



Tackling Workplace Stress using the HSE Stress Management Standards

Guidance for health and safety representatives

Introduction

Workplace stress has been viewed as a major problem by trade unions since the 1980's. It is due in part to work by unions that stress is now recognised as one of the main ill health concern in the workplace.

Unfortunately while many employers have accepted that stress is a major problem in their workplace, few have any idea how to tackle it effectively.

There is now clear guidance available from the Health and Safety Executive, which will help organisations identify practical solutions to the problem. These are the Management Standards for Work-related Stress which build on the existing HSE guidance booklet “tackling work-related stress”.

The TUC believes that every safety representative should encourage their employer to implement these standards in their organisation.

Unions have a major part to play in ensuring that the employer takes their responsibilities to tackle work-related stress seriously. Dealing with stress at work highlights the fact that health and safety is not divorced from the rest of a union's industrial activity. Unions and employers working together to invest in health and safety can result in a vast improvement in other aspects of industrial relations and a working environment in which stress is managed properly.

This guide is to help union safety reps encourage their employer to work with them to implement the HSE standards on managing stress at work. The standards were launched in 2004 following extensive development and piloting. They are an effective tool to assist organisations to identify the causes of workplace stress and implement practical solutions to manage the risks. They are now the main standard in use in the UK.

This guide gives:

- A background to the problem of stress;
- Outlines what the standards are;
- Says what you and your employer must do;
- Explains the process;
- Tells you where to go for additional information.

Background

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define stress as **“the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.”** This definition is widely accepted.

We all recognise that a certain degree of pressure is part and parcel of all work and helps to keep us motivated. However excessive pressure can lead to stress that undermines performance, is costly to employers and can lead to ill health.

The last figures from the HSE show that 428,000 people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill. Clearly it is a major problem in our workplaces and research by the TUC confirms that. The 2014 survey of union health and safety representatives showed that 67% of them identified stress as one of the top five hazards in their workplace and 32% said it was the top hazard. In the public sector the figure was higher with 75% of representatives saying that it was one of the top five hazards.

Something clearly needs to be done and Trade Unions have been campaigning for specific legislation to make risk assessment for stress a legal duty on employers but to date that has not happened.

However, the HSE agrees with the TUC that work-related stress should be treated as any other workplace hazard. It also emphasises that it is subject to risk assessment as required by the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999. To assist with this process, HSE has developed Management Standards to assist employers in carrying out this duty.

The HSE Stress Management Standards

The Management Standards and accompanying guidance have been designed to assist employers in identifying causes of stress in the workplace and develop and implement solutions to minimise the effects on workers. The TUC and affiliated unions have welcomed this development as it gives real support to employers wishing to tackle stress at work. The standards also give health and safety enforcement officers a means of assessing whether an employer is failing to manage stress.

The TUC and unions want the standards to be used to enforce the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999 when employers fail to manage stress at work despite the assistance and advice given in the standards by the HSE.

The TUC believes that, in the absence of specific legislation, the HSE's Stress Management Standards are the most effective way of dealing with stress. However it is important that unions are involved in the introduction of the standards at every stage. If employers simply try to introduce them without proper consultation they are unlikely to be effective.

The Standards aim to simplify the risk assessment process and at the same time provide a yardstick by which organisations can gauge their performance in tackling the key causes of stress.

The standards classify the principle causes of work-related stress into six key areas:

Demands - Includes issues like workload, work patterns, and the work environment

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

Support - Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues

Relationships - Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

Role - Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles

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

For each of these factors the HSE Standards give a state which each employer should aim to achieve. These are:

Demands - *Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs.*

Are members able to deal with workloads and deadlines? It may be that the work is dealt with but it is a matter of 'coping' all the time. Is the feeling of being under pressure all the time the general attitude of members or is it just one or two people? If a general attitude then it is probably an organizational issue. If down to individuals, then it may be that they have not been trained properly and do not have the right skills for the job. This is an example of why a dialogue following the survey is key – it helps identify the local issues and develop practical solutions.

Control - *Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work*

Having established what they do and if they have been trained to do the job, workers need to know how flexible the working arrangements are. Are members able to vary the routine or the way in which the work has to be carried out? For instance this may be because members work on a production line or they are call centre workers and forms have to be completed in a set way or phrases said in a particular format.

