

Managing Stress Risks at Work: Best Practice Checklist for Line Managers

Work-related stress is now the single most important risk to health and wellbeing at work in the UK. It represents the main cause of sickness absence and contributes to an even greater cost to business; presenteeism.

There are additional risks posed by stress that also need to be taken into account such as legal and reputational risks. A large body of evidence now clearly demonstrates a strong business case for management action to prevent and reduce stress at work.

This resource, which can be used by managers and those who support them, is a simple checklist tool to help identify current gaps in skills and knowledge. Development Interventions such as management development and coaching can help plug these gaps and move the organisation towards best practice in managing stress risks at work.

These checklists should not be considered as exhaustive. Rather they ask a series of pertinent questions about the *main aspects* of managing stress risks at work to help identify potential gaps in current management practice. There are no right or wrong answers. It's better to regard the questions simply as 'prompts'.

You can use the checklist in a number of important ways:

- To raise awareness of best practice in managing work-related stress
- To identify current gaps in management skills and knowledge
- To facilitate discussion with colleagues around the issues involved
- To help you/managers think about and prioritise actions that may be required to plug any gaps identified
- To clarify what resources and support (internal and external) may be required to enable managers better tackle stress problems
- To help generate ideas about *quick wins* and longer-term strategies

The checklist has been divided into four key areas:

1. **Awareness** – questions highlighting the level of management awareness about work-related stress and the associated risks
2. **Preventing stress** – questions related to management actions, skills and behaviours known to help prevent stress at work
3. **Monitoring stress** – questions related to actions that enable early identification of stress problems at work
4. **Responding to stress problems** – questions related to how managers respond once stress problems have been identified

For all questions, tick the appropriate box. The alternatives are: **Yes**, **No** and **Don't Know**. If you're someone who supports managers (e.g. HR) and are using this tool to audit current management practice, consider each answer in respect of *most* managers in the area you are looking at.

1. Awareness

This first checklist relates to broad aspects of management awareness. Awareness is vital, primarily because it helps managers understand *why* they need to act. It also increases the likelihood that problems will be identified at an earlier stage, when it is easier and less costly to take preventive or remedial action.

Are you/managers aware of:	Yes	No	Don't Know
a. The risks (health, business, legal) posed by stress and the implications for management practice?			
b. The organisation's policy on stress and what you/managers should do to prevent and reduce stress under that policy?			
c. The signs or indicators of increased vulnerability to stress in staff, and what might increase vulnerability?			
d. The Management Standards approach and the 6 main risk factors for work-related stress?			
e. The key management skills and behaviours required to prevent and reduce stress at work (known as <i>stress management competencies</i>)?			
f. The support structures (internal and external) available to staff experiencing stress problems?			

2. Preventing Stress

This checklist relates mainly to management actions, skills and behaviours known to help *prevent* work-related stress. As such, these questions and any gaps identified are very important. Preventive actions are likely to be by far the most cost-effective.

Do you/managers:	Yes	No	Don't Know
a. Adopt a proactive, preventive approach to managing stress risks at work e.g. by conducting stress risk assessments?			
b. Manage your/their working time in order to prioritise people management activities?			
c. Encourage staff to take the breaks and holidays they are entitled to?			
d. Communicate with clarity to staff about their roles and responsibilities			
e. Proactively identify (foreseeable) workload problems and work collaboratively with staff to develop approaches for dealing with them?			
f. Manage (your/their own) stress and emotions so as not to pass on stress to the team?			
g. Demonstrate flexibility and a considerate approach, taking into account individual circumstances?			
h. Empower staff, enabling participation, involvement in decision making and a sense of control at work?			

Do you/managers:	Yes	No	Don't Know
i. Enable control over the pace of work and when to take breaks?			
j. Demonstrate integrity and respect for staff in all interactions?			
k. Promote a team climate that promotes openness and mutual support?			
h. Promote a sociable working environment with opportunities for team building?			
i. Use and encourage face-to-face communication rather than relying on email?			
j. Ensure that staff have the training, tools and equipment to do their job well?			
k. Seek wherever possible to play to people's strengths and create a good person-job fit?			
l. Enable individual control over personal work spaces where practicable?			
j. Ensure that most interactions, including email communications, are positive and constructive?			
k. Enable staff to have opportunities for personal and professional development?			
l. Provide opportunities for staff to get involved in activities or projects that provide a sense of meaning or purpose e.g. volunteering, charity work?			

