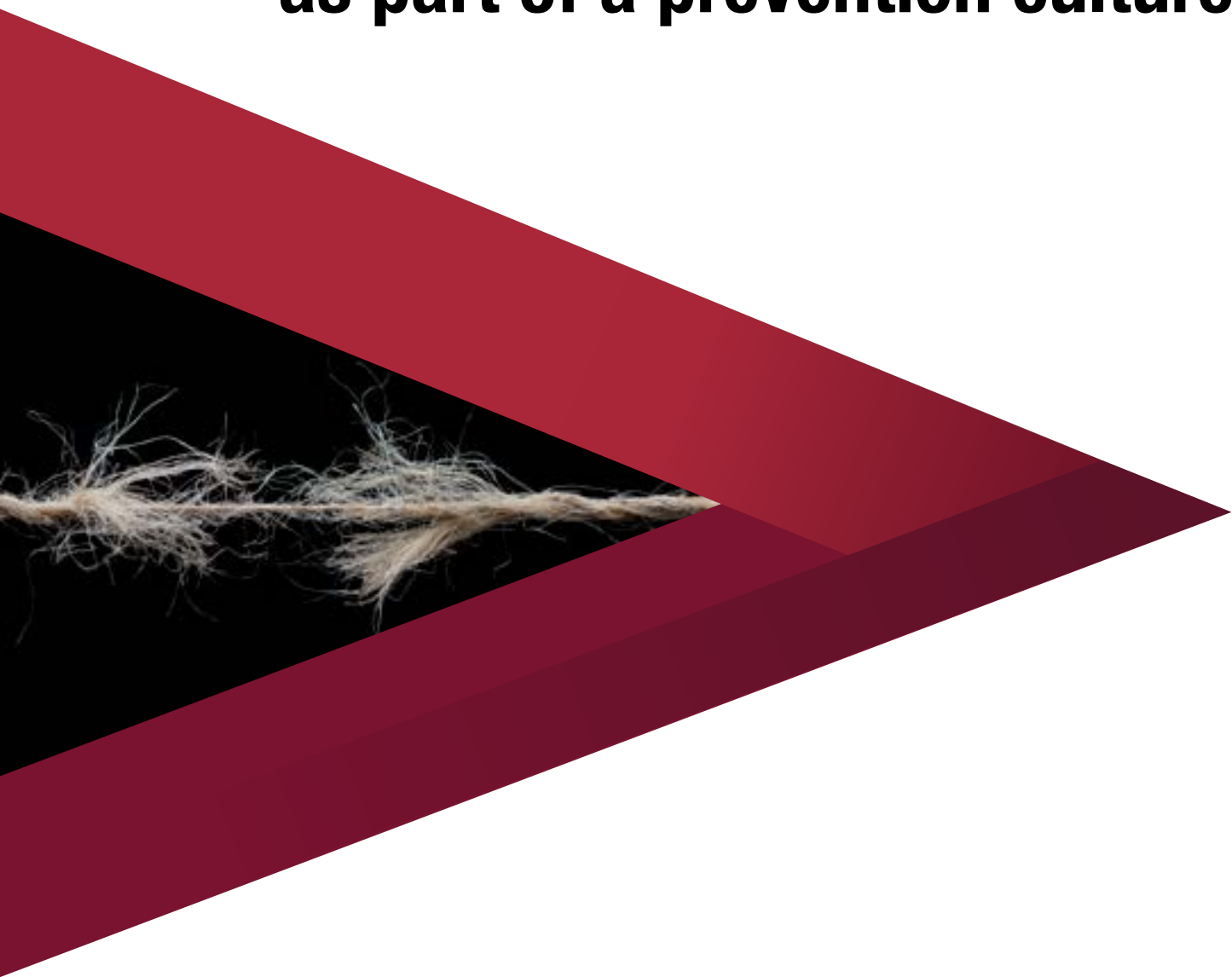




# Managing work-related stress as part of a prevention culture



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## Just how stressed are we?

Work-related stress is one of the most commonly reported causes of occupational ill health in Great Britain, accounting for 40% of all work-related ill health cases, and 49% of all working days lost due to ill health in 2016/17<sup>1</sup>.

While the highest incidence rates are recorded in the public services – education, health and social care, prisons, emergency services, and local and central government – there is increasing evidence that it is a significant problem in other sectors.

Over 12.5 million days are lost at work due to work-related stress and the overall economic cost to Great Britain is estimated to be over £5 billion<sup>1</sup>.

Given the prevalence of the issue, have you ever taken a step back to consider what impact work-related stress may be having on your organisation? High sickness absence? High staff turnover? Low productivity? Low morale?

## What is HSE doing about it?

Stress in the workplace is an issue HSE takes very seriously.

Work-related stress is one of HSE's three strategic health priorities, alongside musculoskeletal disorders and occupational lung diseases.

To encourage employers to do the right thing and protect their workers, HSE has initiated a specific campaign, Go Home Healthy, providing help and information so that employers can take proactive steps to prevent these conditions.

Specifically when it comes to work-related stress, HSE is looking to achieve:

- A significant increase in the number of employers taking a preventative rather than reactive approach to managing work-related stress through suitable risk assessment methodology, for example the HSE Management Standards or an equivalent methodology;
- More human resources and health and safety professionals trained and competent to implement the HSE Management Standards approach within their organisations;

- Cross-sector learning about what interventions work;
- Recognition that preventative action on work-related stress can make a valuable contribution to the wider mental health agenda.

