



STRESS EMPLOYEE GUIDANCE

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**DEALING
WITH STRESS
INFORMATION FOR
EMPLOYEES**



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INTRODUCTION

Good health is to be valued and enjoyed. It cannot be taken for granted. Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board is committed to improving the health of its employees by introducing and promoting policies that are conducive to a healthy lifestyle.

The everyday experiences of strain, time pressure and trying to cope with the demands placed upon us at work and at home often take their toll. This booklet is aimed at helping individuals to recognise and begin to deal with stress by

- Raising awareness of the issue
- Providing useful information on who you can talk to about stress
- Providing helpful tips for dealing with stress.

Stress is an organisational as well as a personal issue. Work related stress is a health and safety matter and, as your employer, Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board has a responsibility to take reasonably practical steps to ensure the health, safety and welfare of its employees. You can 'do your bit' for managing work-related stress by talking to your manager - if they don't know there's a problem, they can't help to sort things out. If you don't feel able to talk directly to your manager, there are other sources of information and advice available, details of which can be found on page 9 of this booklet.

What is Stress?

You almost certainly know what stress feels like, even if you can't define it. The important thing is, that if you feel stressed, you begin to take steps to handle the cause.

We need a certain amount of pressure both personally and in our workplace not only for self-preservation but also to help us perform well in demanding situations. Normally once the immediate situation has been dealt with, the symptoms of stress subside. However, if we are regularly in situations that feel pressured, this can give rise to prolonged stress which makes us feel tense or keyed-up for long periods, rarely enjoying a feeling of calm. This is when stress becomes a problem by interfering with our normal physical and mental functioning. Lack of stimulation or challenge in both our personal and working lives can have similar effects and also makes us less able to deal effectively with stress when it does arise.

Often the problem is compounded by the methods we choose to deal with stress. These include caffeine in tea, coffee and soft drinks; cigarettes, alcohol, food, tranquillisers and drugs. While possibly providing rapid, short term relief of stress-related symptoms, they do nothing to tackle the root causes of our stress and, in fact, weaken our ability to deal with it properly. Worsening stress may cause us to increase our intake of these 'props' to the extent that we can find ourselves unable to cope without them. This in itself can lead to problems of dependence on drugs or alcohol which may require treatments.

In very serious cases, continuous exposure to stresses increases the risk of serious complaints such as high blood pressure, heart disease, ulcers, allergies, asthma and depression.

How Can I tell if I'm stressed?

When we are subjected to prolonged stress, the physical and psychological symptoms often go unrecognised as such because we become used to feeling 'tensed up'. Symptoms vary from person to person but may include headaches, aching neck or shoulders, backache (all caused by prolonged Muscle tension); as well as excessive sweating, indigestion, difficulty in breathing, poor concentration, irritability and short temper, amongst others.

Check off the symptoms you recognise in the following lists. If you identify a large number of signs, don't panic! The first step in preventing or reversing stress is to be aware that it can happen to you, and to assess your feelings and experiences periodically.

The symptoms of stress can manifest themselves in a variety of ways over time and, of course, in combination with each other. There are three broad areas of symptoms:

Behaviour:

- Increased consumption of stimulants, such as alcohol or cigarettes.
- Eating habits frequently change.
- Less reliable with poor timekeeping, increased absence from work and even more accident prone.
- Personal relationships often become strained, often for no apparent reason.

Mental Health Problems:

- Increasingly irritable and withdrawn.
- Anxiety and depression often accompany stress.
- Harder to maintain concentration and becoming increasingly forgetful.

Physical Symptoms:

- Sleep often becomes more difficult.
- Aches and pains that last longer and develop generally into tense muscles and a general lethargy.
- Headaches and migraines become more frequent.
- More susceptible to colds and flu.

Causes of Stress

It is important to establish why you are experiencing stress. There are no specific causes, however it can result when demands are too great or when our expectations are not met. Personal stress, e.g., bereavement, family worries, moving house, and relationship issues all affect every one of us and they are issues that need to be handled.

In the work place there are also a number of issues that cause stress on an organisational level:

- A poor working environment.
- Excessive working time, workload and inflexible working arrangements.
- Lack of personal fulfilment and poor career prospects.
- Internal politics.
- Poor working relationships.
- Lack of control over your job.
- Poor communication.
- Inappropriate management style.
- Resistance to change or excessive change.

- A blame culture.
- Nature of the job such as working with the public, working alone, repetitive or boring work.

