

Health and well-being (managing stress)

Chapter 11a

Purpose

This policy covers the framework for Health and well-being with the NAO.

1. Introduction

The NAO has a duty of care as an employer and is committed to promoting a safe and healthy workplace for the benefit of staff and the business. We therefore have in place a framework of policies to address sickness absence ([Managing Sick Absence](#)), provide flexible working options ([Flexible Working](#)), and help address conflicts at work (such as bullying or harassment) all of which can be sources of stress ([Staff Complaints Procedure](#)). The guidance in this chapter aims to help performance coaches and staff minimise the risk of stress occurring, and show them how to deal with it quickly and effectively. By promoting a working culture where staff well-being is an integral part of how we work will benefit our staff and support the on-going success of our business.

Stressed employees are costly for organisations. The CIPD says that stress is now the number one cause of long-term absence for both manual and non-manual employees. According to the Health and Safety Executive, an estimated 9.8 million working days a year are lost through work-related stress. The personal cost of stress is immeasurable to those affected; it also has a considerable knock-on effect on teams, colleagues and the wider organisation. The business case for managing stress is clear, and therefore the need to manage work-related stress effectively is of paramount importance.

2. Definition of stress

The Health and Safety Executive define stress as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed on them. It is the product of a complex relationship between the pressures or demands that you experience and the resources you have available to respond to them. Short-term pressure can be a positive state if managed correctly, but where this is excessive and sustained it can result in chronic stress which can be detrimental to health and well-being and it will affect work performance and attendance. It is the physical and psychological effects of chronic stress that eventually makes us ill

2.1 Recognising the symptoms of stress

Here we list some of the most common symptoms. These can present as physiological, psychological or behavioural indicators. Use this list to familiarise yourself with some of the symptoms, and remember the next time you suffer from any of these symptoms it could be stress-related.

Physiological indicators of stress

- tightness of the chest, neck, jaw, face, abdomen, shoulder and back muscles
- hunched posture and clenched fists
- breathing becomes shallow and rapid
- headache
- irritable bowel symptoms such as diarrhoea or constipation
- nausea
- sleep disturbances and fatigue
- shaking hands
- susceptibility to minor illness
- chronic (long-term) pain
- facial expression shows tension frown, tightened eyebrows, clenched jaw, pursed lips
- rashes

Psychological indicators of stress

- irritability
- depression
- anxiety, restlessness and impatience
- withdrawal
- diminished initiative and lack of interest
- self-deprecation and reduced self-esteem
- decreased perception of positive experience opportunities
- narrowed focus
- changes in eating habits
- weakened positive emotional response reflexes
- lack of concentration or lack of attention to detail
- impaired memory
- diminished productivity

- disorganisation of thought
- diminished sense of meaning in life
- aggressive behaviour
- pessimistic and negative
- carelessness
- under-eating or over-eating
- intolerance of others
- withdrawal and listlessness
- bursting into tears

What to do if you recognise these symptoms of stress in yourself?

If you recognise some of these symptoms but are not sure of your level of stress you can take our self-assessment stress test, and review the recommendations for your score.

- [Self-Assessment Stress Test](#)

You may think you can manage stress in the short term but it could be affecting your ability to manage stress effectively in the long term. It may only take one small additional issue to make your current stress levels become unmanageable. It is always best to seek help as soon as possible to address the stress you are experiencing now to help you better manage your stress levels in the future. In the first instance you could speak to your Performance coach, or you could speak to your HR Business Partner who will be able to advise you on where you can get additional help.

Alternatively, you can contact your own General Practitioner or speak to one of our trained counsellors from our [Employee Assistance Provider](#). They offer a confidential service through telephone, email or face to face sessions. Details of how to access this service can be found [here](#).

What to do if you recognise these symptoms of stress in a colleague?

You should advise them to speak to their Performance coach directly to voice their concerns and to seek advice from their GP as soon as possible. Alternatively, they can also contact their HR Business Partner or a member of the HR Attendance and Wellbeing team, who will be able to advise them on where they can get additional help (e.g. from our EAP service as detailed in the above section).

Other useful documents:

- [Common Causes of Workplace Stress](#)

- [Top Tips for Managing Your Stress Levels](#)
- [Occupational Health Process](#)
- [Checklist for Managing Stress](#)
- [External Sources of Support](#)
- [Self Help - ways to de-stress at your desk](#)

3. The manager's role in minimising stress

Research shows that performance coaches can sometimes be a cause of employee stress. However, they can also significantly reduce stress by implementing effective stress management practices.

3.1. Establish reasons contributing to the stress:

When you suspect that a member of your team is feeling stressed, it is important to identify the reasons that lie at the heart of it. It is a good idea to talk to them and be aware not just of their work issues, but also any conflicting working styles and lifestyle priorities. Remember too that different individuals will have different stressors and different 'tipping points' beyond which they feel highly stressed. Aspects to consider when you are talking to individual employees might include:

- individual or team workloads
- the office environment (e.g. levels of noise, light, space, untidiness)
- the impact of any recent changes to working practices or larger-scale change initiatives
- concerns about job security
- lack of communication or feedback in the team
- difficult relationships with colleagues
- bullying in the workplace
- changes in an individual's personal circumstances

If a member of your team leaves, it is a good idea to conduct an exit interview with them in order to elicit candid feedback about the likely causes of stress. It is worth considering sharing this information with your HR Business Partner to help them establish whether the causes of stress are indicative of a wider organisational issue.