Support - *Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors.*

You need to establish that there is a clear line of responsibility or supervision or that the member is clear about the kinds of decisions they can take on their own. Asking if they know who their line supervisor is and whether that person is readily available to give guidance and support would be useful.

Is teamwork or communication between colleagues encouraged or does the work set-up prevent this? Do members have time to talk to each other?

Relationships - *Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviour, e.g. bullying at work.*

This follows on from the last heading. Does the work pattern or job set up enable people to build constructive and supportive relationships at work?

If you identify problems you may need to negotiate an agreement on dealing with bullying at work. Check if there is a grievance procedure. If there is one, do members think it works? You may need help from your union official to help set up these discussions or get guidance.

Role - *Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities.*

You need to establish that members are clear as to what their job is and what it is they are expected to do.

Change - *Employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change.*

Change itself may not be a bad thing. However, it is key that structures are in place so that members are informed and consulted on change, particularly at times of fundamental restructuring when redundancy might be on the cards.

The Practicalities – What you and your employer need to do

The first step for an organisation implementing standards is to set up a group to oversee the stress risk assessment process. This can be the existing safety committee or a group set up specifically for this purpose. There should be union involvement, but it is also important that both HR and occupational health specialists are on the group. The group will be responsible for introducing and implementing the standards.

It is important that the group has realistic timescales and that the organisation is committed to providing the resources necessary to implement the findings of the risk assessment. Tackling stress is not something that can be done overnight, and it will involve both management and safety reps in a long process. That means that unions must ensure that safety reps are going to be given sufficient time off to deal with the additional demands.

Management must also realise that simply using the standards to produce reports will achieve nothing. The process should lead to proposals for change that must be implemented. These can include some quite uncomfortable options in some cases, such as tackling a long hours culture or increasing staffing levels. That is why it is crucial to get commitment from the top. There is no point in starting the process if half way through management backs out because they are not prepared to fund the changes needed. That will just feed the frustration of your members.

The TUC would also recommend that all members of the group receive full training on the standards right from the start, although at some stage all managers and safety reps will need training.

A good communications strategy is also key, as the workforce must feel both informed and involved at every stage.

Often the impetus to tackle work-related stress will come from the unions, but the first step is to gather information on the current state of the organisation. The

employer is advised to carry out an audit or a survey to establish a picture of what is happening and to give an overall view of the work place. An indicator tool / questionnaire tapping into the six Management Standard areas can be found on HSE's website (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm>). This will give an idea of priority areas that may need further discussion.

Using the HSE questionnaire will allow organisations to measure how they are currently performing against the standards. Data from the questionnaire can be fed into an analysis tool which is also available on the HSE website. The analysis tool can be used to indicate possible hot spots and prioritise areas for action. It also sets interim targets for the organisation to aim towards. The questionnaire can be repeated following the implementation of practical controls and progress to achieving the standards can be measured.

Unions can also do their own surveys locally to find out the levels of stress and the causes. The TUC has produced a simple "Stress MOT" that safety reps can use to find out if there is likely to be a major problem.

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUCStressMoT-survey.pdf>

The Process

The next step is the Risk Assessment process. Risk assessment is designed to help prevent people being harmed at work, physically or psychologically. If work causes stress, then all the risks - not just the psychological risks - must be assessed. Sometimes this will take you out of straightforward health and safety issues. You may have to deal with employment rights and welfare issues such as job descriptions or parental leave or care for a dependent.

The approach to risk assessment is the same for stress as for other risks. It needs to focus on the causes, not just the effects. But there are different methods that can be used. It is important to get the starting point right. The HSE recommends using the five steps to Risks Assessment that are used for other risks. The Stress Management Standards have been designed to follow the five steps to risk assessment process. Your employer is responsible for carrying this out, although they should consult you at each stage.

The five steps (along with some examples) are:

Step 1. Look for the hazards - what could cause harm and how?

The employer can use the survey results and can also carry out an inspection of the workplace to check for physical sources of stress. For example, under **Demands** they could check to ensure the proper design and installation of machinery to avoid muscular-skeletal problems or RSI. Check on noise levels and vibrations. Even noise levels that do not cause damage to hearing can have a negative effect on the heart and circulatory systems. They can look for toxic chemical or biological hazards that can have an increased risk for stressed workers because of the body's reduced ability to fight off infection. Also they should check on environment issues such as temperature and ventilation and on the lighting conditions. Working in

poorly lit rooms without any natural light can be very demanding and sometimes painful on the eyes causing stress-inducing headaches etc.

