

Work-related stress, staff guidance

Some common questions about stress are answered below. Further information is given in the [Managing Stress and Promoting Wellbeing at Work policy](#).

What is stress?

Stress is a condition that may be experienced when a person feels excessive pressures or other demands are placed upon them, beyond their ability to respond. It is not an illness, but can lead to health problems if prolonged or particularly intense. Some pressure at work can be motivating but when it becomes excessive may lead to unhealthy physical, emotional and behavioural symptoms.

Isn't it good to have some stress?

Some sense of pressure helps us to perform and get things done. The surge of adrenaline can be stimulating. However, these periods of intense activity need to be balanced with periods of relaxation where we can feel refreshed. Long hours and a heavy work load can cause stress. It is when pressures are continuous without respite or feel overwhelming, that stress can occur resulting in negative physical and psychological effects.

How would I know if I have it?

All of us are affected at one time or another by stress. People respond in many different ways to stress so it is helpful to be aware of your own particular warning signs. Early signs will be changes that you or others notice in your usual health, behaviour or moods.

Physical signs might be a pounding heart, dry mouth, headaches, odd aches and pains, sleep disturbance and feeling constantly very tired and unwell with a lowered resistance to minor illness and infections; headaches and other aches and pains resulting from tense muscles; heart palpitations; stomach and digestive problems; Underlying medical conditions such as asthma or eczema can be exacerbated.

Emotional signs are any changes in mood. This might be increased irritability or outbursts of anger, or tearfulness and depression. Some people feel very anxious, with accompanying symptoms of dizziness and palpitations and attacks of panic. Ability to concentrate can be affected and a general loss of appetite for food and sex. The way that someone responds to stress may encourage unhealthy behaviours such as smoking and drinking too much, as well as substance misuse.

At work, indications of someone being stressed and under pressure could be absenteeism, poor timekeeping, a decline in performance and noticeable change in behaviour. There may be a loss of creativity, increased level of mistakes, poor judgement and difficulty in planning, concentrating or making decisions.

Who's at risk? Are some people more likely to suffer than others?

We are all potentially at risk of being stressed since it can be caused by a range of commonplace situations but are more vulnerable when several areas of our life are problematic at the same time and if we lack practical and emotional support. People have very different mental responses to the body's natural reaction to stressful situations. For

some it is a stimulus, helping them to achieve more, in others an adverse reaction, causing a sense of not being able to cope and demotivation.

What can I do about it?

Usually stress has developed over a period of time without someone being aware of what is happening. The first step is to recognise that stress might be responsible for how you are feeling and to acknowledge this. Then you need to try to identify the aspects of your life that are causing it. Sometimes you may not be able to change or avoid all related aspects, but small lifestyle changes can help reduce these. It is helpful to write down what you are feeling, when it happens, who else is involved, in the different parts of your life. Talk to people that you trust and can help you make the changes you need to reduce work and home pressures. At work, stress can develop when an employee feels under pressure from several sources: such as high workload, interpersonal difficulties with colleagues, unclear role and responsibilities. As a first step, talk to your immediate supervisor or manager about any work issues. They may not be aware of how you are experiencing these difficulties and should work with you to resolve the issues.

If you would have difficulty raising these matters with your manager, other sources of support within the University include your:

- HR Business Manager or HR Adviser
- Occupational Health Service
- Union representatives
- Staff Counselling Service

Think about how you are looking after yourself. It is essential to have periods of rest, relaxation and fun as well as work. We need a healthy balanced diet to look after our physical energies and exercise of some kind, especially if our work is sedentary. Drink plenty of water and keep alcohol and caffeine consumption to sensible limits, take lunch breaks away from your place of work, regular social activities in the week, and longer periods away from work to take a break. People with philosophical or religious beliefs may interpret their experience of stress in different ways. They may address stress through practices such as meditation or prayer; likewise they may be pleased to receive complementary pastoral support from chaplains or others in their tradition.

Do I need to go to see my GP?

If stress is causing physical symptoms, severe distress or making it difficult for you to function as normal, contact your GP and Occupational Health. It is important to remember that although stress is a usual part of life, extreme or prolonged stress can lead to other illnesses. Stress has been linked to the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease, as well as insomnia, anxiety and depression.

What if I feel I can't cope at work anymore?

If you get to this point it is always important to stop and rest rather than feel you must struggle on, itself a common response to stress. It is helpful to talk to someone about how you are feeling and get some help. Talk to your immediate supervisor/manager. Make an appointment with your GP and Occupational Health and contact your HR Business Manager or HR Adviser and/or the Staff Counselling Service for appropriate support and advice.

Who can help me in the University?

There are a number of different services within the University that can help you. If practicable talk to your manager so that they can identify, discuss and resolve with you the factors in your job which may be adversely affecting your health.

The Occupational Health Service offers confidential advice and support. Occupational Health will seek to work together with the individual and management, to alleviate adverse stress symptoms and assist in resolving workplace stressors.

Personal and Professional Development offers day courses in Stress Management to all staff of the University throughout the year. These are led by a member of the University Counselling service and can be booked through CPPD. There is also a useful course on Time Management.

The Staff Counselling Service offers free, confidential counselling on personal and workplace issues. The service is accessible by self-referral or at the suggestion of managers, Human Resources or Occupational Health. Current union contact details and further information on union representatives are available from the Human Resources Division website.

People with philosophical or religious beliefs may wish to contact chaplains or others in their tradition for complementary pastoral support. The Chaplain to University staff can provide pastoral support in the Christian tradition, and help those of other traditions to find appropriate support.

- [Occupational Health Service](#)
- [Staff Counselling Service](#)
- [Personal and Professional Development](#)
- [Recognised trades unions](#)
- [Chaplain to University Staff](#)

Why do I feel it's all my fault?

People often feel like this and blame themselves for not being able to cope. We all have times in our lives when what we face can seem overwhelming. Stress is not a weakness and you do not have to suffer. Workplaces are constantly changing and often new developments affect the workload and pace we have to react to. All require effective change management.

How do I recognise stress in another person?

Signs may include:

- Changes in their behaviour and mood
- Frequent illness and absence
- Reduced productivity, concentration and decision-making

What can I do to prevent stress becoming a problem?

- Keep a balance between work and your personal life.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Make time for relaxing and enjoyable activities.
- Tell someone you trust at work if your job is making you feel stressed.

If the pressures of work feel too great you must talk to your manager. If you feel unable to discuss concerns with your manager, advice and support may be sought from your HR Business Manager or HR Adviser, Occupational Health Service, Union representative, the Counselling Service, as appropriate.

Where can I get more information?

- [Stress at work: policy statement](#)
- [The Health and Safety Executive](#) provides information on work-related stress
- [The Occupational Health Service](#)
- [The Staff Counselling Centre](#): Information on arranging counselling is available on the website or email stafcouns@admin.cam.ac.uk