Managing Workplace Stress: a guide for employees

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 employees with the information, tools and support to carry out the following:
- Prevent, as far as possible, stress in the workplace
- Identify early warning signs of stress in themselves and others
- Seek support and guidance from others where necessary

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 definition makes a distinction between pressure, which can be a positive state if managed correctly, and stress which can be detrimental to health.

Stress can be an unnoticed and gradual build up of the many pressures experienced in work, at home and in everyday life. Most people are able to cope with the big issues in life and can find them exciting but for some they are too demanding or combined with everything else going on, they can become overwhelming, resulting in stress. Stress affects people in different ways; in most cases it can be managed effectively but if it is not spotted or understood, or adequately tackled it can lead to problems, both physically and mentally.

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.   How to recognise stress

Recognising stress is key to ensuring effective team working and to preventing long term sickness. Work is generally good for people if it is well designed, but it can also be a great source of pressure. Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor, it can help us achieve our goals and perform better. Stress is a natural reaction when this pressure becomes excessive.

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, but if you feel that your attitude or
behaviour is changing due to a situation at work or home, these may indicate stress and a need to seek further support and advice.
The following is not an exhaustive list but does include some of the symptoms of stress:

Behaviour you may…	Physical symptoms might include…	Mentally you may…	Emotionally you are likely to…
• find it hard to sleep • change your eating habits • smoke or drink more • avoid friends and family • have sexual problems	• tiredness • indigestion and nausea • headaches • palpitations • aching muscles	• be more indecisive • find it hard to concentrate • suffer loss of memory • feelings of inadequacy	• get irritable or angry • be anxious • be hypersensitive • feel drained and listless

You may find it useful to use the HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool to help you identify the causes of the stress you are experiencing.

5. What should you do if you feel stressed?

Anyone can suffer from work-related stress, no matter what work they do. The earlier that it is recognised and addressed, the easier it is to deal with. A flowchart is attached in Appendix 1 to provide you with some simple steps to follow.

5.1. Talk it through

Talk to your line manager or a friend or colleague:
If you are feeling stressed, the best thing you can do is talk to someone. You may feel unable to talk to your line manager about how you are feeling and you may find it useful to talk to a friend/colleague or independent person who could act as a mediator or provide alternative support in some way. Raising issues with your line manager is important, as they have responsibility for you and your work. You may decide that it is best to meet with your manager's manager. Consider ways in which the meeting could be made easier eg: holding the meeting in a neutral location, bringing a colleague or trade union representative to the meeting. You might find also find it helpful to talk things through with your GP.

Discuss work issues:
You should discuss whether work has contributed to you feeling stressed. You should use the HSE Management Standards to identify the causes of stress. Consider what particular aspects of the job may cause you stress/ make you feel anxious. You may have some practical suggestions about what can be done about these. Think about how you would like your work to be monitored. What goals are realistic in the circumstances? How would you like your work to be monitored and at what frequency?

Discuss outside of work issues:
Whilst you do not have to reveal issues external to work, it may be helpful to let your line manager or others know about issues that are affecting you and may impact your work. If you are willing to discuss your medical care, it may be useful for you to let your line manager know certain aspects of this e.g. side effects of medication which might impact on your work. This can be done in person or through an Occupational Health referral.

If you are signed off from work by your GP:
The University's Health and Wellbeing Policy contains useful information for managers and employees on how to manage sickness absence. If your GP signs you off from work, you should inform your line manager as soon as possible. It is important that you maintain regular contact with your line manager whilst you are absent from work. If you are signed off work due to stress (either work-related or due to personal issues), your line manager will automatically refer you to Occupational Health where both you and your manager can obtain support, advice and guidance. You may find it helpful to follow the flow-chart in Appendix 1 as to the steps you should follow.

5.2. Professional support

There are a number of different professional support and service providers that you can access through the University, all of which are available to support you.

All staff at the University have access to an Employee Assistance Programme provided by Confidential Care which is a 24/7 confidential telephone support and counselling service (www.well-online.co.uk or 0800 085 1376).
There is a network of staff available to provide informal support to other staff, including a number of Harassment Advisers. Details of this network can be found under the Health and WellBeing section of the HR website.

