagues and a sense of meaning in their working environment. However, modern trends including reliance on technology, outsourcing, lack of job security and decreased investment in nurturing relationships can all mean that companies fail to give individuals the support they need.

Factors such as a demanding workload, poor management and job insecurity can contribute to debilitating physical and emotional symptoms. Other common stress triggers include a lack of control at work, being presented with demands that are not matched to one's skills and knowledge, an undefined job role, poor working conditions, and being bullied or feeling undervalued.

Symptoms of stress can include sleep disturbances, an upset stomach, weight gain or loss, irregular heartbeat, palpitations or chest pain, and increased susceptibility to infections such as colds and flu. Sufferers may experience panic attacks, irritability, tearfulness or headaches. Their personality may change and they may become withdrawn, turn up at work late, make errors, or display odd or aggressive behaviour. When these symptoms become

prolonged they can be classed as a mental health issue. Ignoring a problem in the hope that it will go away may make things worse, so managers should be alert to the early signs of stress.

Stress at work: a modern epidemic

Stress is the most commonly reported occupational health problem in the UK after musculoskeletal disorders.³ According to the Shaw Trust, around three in ten employees experience stress, depression or some other form of mental health issue in any one year.⁴ And a significant proportion of people are under severe duress. Twenty per cent of respondents to one Health and Safety Executive survey suffered from stress in the workplace at 'very' or 'extremely stressful' levels.⁵

The Department of Trade and Industry has reported that stress-related absences account for 13 million lost working days each year,⁶ while the Mental Health Foundation suggests that 91 million working days are lost due to mental health conditions⁷ – and illnesses of this nature are being increasingly diagnosed by GPs. Indeed, one in four people will experience some form of mental distress during their lives.



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Stress at work: a growing concern continued



Employer attitudes

Although society as a whole is becoming more understanding of conditions like depression and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) – and recent years have seen a huge rise in the growth of counselling, personal development services and holistic therapies – employers seem to be lagging behind when it comes to taking a sympathetic approach to mental distress.

Ninety-eight per cent of respondents to a CBI survey said that firms should put mental health firmly on the agenda and treat it as a ‘company concern’.⁸ Yet a shocking proportion of employers refuses to recognise that problems exist within their own firms – almost half believe that none of their staff has mental health issues according to a Shaw Trust survey. And misconceptions thrive: one in five employers interviewed thought that an employee who has been on sick leave with a mental health condition is unlikely to fully recover.⁴

Mechanisms for dealing with stress at work are frequently missing or inadequate, the report found. Eight out of ten directors claim that their company has no policy to deal with stress and mental ill-health at work, and about one in three companies fails to track regularly the stress levels of employees.⁴ And a separate report by the Social Exclusion Unit found that less than half of employees have access to an occupational health service at work.⁹

Some employers operate employee assistance programmes (EAPs) as part of their occupational health service framework. These services offer confidential support and advice to individuals and also identify wider team and organisational welfare issues. They have a proven track record in helping people to deal with personal problems and function more effectively at work – thereby boosting company productivity – so it is surprising that more employers do not invest in such schemes.

The stigma barrier

One of the reasons behind poor employer attitudes to mental health is the unacceptable level of discrimination that still exists within wider society, which is exemplified by the fact that nearly half of people given psychiatric diagnoses have been abused or harassed in public. Meanwhile almost a quarter have been turned down by insurance or financial companies, according to a Mind survey.²

It is not surprising that these sorts of attitudes extend to the workplace. The same survey found that some participants had been turned down for jobs after completing employers’ medical questionnaires, and others who had taken time off work were prevented from returning by their bosses. The group interviewed included some people with severe and enduring conditions as well as those with stress and anxiety.

Experiencing illness may well increase someone’s empathy or problem-solving skills – abilities that add value at work. Yet owing to some employers’ mistaken belief that people who have a mental health need are unstable or unreliable, many workers fail to declare existing conditions for fear of reprisals, or don’t apply for jobs that are well within their capabilities.

Such blinkered attitudes are illegal. Employers are obliged to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act and make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to accommodate those with mental health needs. This may mean allowing flexible working hours or altering the nature or location of a job role, for example.

Together believes that employers should encourage a climate of acceptance and inclusion from the recruitment stage onwards and take steps to foster equal opportunities on a company-wide basis.