Helpful Tips to Alleviate the Symptoms of Stress

It is impossible to avoid stress completely. As pointed out earlier, a certain amount of stress is necessary to help us survive life's 'ups and downs'; however, there is a lot we can do to reduce unnecessary stress and the harm it can cause:

Assess the problem

The first step with any problem is to recognise that the problem exists. Becoming more aware of how stress affects you puts you in a better position to do something about it. List all those things that trigger your stress, e.g., the train being late; the traffic jam; working environment; work processes. Recognising the trigger and trying to relax in those situations is a big step forward.

Take action

Once you have identified the issue or issues that are causing you difficulty, you can begin to move to a positive solution. Often, this involves regaining a sense of control.

There are many approaches to finding and maintaining control in a healthy way. Different things work for different people - the important thing is to take action of some kind and find out what works best for you. A key component of any approach involves making a change, doing something different.

Here are a number of approaches:

1. Keep events in perspective

Try to step back from events - do not let a minor criticism or mistake cause anger or resentment to build-up. Think of all the positive events which have occurred - little things or a single mistake should be seen for what they are.

2. Acceptance

There are some things which we may be able to change for the better and there are others which we cannot. Where it is not possible to avoid stressful situations, we can learn to alter our response to them. In addition, we often avoid situations which we imagine will be stressful, but in reality are not. Sometimes the act of avoidance causes us even more stress than facing up to the situation!

3. Releasing Emotions

There are very natural and effective ways of relieving tension e.g., laughing and crying. Letting anger out before it builds up to an uncomfortable level is another. All too often, we try to hide our feelings, with the result that they become "bottled-up" unnecessarily, increasing our stress levels. Talking to a friend or colleague close to you and who you can trust is an effective way of dealing with stress. Or alternatively, if you wish to speak to an independent person, your GP may be able to provide details of services available in your local area or you may be able to access the South Ayrshire Council's Occupational Health Service through management referral, (please refer to Where to Get Help on page 9 of this booklet and page 11 external contacts.)

4. Keeping Healthy, Rest and Leisure

A properly balanced diet is important to keep us healthy and energetic. Do something that forces you to think about something other than work, something that needs your active involvement.

Gentle cycling, brisk walking or swimming, is an ideal way of reducing the tensions caused by stress and helps to establish a regular, more restful sleeping pattern. Also, you may wish to try yoga or relaxation classes.

(You may wish to seek your doctor's advice if you have a medical condition which will be affected by physical activity or if you have not exercised for some time).

It is also important that you take time out to unwind. Recovering from the 'high alert' positions that our bodies may have been in for long periods during the day is important and sometimes hard to do. Guard against the increased or excessive use of 'props' such as alcohol, cigarettes and food to aid the relaxation process. Try to ensure adequate sleep at night and allow time every day for something restful that you enjoy. If possible don't have lunch at your desk. Use meal breaks and tea breaks at work to refresh yourself.

Make relaxation part of your daily routine. It doesn't have to take long but do ensure you build it into your day.

5. Time Management

Stop trying to do more than one thing at once - put jobs in order of importance and try and plan ahead instead of doing everything at the last minute. Once you've finished a task, take a few moments to pause and relax. Ask your manager about South Ayrshire Council's in-house training course on Effective Time Management.

6. Asserting Yourself

Some people find that although they can be assertive at home, it is often much more difficult at work. Often colleagues are also very pressurised and, in many cases, may be aggressive or demanding. If you learn to be more assertive you are more likely to get more of what you want. It will help you feel good about yourself and your behaviour, and you will experience fewer feelings of regret or loss of control which can lead to negative stress. Ask your manager about South Ayrshire Council's in-house training courses such as Assertiveness Skills.

7. Positive Thinking

At the end of each day, try to sit back and reflect on what you've done and what you've achieved, rather than spending time worrying about what still needs to be done.

8. Environmental Changes

There may be changes that you and your manager can make to create a healthier working environment. Your manager could undertake a risk assessment which may highlight issues that with your ideas and assistance can be improved. There will also be others that may be less easy to resolve or which may be out of the control of the Board, however think of examples of changes *you can* make.

9. Sleep Problems

Underlying emotional problems can make people much more vulnerable to stress. Depression may make it difficult for you to sleep, or you may find you wake very early feeling particularly depressed or anxious. If you are experiencing sleep problems, consider contacting your G.P.

Where to Get Help

You may be reluctant to talk about stress at work for fear of being seen as weak. But stress is not a weakness, and can happen to anyone.