If any feedback causes you to suspect that bullying is a contributory factor to stress levels in your team, it is important to tackle this immediately. Similarly, if a team

member is underperforming, and this is causing stress in your team, this should be addressed as soon as possible.

3.2. Tap into organisational and external support

- Advise them to see their GP as soon as possible. You can also encourage employees to eat well, exercise and get enough sleep as all these can help to combat the feelings of stress (more information available on this through Learning Choices and our [Employee Assistance Programme](#)).
- Encourage individuals to look at our flexible working policies and ensure that all your team members are aware of their entitlements, e.g. for those with childcare responsibilities to look at flexible working and childcare schemes.
- Refer them to our Employee Assistance Programme. They offer email, telephone and counselling sessions to NAO employees. This is a completely confidential service and anything you say to them will stay private. For more information on this service and how you can access it please see our [Employee Assistance Pages](#) on Merlin.
- If you are still concerned that they need some external help, please report your concerns to your HR Business Partner who is able to refer the individual to Occupational Health. Our Occupational Health Management Service is a team of experienced professionals who offer us advice on how we can better support the individual at work (for more information on our Occupational Health service please see below).
- You should also speak to your HR Business Partner if there are any other concerns e.g. bullying or underperformance.

3.3. Identify the changes you can make in your team

- As a Performance coach or assignment manager you can assess how well you currently communicate with your team. What could you do better? A good place to start is by discussing individual and team objectives. It's important that all team members are aware of all business objectives, and how they fit in with yours, and the wider aims of the organisation. If your team has to work particularly hard at the moment, explain the reasons, and give timescales, if possible, for when workloads might return to a more reasonable level. As a Performance coach or assignment manager you can assess how the individual is performing in a team, based on any feedback you are given, and assess how you can better support them.
- If you are an Assignment Manager you can schedule regular one-to-one time with each employee if they are working with you for any length of time.

Alternatively if it is a short audit you should meet with them at the start and end of the audit to give feedback.

- Give regular praise and feedback.
- Performance coaches and Assignment Managers should also work together to ensure employees are taking their full annual leave entitlement in in order for them to recharge physically and emotionally.

3.4 Other useful documents:

The Manager's Role in Preventing Stress

- [Occupational Health Process](#)
- [Checklist for Managing Stress](#)
- [External Sources of Support](#)

4. How to help employees return to work after a stress related absence

If someone in your team has had time away from the workplace because of stress, it is important to help them manage their return to work as sensitively as possible. The following hints and tips are designed to help you ensure this is the case.

Get some advice before you start

When planning for the return of an employee who has been off with stress, it can really help to get some initial advice from others. It is a good idea to speak to your HR Business Partner, who can liaise with other HR colleagues as appropriate.

Welcome the employee back

Taking the first few steps through the door of the organisation can seem a daunting process for an employee after a period of stress-related absence. As a Performance coach, consider what you could do to help make this easier. This might mean arranging to meet your team member at a coffee shop across the road beforehand, or waiting in reception to welcome them back and help to boost their confidence.

Arrange a catch-up

Even if you have been in regular contact with your employee throughout their absence, it is important as a Performance coach to sit down with them early on their first day, and ask them how they feel about their return to work. This will allow you to gauge how best to help them ease back into their role. If anything has changed in their absence, e.g. a new way of doing things has been introduced, be sure to give the employee a quick overview and, if relevant, arrange for someone to sit down and go through this properly with them.

Take a phased approach to their return

It is a good idea to have some specific work for your employee to get started on when they return. The nature of the work should be sufficiently taxing so that the employee doesn't feel patronised, but it is equally important not to load up their in-tray. This could quickly lead to them feeling overwhelmed. Instead, it is a good idea to gradually introduce bigger tasks, projects or increased responsibility and to review each step with the employee as you go along. The GP or Occupational Health may have advised on a formal phased return arrangement in which case you need to make sure their workload is arranged around any recommendations they have given. As a performance coach you should also be prepared to make short term [reasonable adjustments](#) with regard to particular activities that are likely to cause your employee further stress.

Reflect on what you could do differently

People become stressed for a variety of reasons, some work-related, some personal. If you are aware of the underlying causes of a member of your team becoming stressed, it is important to reflect on what you, as a Performance coach, could do differently to help. It is also a good idea to discuss these questions with the employee as part of the return to work process. Ask them for their thoughts about what could be done differently to help and support them in the short and longer term and liaise with their Assignment Manager/s to act on these where possible. This might be something as straightforward as having fewer team meetings, to enable your employee to feel more in control of their workload.