The effect on business

It is in the interests of employers to take action against stress. The financial costs of stress are severe. The Health and Safety

Executive puts the annual economic cost of stress-related absence as £3.7 billion,¹⁰ while, based on Labour Force statistics for full-time workers, the Shaw Trust calculate that £9 billion alone is lost in terms of salary paid out.⁴

Indeed it is estimated that nearly 10 per cent of the UK’s gross national product (GNP) is lost to work-generated stress.¹¹ And this worrying trend is becoming a global phenomenon: depression is reckoned likely to become the second biggest international health burden after chronic heart disease by 2020.¹²

Of course, employers are at risk of losing talented staff in addition to their business suffering an immediate financial impact, and expenditure on finding a replacement and retraining is likely to outweigh the outlay involved in supporting an individual to stay in their post.

And it should not be forgotten that workers – whether stressed or not – will exercise choice when deciding to leave pressurised environments. Increasingly the best employees are likely to ‘vote with their feet’ and target companies that offer a flexible and supportive package.

All the evidence constitutes a compelling argument for companies to address the problem of stress in the workplace.



Stress at work: a growing concern continued



Tackling the problem

The government has taken some steps to improve matters. A survey commissioned by the Department of Health's Mind Out for Mental Health campaign recommended that training to build awareness, particularly for managers, can make a positive contribution to combating stigma.¹³

The Department of Health, Health and Safety Executive and Department for Work and Pensions are rolling out a strategy to promote wellbeing at work which adopts a partnership approach to improving people's working lives and ensuring better access to advice.¹⁴ The Department of Health's 'Action on Stigma' initiative encourages firms to confront difficulties for people with mental health needs.¹⁵

Promoting mental health is also part of the government's social inclusion strategy. A 2006 White Paper¹⁶ 'Our Health, Our Care, Our Say' sets out desired outcomes for people receiving services that include improved wellbeing, personal dignity, and exercise of choice and control. Accompanying guidance from the Department of Health recommends helping people back to work and ensuring that they are given jobs that reflect their abilities and interests.

Health and Safety Executive guidelines on preventing stress suggest that, among other things, employees should be given achievable demands and have a say about their environment and the way they do their work. The standards¹⁷ also say that bosses should crack down on unacceptable behaviour such as bullying, encourage staff to develop new skills, and put listening systems in place to respond to employee concerns.

Steps to prevent stress

Many improvements employers can make are small but effective. Following these five simple steps can make a huge difference.

1 Recruitment

At the recruitment stage, setting precise parameters to find the right person for a job is important. Job descriptions should be clear and detailed, and any subsequent alterations to someone's role should be communicated sensitively.

2 One-to-one support

Line managers should hold regular meetings with staff and give constructive feedback and praise. If a manager is concerned that someone's performance is being affected by stress, they should question the person sensitively without patronising or discriminating against them.

Involving human resource staff can ensure fair treatment. Often a face-to-face meeting will be enough to reassure someone, bring an issue into the open and establish what adjustments will help the situation.

Reviewing work routines and production schedules, and ensuring that jobs are meaningful and stimulating, can help to ease a stressful situation.

3 Putting policies in place

It is essential that employers formulate a specific mental health policy, or refine their existing occupational health policies if this has not been done recently.

Moves to tackle stress will require a full commitment on the part of senior management. Adopting flexible working or family-friendly policies, and encouraging greater social interaction may prove to be positive options. Bear in mind that any organisational culture change needs to be carefully handled.

Staff undergoing difficulties may need access to complaints and grievance procedures, so these should be made readily available.

4 Tracking stress levels

Employers should establish (and subsequently review) monitoring systems to 'take the temperature' of employees' mental (or emotional) health. Appraisals, focus groups and feedback systems are all effective ways of keeping track of both individual and organisational stress levels.

One of the most important actions to undertake at an organisational level is to conduct a stress audit – covering business needs and the estimated timescales and costs of implementing improvements.

5 Getting the most out of occupational health services

A good occupational health scheme is vital both to support employers to meet their legal responsibilities and demonstrate the value they place on employees. The wellbeing of everyone concerned in an organisation is enhanced when the focus is on prevention, not cure.

Many researchers who have assessed the marketplace conclude that employers need to make improved provision for occupational health care and support. This is a key finding of Together's Stress in the City survey. For the executive summary, see page 11.