3. Monitoring Stress

This checklist relates to the monitoring of stress problems, including specific management actions that help with this task. Monitoring is important so that any stress problems in the working area, individuals or team can be quickly and easily identified, enabling prompt action. This includes the monitoring of others *and* self.

Do you/managers:	Yes	No	Don't Know
a. Monitor stress problems in individuals/teams such that they can be identified at the earliest possible stage?			
b. Monitor absence in individuals to establish whether absence is stress-related, conduct return to work interviews and discuss any concerns you/they have?			
c. Maintain communication during absence and conduct return to work interviews to discuss any concerns you have?			
d. Have regular, face-to-face meetings (formal and informal) with team members?			
e. Use good communication and listening skills to establish whether team members' individual circumstances could be making them more vulnerable to stress?			

Do you/managers:	Yes	No	Don't Know
f. Monitor workloads and working time (yours and others) to ensure they don't become excessive?			
g. Regularly discuss work pressures/demands with staff, for instance in team meetings?			
h. Monitor individual/team performance and provide regular support and feedback to staff on their work performance?			
i. Provide regular, ongoing support for staff working alone or remotely?			
j. Monitor interactions between team members to identify any tensions or squabbles?			
k. Make sure you/they are accessible to staff (e.g. at agreed times), including making it clear how to get hold of you/them in an emergency?			
l. Seek (upward) feedback from staff on your/their stress management skills and behaviours?			
m. Consult and communicate regularly and clearly about organisational change and the local impact on teams and individuals affected?			
n. Use good communication skills such as active listening to understand individual preferences and motivations?			

4. Responding to Stress Problems

This checklist asks questions which establish potential gaps in managerial responsiveness to stress problems. How managers respond to problems and support employees is critically important to effective risk management. Lack of, or inadequate, response will increase the legal risk to the organisation and also damage its reputation.

Do you/managers:	Yes	No	Don't Know
a. Enable staff to get quick and easy access to appropriate support structures for individual stress problems (whether work-related or not)?			
b. Respond quickly to stress problems in individuals or teams and develop plans as appropriate, involving staff in the development of solutions?			
c. Implement action plans to ensure that local stress risks are minimised?			
d. Demonstrate flexibility and take account of individual circumstances when developing plans (e.g. make reasonable adjustments)?			
e. Respond quickly and decisively when workload problems are identified by staff?			
f. Provide or facilitate appropriate support for those affected by change?			
g. Take responsibility for resolving relationship problems within the team (e.g. tensions, squabbles)?			

Using the Checklists

The checklists can be used by managers themselves or by support staff/practitioners who provide expert support and advice to managers. They may also be useful for union health and safety reps.

Guidance notes for managers

When completing the checklists, there are no right or wrong answers, just give your first and natural response to each question.

Once you have completed the checklists, take some time to reflect on the results and any patterns or trends you find. It's good also to discuss the results with others, including colleagues, your own manager, and those who report directly to you. They may have different perceptions.

It may be helpful too to discuss the results with support staff (e.g. HR, Occupational Health or Health & Safety). They may be able to provide you with additional support, resources or advice.

- **Yes's** of course are good, they indicate that you are more likely to be taking appropriate action to minimise stress risks. (Do check with others though to confirm your impressions.)
- **No's** are not necessarily bad, but they can highlight gaps and things you could do (or do more of) to minimise stress risks. If you have a number of **No's** in any one section, this may highlight a significant need for development and it's worth discussing this with relevant colleagues such as your staff development manager.
- **Don't Know's** are less likely, because you're using the checklists to look at *your own* practice. However, if you do find yourself answering **Don't Know** to any questions, it may highlight policy gaps or organisational issues that should be fed back to your managers or support staff, or whoever is the appropriate person in your organisation.