Although you have a responsibility for managing your own personal stress by trying to help yourself where possible, work-related stress can also be a result of poor employment relations and job design - speak up if you are experiencing a problem. Your manager has a responsibility to assess workplace risks that may affect your health and put control measures in place to avoid or reduce them.

Occupational Health Service

The purpose of the Occupational Health Service is to maintain the balance of health and well-being of employees at work through intervention, medical investigation and the provision of advice on work related issues affecting your health. If you think you are experiencing stress which is impinging on your daily working life, you should discuss this with your line manager or the Board's

Personnel Representatives who will be able to refer you to SAC's Occupational Health.

Ayrshire Valuation Joint Board Policies and Procedures

The Board is committed to improving the health of its employees by introducing and promoting policies that are conducive to a healthy lifestyle. These policies are available on SharePoint or from the Board's Personnel Representatives and include: Managing Stress, Code of Conduct, Managing Change, together with policies on Addictions.

For further information on any of the Board's policies and procedures or to talk to a Human Resources Officer or the Board's Personnel Representatives.

Some of us, however, may find that we are unable to reduce stress, no matter what we try to do. This is when we should seek specialist help.

Your Family Doctor

Many people turn to their family doctor when they experience the first signs of stress. It is important to be checked out to rule out the possibility of physical illness. If your doctor prescribes any medication it is important you get him or her to explain the effects and any likely side effects and how this may affect you and your performance at work.

Trade Unions

Your Trade Union representative can help with work related issues.

Don't suffer in silence. Talk to your manager. If your stress is work related, this will give them the chance to help and prevent the situation getting worse. Even if it isn't work-related, they may be able to do something to reduce some of your pressure. If the source of pressure is your line manager or if you don't feel able to talk directly to your manager, there are other sources of information and advice available such as the Board's Personnel Representatives, SAC Human Resources and Occupational Health.

Useful Contacts

Knowing where to seek external help is important, below is a list of some of the organisations that may be helpful.

<p>Addictions:</p> <p>Alcoholics Anonymous Tel: 01904 644026 www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk</p> <p>Al-Anon Tel: 020 7403 0888 www.hexnet.co.uk/alanon email: alanouk@aol.com</p> <p>Gamblers Anonymous Tel: 020 7384 3040 Literature helpline: 076 2694 7800</p> <p>Narcotics Anonymous Tel: 020 7730 0009 www.ukna.org</p>	<p>Debt:</p> <p>Citizens Advice Bureaux www.cas.org.uk</p> <p>National Debt Line Tel: 0808 808 4000</p> <p>Consumer Credit Counselling Service Tel: 0800 138 1111</p>
<p>Bereavement:</p> <p>Compassionate Friends Tel: 0117 953 9639</p> <p>Cruse Tel: 020 8331 7227</p> <p>Still Birth and Neonatal Death Association Tel: 020 7833 2851</p>	<p>Disabilities:</p> <p>Disability on the Agenda www.disability.gov.uk</p> <p>Disability Rights Commission Tel: 08457 622 633 www.drc-gb.org</p> <p>Employers Forum on Disability Tel: 020 7403 3020</p> <p>Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities Tel: 020 7418 2727 www.opportunities.org.uk</p>

<p>Disabilities:</p> <p>National Aids Helpline Tel: 0800 567 123</p> <p>National Health Information Line Tel: 0800 665 544</p> <p>Rehab UK Tel: 020 8896 2333</p> <p>Royal National Institute for the Blind Tel: 020 7388 1266 www.rnib.org.uk</p> <p>Royal National Institute for Deaf People Tel: 0808 808 0123</p> <p>Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) Tel: 0870 8505131 www.radar.co.uk</p>	<p>Mental Health:</p> <p>Association for Post-Natal Illness Tel: 020 7386 0868</p> <p>Fellowship of Depressives Anonymous Tel: 01802 433 838</p> <p>Manic Depression Fellowship Tel: 020 8974 6550 www.mdf.org.uk</p> <p>Mind Tel: 020 7802 0300</p> <p>Mind out for Mental Health Tel: 020 7403 2230</p> <p>Samaritans Tel: 0845 7909090</p> <p>British Association for Counselling Tel: 01788 578 328</p>
<p>Eating Problems:</p> <p>Anorexia Aid Tel: 01603 621414</p>	<p>Phobias:</p> <p>The Phobics Society Tel: 0870 7700 456 www.phobics-society.org.uk/</p>
<p>Gender issues:</p> <p>Lesbian and Gay Switchboard Tel: 020 7837 7324</p>	