Stress at work: a growing concern continued



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¹¹ Stress and Mental Health in the Workplace, Mind (2005)

¹² World Health Organisation cited in Hartley, E., High Depression Rate Triggers New Campaign, Healthcare Today (May 1998)

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¹⁴ Health, Work and Wellbeing – Caring for Our Future, Department for Work and Pensions (2005)

¹⁵ Action on Stigma: Promoting Mental Health, Ending Discrimination at Work, Department of Health/Shift and Care Services Improvement Partnership (2006)

¹⁶ Our Health, Our Care, Our Say: A New Direction for Community Services, Department of Health (2006)

¹⁷ Available online at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards>

Stress in the City: research findings



employees suffering from stress although the vast majority of people think the employer does have a responsibility to help. HR directors agree that stress is a problem and that employers should be actively involved in helping an employee suffering from stress to deal with it. Many companies do have policies and procedures and it is clear that everyone values these, although employees are not always aware of them.

Staff are also keen that those affected by workplace stress get help from outside the organisation – more than 75 per cent felt this was important – and they clearly think that a range of support services would be beneficial. As a first line of defence, however, 85 per cent think that managers should be trained in how to look after staff's mental wellbeing. Most said they would welcome coaching and counselling in stress management and thought all employees should be offered this, and many were in favour of relaxation techniques being introduced into the workplace to help minimise stress and deal with loss of wellbeing when it does happen.

Executive summary

Mental wellbeing is extremely highly valued by people in the workplace, and yet many of them feel it is under threat from stress related to their job. The reasons range from 'unreasonable management expectations' to 'lack of job security' and 'long working hours'.

More than a quarter of workers know someone whose mental health has suffered because of stress at work and half of them think it is a serious problem – and one that is getting worse. HR directors agree and some think it is more acknowledged now as people are more prepared to talk about and admit to it.

When it comes to dealing with the issue, there is considerable doubt among staff that companies will support

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Stress in the City: research findings continued



Many organisations found the financial costs of stress hard to quantify but felt the non-financial costs, such as staff morale and increased workloads for colleagues, were considerable. HR directors feel that training and support services are a good and valuable investment.

The research

The research was carried out among people working in the City of London in June 2005: 503 employees from a range of business – retail banking, merchant banking, insurance, legal services, stockbroking, commodity trading, financial services, business consultancy, mergers and acquisitions and IT services – were interviewed.

Interviewees spanned every level of corporate responsibility: senior director, director, senior manager, middle manager, first-line manager, clerical and junior clerical staff.

Qualitative research was carried out with 30 human resources

directors. More than half of these were drawn from the same companies as the quantitative respondents.

The importance of mental wellbeing and the scale of the problem

Mental wellbeing is considered an extremely important aspect of life. Among all categories of worker it consistently came out as the most valued, above:

- fulfilling personal relationships
- nice home
- good social and recreational life
- personal development
- successful career
- challenging work life
- money
- physical fitness
- community involvement.

Answers were rated on a five-point scale, with the average score for mental wellbeing 4.45.

More than a quarter of those surveyed said they knew personally of someone who had suffered stress in the workplace. This is particularly true of middle managers and directors, of whom 30 per cent knew someone whose mental wellbeing had suffered because of this.

It is regarded as a 'serious problem' by half of all workers, who also think it is getting worse. While HR directors too acknowledge it is a problem, the research suggests that staff consider it much more of a problem. This is slightly more true of men (56 per cent) than women (44 per cent) and of older people (over 55) than younger (under 29).

Many HR directors knew of people in their company suffering from loss of mental wellbeing due to workplace stress, and they believe this is often compounded by other issues, such as personal problems.

The costs to a company can be considerable and while – surprisingly perhaps – not everyone could put a financial figure on it, several rated it as quite a drain on resources in terms of absent staff, the impact on colleagues, and the effect on customer service and productivity.

However many HR directors were clear that the highest price that an organisation pays is non-financial. They cited low staff morale and a general increase in workplace pressure as a result of stress suffered by employees.

Quotes from HR directors

'I do think modern working life does have its pressures that I think previous generations haven't had to deal with. I think it can have an impact on people's wellbeing and health.'

'I think it is a serious problem. But often people do not want to admit to it because of stigma and the fear it may harm job promotions. So it is probably an even bigger problem than it seems.'