Guidance notes for support staff, practitioners and union reps

If you're someone who advises or provides support to managers, or have a leadership development role, these checklists could prove very useful. They can be used to help you audit stress management practices in the organisation or in different parts of the organisation. The questions should highlight areas of strength and development needs in terms of current management practice. There are also likely to be questions where you're not sure of the answer. These may be the most important questions, prompting you to investigate further and helping you to ask the right kinds of questions.

- **Yes's** are good. They indicate you have some confidence that *most* managers are acting appropriately to minimise stress risks. (Do discuss with colleagues though to ensure your confidence is well-founded.)
- **No's** (and especially where there a number of **No's**) highlight gaps and things managers could do (or do more of) to minimise stress risks. If you have a number of **No's** in any one section, that may highlight priority areas for management development.
- **Don't Know's** are likely, because you're using the checklists to consider others' management practice. These answers are important and highlight that you may need work with colleagues to investigate management practices in whatever parts of the organisation you are considering. **Don't Know's** may also highlight policy gaps or issues that need to be addressed at an organisational or strategic level.

Follow-up questions to consider:

- Are there any obvious or major gaps that occur to you?
- Which of these gaps do you feel might be the *most* important (i.e. would have the most positive impact if addressed)?
- Are there any obvious, *quick wins* that occur to you, things that could be done straight away without major resource implications?
- Have any skills gaps been identified where you feel some additional training or coaching would help?
- Are there important areas that you would need to discuss with colleagues or your manager e.g. because they are longer-term issues or require the use of additional resources?
- Are there areas that you're not sure about, which require further investigation?
- If there was one important thing you feel you could do right away, something you are prepared to commit to now, what would that be?

Please Use the space below for writing down any ideas you have...

Next Steps: Making Positive Changes to Management Practice

Having completed the checklists and considered the questions above, you'll have a better idea of potential gaps what could be done and what should be prioritised.

The following actions will make it much more likely that lasting, positive change occurs:

- **Make a commitment**, even if it is a small commitment, to doing something now. Small commitments lead to bigger commitments later. The same applies if you need to get commitment from others or from the organisation.
- **Discuss your findings and conclusions with others.** Important others may be your direct reports, your colleagues, or your own line manager. Where appropriate, involve others in the development of plans. Such discussions enable commitment and encouragement from yourself and others and therefore make real and lasting change much more likely.
- **Don't try to change everything at once.** It's very important to prioritise. Focus on what you feel is most important and would have the greatest impact on yourself and others. Start with the most important thing first.
- **Bear resources in mind.** It's usually a good idea to focus on *quick wins* first, those things you can do easily that don't have a major resource implication. Also, if these quick wins yield results, you can build a much stronger case later on for longer-term interventions that require a greater investment.
- **Monitor the results of any changes you make.** This will help you evaluate your actions and provide evidence you can show to others. Such evidence will enable you to influence others e.g. making a strong business case to secure resources for further interventions.
- **Ask for what you need in terms of skills development.** If through this process you're able to identify skills development gaps, ask your line manager or staff development manager about the availability of relevant training and coaching. Being proactive about your own development needs is usually viewed very positively in organisations and is much more likely to get you the training you need.
- **Get support.** Making changes can be challenging, so make sure you get the support you need. It's likely your organisation will have a number of support structures and expertise you can call on to help. There may also be external support you can call on. Don't hesitate to ask for the support you need. Trying to do things on your own with no support is much less likely to succeed.
- **Keep records.** Write down what you're going to do and keep records of any changes you make. This is vitally important. Stress is a major health and safety issue with implications in terms of legal compliance, so anything you do to manage stress risks should be recorded in writing. Writing it down is another form of commitment.

Further tools and resources can be found on our website: <http://www.the-stress-site.net>

This checklist tool has been developed by **Alan Bradshaw, Business Psychologist**. Alan provides training for managers to minimise the risks posed by work-related stress. Contact details for Alan can be found in the footer below.