Have an open-door policy

Once the person has had a chance to settle back in, whether you are a Performance coach or Assignment Manager, you can let them know that you are there if they need to talk to you. You might wish to schedule regular catch-ups with them to ask them how they are feeling, or leave it up to the employee to approach you when they feel they need your support. This will enable you both to identify any issues or problems at an early stage and prevent them from causing feelings of chronic stress. Avoid the temptation to keep asking them if they are OK, as this can be disconcerting for them.

Arrange for some informal support

Team members can be a valuable source of support to returning employees, particularly if a lot has changed during their absence. In this instance, you may wish to pair the employee up with a buddy from your team, who can help them get back in the loop. You should also ask other team members to be on hand to give their support as and when required. It is important to note here, though, that you must respect employee privacy and confidentiality at all times. As a performance coach or Assignment Manager you cannot disclose the cause of the individual's absence (other than to HR) for the

purpose of discussing whether reasonable adjustments would be appropriate) unless you have their consent.

Signpost other forms of help

As well as offering managerial support, you can advise them to contact our [Employee Assistance Programme](#) where they can speak confidentially to a team of trained counsellors through email, face to face or telephone counselling. You can also contact your HR Business Partner if you would find that useful. Other useful documents:

[The Return to Work Discussion \(RTWD\)](#)

Helping Employees Return After Stress-Related Absence

Frequently asked questions:

Q.1 I am feeling really stressed at present, who can I talk to?

In the first instance you could speak to your performance coach, or you could speak to your HR Business Partner who will be able to advise you on where you can get additional help. Alternatively, you can contact your own General Practitioner. All discussions with HR/performance coaches are held in confidence and they will only pass information to others with your consent. Workplace Wellness - our Employee Assistance Programme - is also confidential and NAO management will not be informed of any discussions you have with them.

Q.2 I am working to three different managers at present all with conflicting deadlines - I don't know what to do first?

You should arrange to speak to your assignment managers (or performance coach for corporate service staff) who will be able to agree what work will take priority and what deadlines can be extended. Your performance coach can also support you in deciding for example, if your work plan and work load needs to be reviewed or if other resources need to be identified.

Q.3. I am a new entrant and am unsure of my manager's role and responsibilities. Who do I speak to if I have a problem?

In the first instance, you should talk to your performance coach about any problems you have. They will be able to direct to other support where appropriate.

Q.4. I am anxious about the changes that are happening in the Office and the impact that they will have on my work.

You should try to keep abreast of latest information on any changes through, for example, speaking to your performance coach and monitoring information cascaded via Merlin. Your performance coach should be your first point of contact to discuss any concerns you have about your work.

Q5. My manager takes no account of what work I have planned and gives me impractical deadlines at short notice, which causes me stress. What can I do in these circumstances?

You should explain to your assignment manager(s)/performance coach that you already have several on-going work commitments and discuss how best to address the situation. It may be that something else will have to give in order to achieve the deadline which has been given at short notice. You need to maintain an on-going dialogue with your performance coach or assignment manager(s) about your work and work load and you should feel free to be open about any issues.

Q6. What if this doesn't achieve the desired outcome?

You can raise your concerns with your People Development Director or your HR Business Partner and can also receive external support from our confidential [Employee Assistance Programme](#), where you can speak confidentially to a team of trained counsellors through email, face to face or telephone counselling.

Q.7 What can I do to reduce my stress levels and maintain a healthier body and mind?

You can do a great deal to manage stress e.g. take regular exercise, eat a balanced diet, avoid short "quick fixes" such as sugar, caffeine, alcohol. Learn to recognise stress in yourself and others and find out what works best for you to reduce or minimise stress.

You could also try some relaxation techniques to tackle acute feelings of stress. For more information view our podcasts on the [Employee Assistance Programme](#) pages on Merlin.

Q.8 I have just returned from sick leave and was diagnosed as suffering from stress and depression. Who will know about my illness?

The Attendance and Wellbeing/HR Business Partner team will need to know so that appropriate support can be provided, and they will discuss with you who else may need to know about your situation. It will be helpful, for example, for your performance coach and any assignment managers to understand what is going on so that they can monitor progress and make sure any workplace adjustments are made. You will have control over who else is informed

Q9. I am finding it difficult to cope with the conflicting pressures of work and home. What measures are in place to support my work life balance?

The NAO has a number of flexible working options which include part-time working, flexible working, home-working etc. Further details can be found in the [flexible working](#) section of the HR manual on Merlin.

Q10. Issues at home are beginning to have an impact on my work. Is there somebody that I can speak to?

You can speak to your performance coach or alternatively your People Development Director or HR Business Partner who will be able to assist you and give you information about external sources of support - which include our confidential [Employee Assistance Programme](#) .

Q11. I am feeling stressed but I am sure these feelings are just passing. I just can't seem to get on with it and am unsure what to do?

You may think you can manage stress in the short term but it could be affecting your ability to manage stress effectively in the long term. It may only take one small additional issue to make your current stress levels become unmanageable. It is always best to seek help as soon as possible to address the stress you are experiencing now to help you better manage your stress levels in the future.