'Has anybody in the company been off because of stress? Yes. It can be both workplace and outside stress, it is that fine line that can tip people over the edge...a combination of work-related factors, added to by personal ones as well.'

'Ten to 20 per cent of absenteeism is stress-related so it is costing us in terms of productivity.'

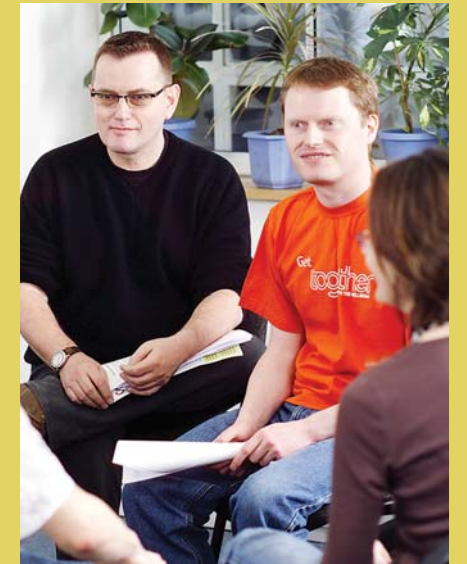
The causes of stress

The causes of stress will vary from job to job, but the research did throw up some consensus among employees. The greatest stress factor identified is 'the high cost if you make a bad decision' – the number one cause of stress among every type of business and at every level. It is closely followed by 'unreasonable management expectations' as a major cause of stress, with insufficient pay and lack of job security not far behind. Almost all of these factors are seen as bigger causes of stress by women than by men.

Workload and the pressures of a competitive economy are also seen as factors, as are non-work factors which nevertheless have an impact in the workplace, such as commuting and personal issues.

Reasons cited for stress included:

- working long hours
- pressure from people higher up
- pressure people put on themselves
- organisational change
- poor work-life balance
- work relationships
- family pressures
- lack of resources to do the job.



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Stress in the City: research findings continued



Quotes from HR directors

'Technology is changing all the time, and this places more demands on people for the need to be more knowledgeable.'

'People who want to get on may work extra hours, which can be a spiral, in terms of them being over-worked, over-tired and not having a good work-life balance.'

'There's pressure on the workforce to deliver. The length of hours they work is a factor, leaving little time for recreation and relaxation. Travelling within the job and having to commute long distances can also be strenuous on the individual.'

'Workplace relations in general, hostility or competitiveness between colleagues.'

How businesses handle stress

There is a clear consensus among HR directors that

employers are responsible for helping staff who are suffering a lack of mental wellbeing, even if it is not seen as directly attributable to work. They do not see it solely as a personal issue, but rather something the company should be involved in addressing.

They spoke of the 'duty of care' and the employer's responsibility for creating a workplace that does not impact on the health of employees. 'They should have lots of responsibility,' said one. 'Providing counselling, support and aid helps the business to be more productive.'

It was also felt that any problem should be addressed jointly with the individual concerned, working together for the benefit of both employee and employer.

However the situation is viewed somewhat differently by staff. Only just over half of the workers surveyed thought their company would give them active support if they suffered a loss of mental wellbeing because of work-related stress. Nearly a third thought management would be sympathetic, but would view the issue as a personal one to be dealt with by the individual. A few even felt their employer would be positively unsympathetic.

This can lead also to the fear that career prospects may be harmed by stress. Most staff surveyed thought that in practice, an employee who reveals they are suffering from workplace stress is likely to see their career suffer because they are judged not to be tough enough. HR directors admit this could happen, although most said it should not.

Quotes from HR directors

'I think that both employer and employee have to accept responsibility. It is the role of the line manager to observe the situation, and the role of the individual to let people know the situation before it gets out of hand.'

'I think it should be a partnership approach, to tackle workplace stress. I think employers have a lot of responsibility in terms of the workload, managing change right and ensuring they don't exert undue pressure to meet targets.'

'Employers have a moral responsibility to help – and there is also a very strong business case for doing so, even when the loss of mental wellbeing is not actually work-related at all.'

'As a good employer you have to support the worker, as it affects the reputation of the company if it is perceived that you are not taking care of employees. You need professional support and counsellors to be available for them.'

'The company should be actively involved, but there has to be an agreement with the employee. You can't force them or drag them along to the doctor. The company should provide outside expert advice and professionals to deal with it and provide the right kind of training and support.'