Provision and maintenance of toilets and staff rooms are an indication of managements' regard/respect for staff or staff's opinion of the workplace.

Step 2. Identify people at risk who could be harmed, and how? Is anyone particularly vulnerable?

For example under **Support** the employer should have established what lines of supervision exist, but is there an issue of competency of those supervisors? Is there a need for training and if so what kind? This is a good issue to involve learning reps in. Remember also that people may be vulnerable because of what is happening in their life outside of the workplace. In these circumstances the organisation's attitude toward flexible working, carers leave or recognition of staff medical conditions can play a vital role.

Step 3. Evaluate the risks

What preventive measures are in place? – Preventive measures are summed up in the Standards. For instance members have some **Control** over their working life or their **Support** includes appropriate training where necessary on a regular basis.

What else needs to be done? – Is the information flow sufficient and appropriate? For instance are employees involved, as well as informed, of **Change** in the organisation? Does the organisation have access to personnel or occupational health advice? Many organisations, especially small businesses, may not need such advice in the short-term on a full time basis but as safety rep you could discuss the need for such advice with management and the possible ways this could be provided, including ensuring a close working relationship with the HSE.

What are the priorities? – The survey should have given the employer an idea of where the gaps are in the organisations approach to the Standards. They can also use the factor table within the standards as a checklist.

Step 4. Record the main findings (and implement them!)

By now the organisation should have a story to tell which is packed with information. It is essential that this information is accurately recorded. This will be the basic reference point. The employer will be using it to inform others of the stress issues at the workplace and working with them to form possible solutions.

You and other union officers will be able to use the document, or indeed the set of documents, as a checklist against the activities of the organisation as they develop their stress management programme.

Having collected the information let members know the outcome of your investigation and report the outcomes to your health and safety committee.

Ensure that the implementation of the HSE Standards in your workplace is a regular item on the Health and Safety Committee agenda. Your findings will be an important tool in how management, in discussion with the Committee, carries out their own risk assessment and ensures the HSE standards are met.

The Committee needs to establish a programme of work to implement the Standards. If such a committee does not exist then discussions directly with the employer will be needed.

Implementation is where the problems often lie. Employers may see that the problem is because of workload or staffing levels and simply walk-away. You need to make sure this does not happen by having involved your membership throughout the process and being sure that information has been made available at every stage.

Step 5. Monitor and review the effectiveness of any control measures (revise them if necessary)

Have control measures been implemented properly?

Are they working effectively?

Are they still valid?

Has anything changed?

This is why keeping a record of your findings is important.

A risk assessment carried out by an organisation is a 'live' document and needs to be kept up to date. Workplaces physically change, the staff change and technology and ways of working change. The stress risk assessment needs to reflect and take account of those changes. Ask yourself if the employers approach to implementing the standards is delivering the intended outcome of preventing and controlling stress at work? Is it answering all the union's concerns you have identified through your survey and assessment?

Unfortunately there is no easy solution to getting your employer to manage stress at work, but the survey, the factor table and the risk assessment, in conjunction with the HSE Standards are tools to point you in the right direction.

Training for safety Reps

For many reps this may be a new area of work and may need assistance. Trade union safety reps have a right to training. Although you should ask your employer to provide joint training on the standards for both management and safety reps, it is not a substitute for union training.

The TUC runs a Short Course Programme that includes stress at work and has taken on board the Standards. These are organised as part of regional/national programmes, or on request from affiliates. They can be organised during working time and last between one and five days. Your TUC Regional Education Officer will provide details of the programme in your area.

You should also contact your local union offices to assist you with getting on a union training course or make arrangements for you to get on a TUC course. There may be the possibility of on-line distance learning.

Sources of information

The Health and Safety Executive stress home page is at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm> while the Stress Standards can be found at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm>. There are a number of free downloads at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm>

You can also go to the TUC stress pages at: <http://www.tuc.org.uk/stress>

You can keep up to date with developments in stress, and other work related health and safety issues, by registering free with the TUC weekly e-magazine *Risks* by going to <https://www.tuc.org.uk/mediacentre/register>

And do not forget to contact your union for guidance if you have any problems with your employer that you feel you need support with.