The HR Partner/Advisory team provides managers and employees 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 well as providing advice on making a referral to Occupational Health, on the support available and on the appropriate training courses available.

You and your manager may agree that a referral to the University's Occupational Health service would be helpful. They can provide you with specific advice and guidance on how to manage stress, they can also provide advice and guidance to your manager. It is usual that Occupational Health will make an appointment to see you in person and you and your manager will both be sent a copy of a management report after this appointment. Depending on the situation, the management report may include advice and guidance on managing your return to work from sickness absence, advice and guidance on workplace adjustments and on any other issues that have been raised by either you or your manager.

The Health and Safety Services team provides managers and employees 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.
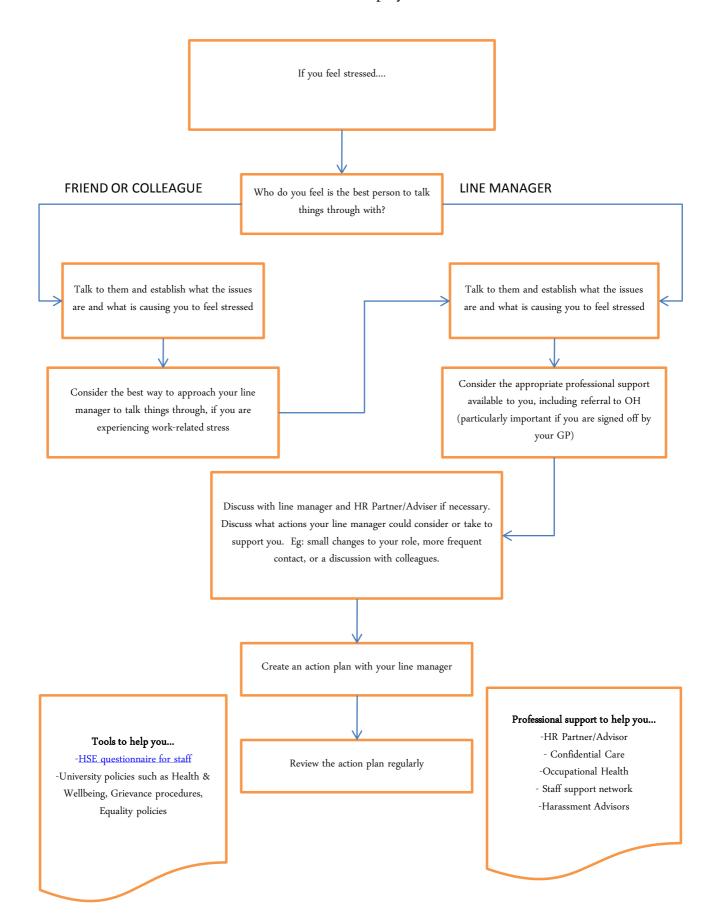
Other sources of help and support include your GP, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE); MIND; NHS DIRECT; Time to Change; ACAS; CIPD; International Stress Management Association; The Mental Health Foundation. Further details for each of these can be found on the HR website.

5.3.   Create an action plan

When you have met with your manager and talked through the issues that are affecting you, 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 your needs, in line with management need. A template for an action plan (including hints and tips) is attached to this guidance as Appendix 2.

Guidance for Employees

If you feel stressed....

FRIEND OR COLLEAGUE   Who do you feel is the best person to talk things through with?   LINE MANAGER

Talk to them and establish what the issues are and what is causing you to feel stressed

Talk to them and establish what the issues are and what is causing you to feel stressed

Consider the best way to approach your line manager to talk things through, if you are experiencing work-related stress

Consider the appropriate professional support available to you, including referral to OH (particularly important if you are signed off by your GP)

Discuss with line manager and HR Partner/Adviser if necessary. Discuss what actions your line manager could consider or take to support you. Eg: small changes to your role, more frequent contact, or a discussion with colleagues.

Create an action plan with your line manager

Tools to help you...
-HSE questionnaire for staff
-University policies such as Health & Wellbeing, Grievance procedures, Equality policies

Review the action plan regularly

Professional support to help you...
-HR Partner/Advisor
- Confidential Care
-Occupational Health
- Staff support network
-Harassment Advisors

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.

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