The help available

There may be a lack of awareness of the help that is on offer. While less than half of the workers surveyed said their

employer had an established process for helping people suffering from stress at work, most of the HR directors interviewed said they did have such procedures.

More than a quarter of staff felt they would be 'given a bit of slack' but their company had no process for helping. Women may be more aware of the help that is available – 51 per cent said their employer did have processes for helping those suffering workplace stress while only 36 per cent of men did.

The vast majority of workers (89 per cent) feel that employers should offer services to help with workplace stress, with half saying the employer has 'a great deal of responsibility' to do so. They are clear too that such help should come from outside organisations rather than from the employers themselves – three-quarters of respondents took this view. Less senior staff felt this even more strongly than senior managers and directors.

Workers would also like to see a range of support services and a clear majority of 85 per cent believe managers and leaders should be trained in how to look after the mental wellbeing and needs of staff.



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Stress in the City: research findings continued

Three-quarters (75 per cent) of those spoken to think that coaching and counselling services in the management of stress and loss of mental wellbeing should be provided – a view supported by HR directors as a sensible and practical step. A similar large majority (74 per cent) think that all employees should be trained in managing workplace stress and looking after their own mental wellbeing. Almost three in five of those surveyed (59 per cent) think that relaxation techniques should be introduced at work – indicating support for the notion of minimising and reducing workplace stress as well as dealing better with the loss of mental wellbeing that does occur.

Subscribing to training and support services is widely seen as a sensible investment in staff by HR directors who would like to see an accredited provider.

The idea of outside support found favour with many of them who thought it was important to employees' confidence and for confidentiality reasons. Others felt that employers should be closely involved if the underlying cause of the loss of mental wellbeing was workplace stress – although of course the two need not be mutually exclusive. Important attributes of any provider are seen as confidentiality, flexibility, tailoring to individual needs and experience in the field.

Quotes from HR directors (on outside support service)

'I think it is a confidential thing, but I also think the colleague needs to keep in close contact with the company and not lose touch. It needs to be kept as a partnership approach, but definitely with stress counselling or whatever, I think it should be external.'

'I think it should be a partnership between employers and out-sourced professionals to tackle the problem hand in hand. You should have management trained to recognise problems and refer to professionals to deal with it.'

'You need trained qualified professionals. It might remove some of the stigma, if it's done in a discreet, confidential way.'

Quotes from HR directors (on types of support service)

'Anyone who has any involvement with staff should have training and counselling. Lots of people tend to go straight to disciplinary action, rather than attempting counselling first.'

'Coaching and counselling is valuable and helpful for managers to stop signs of stress before it becomes a big problem. It also makes management aware of their behaviour and its impact on employees.'

'General training is harder. It is more time-consuming and would cost more, but it is a good idea.'

'It's important to make sure that HR managers have specialist training, because in times of crises, it is the HR managers that employees turn to for answers. And at that point you can never have enough training behind you.'

'You should train people on how to be more resilient, otherwise provide outside professionals for counselling.'

Quotes from HR directors (on support as an investment)

'You can make considerable savings with regards to absenteeism and you gain better returns on your input as well as better productivity. We have the figures to prove it is beneficial to put money in.'

'This should not be put down to money. Even if there is only one person suffering from stress the issue should be resolved. One person is just as important as 20. You cannot put a cost on the wellbeing of your staff, cost just

shouldn't come into it...it is much better to put the time in early as it saves time in the long run. It is much better to prevent the problem from getting out of hand, as opposed to getting to the point where people are not doing their job properly.'

'We have seen the payback on investment and training. There's evidence in reduced staff absence and better efficiency.'



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Wellbeing for work: towards a solution



Our range of support services includes:

- wellbeing-friendly policies and procedures tailored to your organisation
- self-help staff booklets
- stress management training for employees and managers
- mental health awareness training
- workplace assessments for staff wellbeing, identifying factors likely to affect employees' mental health
- manager mentoring to support managers when dealing with mental health-related staff absence
- individual employee support by qualified counsellors and psychotherapists.

The impact of stress-related absence on business can be severe. Employers are at risk of losing talented staff, in addition to suffering significant financial costs.

As a mental health charity committed to enhancing the wellbeing of people who use services and the communities in which they live, Together is uniquely placed to help companies reduce stress and promote better mental health awareness within the workplace.

We can help improve the wellbeing of your staff with preventative and supportive techniques.