## Making the case for tackling work-related stress

As a health and safety, occupational health or human resources professional, you're probably already convinced that proactively preventing the conditions that create stress - rather than waiting for staff to go off sick or leave - is better for your business, not only ethically but also in terms of productivity and efficiency.

But how do you convey this to the decision makers within your business to allow you to invest in resources to help you manage it before it becomes an issue?

Decision makers are usually motivated by one of three arguments; the legal, moral or financial. Constructing your case around each of these three arguments, may help you to convince the powers that be!

### > You have a legal requirement

Employers have duties under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, to assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities; and under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, to take reasonably practicable measures to control that risk.

Employers therefore have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it. And, as with any other workplace hazard, if employers fail to adequately protect their employees from work-related stress, HSE could investigate and take enforcement action if appropriate.

Assessing the risk needn't be complicated and should be proportionate - our website provides you with more information on the risk assessment process, including a risk assessment template and example risk assessments on stress.  
(<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/risk-assessment.htm>)

### > It costs money

Stress accounts for 49% of all working days lost due to ill health, with the overall economic cost to Great Britain estimated to be over £5 billion<sup>1</sup>. But it's not just about sickness absence. Work-related stress can also lead to low productivity and human error, high staff turnover and poor performance in your organisation. Often these costs are difficult to quantify, so sometimes get overlooked when calculating the true cost of the issue.

### > It may result in ill-health

As one of the most commonly reported causes of occupational ill health in Great Britain, work-related stress may be associated with psychological and physical ill-health in workers. It can also lead to increases in accidents. Preventative action on work-related stress can therefore make a valuable contribution not only to the wider mental health agenda, but to the safety agenda too.

## Taking a preventative approach

Once you've made the business case, you'll need to plan your approach.

The good news is that there are lots of free resources out there for businesses to tap into, including a wealth of information on the HSE website.

Improving mental health is becoming an important business topic, with many organisations realising that good mental health is just as important as good physical health. Many pioneering organisations are incorporating the topic within their wellbeing initiatives, helping to raise awareness of the issues as well as break down stigma.

In the last few years initiatives such as mental health first aid, mindfulness and resilience training have become very commonplace interventions.

And while such interventions are widely adopted, you need to add a big dose of prevention into the mix.

Just think about how you manage the risk of physical hazards - managing work-related stress needn't be any different.

Risk control strategies for work-related stress should follow the hierarchy of control approach, just like any other hazard. And importantly, you should make sure you involve and work in partnership with employees and their representatives to help decide on practical improvements and interventions that can be made.

**An approach that focuses on implementing primary, proactive interventions so far as is reasonably practicable, complemented as appropriate with secondary and tertiary interventions, will ultimately prove more successful.**



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### The HSE Management Standards

To help organisations take a proactive, preventative approach to managing work-related stress, HSE developed the Management Standards - a systematic approach to implementing an organisational risk assessment for managing work-related stress.

The HSE Management Standards approach is an internationally recognised and comprehensive way to carry out a work-related stress risk assessment for your organisation, and you can adopt the Standards either wholly or in part so long as the process produces a suitable and sufficient risk assessment.

The Management Standards cover six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and wellbeing, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. In other words, the Standards cover the primary risk factors of stress at work: Demands, Control, Support, Relationships, Role and Change.

They help simplify risk assessment for work-related stress by:

- Identifying the main risk factors and making them tangible;
- Helping employers focus on the underlying causes and their prevention;
- Providing a yardstick by which organisations can gauge their performance in tackling the key causes of work-related stress;
- Defining a desirable set of conditions for organisations to work towards.

For further, detailed information about the HSE Management Standards and how to use them, please see our website:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm>

### Are the HSE Management Standards suitable for SMEs?

The Management Standards approach was developed in consultation with large employers that typically have in place formal departmental management structures. Although these formal structures are not normally present in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs), research carried out by HSE in 2005 (see research report RR537) provided evidence that the approach can be successfully used by SMEs.

The main difference in using the Management Standards approach in an SME is the use of questionnaires to gather data in step 2.

It might not be pragmatic in an SME environment to use questionnaires, as the effort might not produce sufficient value. Therefore in such situations the views of employees are probably better gathered via face-to-face meetings.



## The Management Standards are right for us - where do we start?

From the outset, all organisations have to be realistic - managing work-related stress takes effort, commitment, resource and, most importantly, time.

The Management Standards approach helps you work through the process in a methodical way - breaking it down into manageable steps.

From our experience of working with employers across a number of sectors, we've found the following checklist will help you ensure that you get your organisational level stress intervention off to the best start:

- Secure commitment from your senior managers - you need their buy in and understanding;
- Set up a representative steering group to help guide the process. This group and your senior managers need to understand what the risk factors for stress are, that you need to focus on prevention, and that you need to explore organisational level issues;
- Set yourself a goal or vision - what are you aiming for? Your goal will influence how you benchmark progress;

- Elect a figurehead as champion - this helps move your intervention forward in a positive way;
- Make sure you have a communication and employee engagement strategy for the intervention;
- Plan your stress intervention like a project - think about timing and securing budgets.

You then need to find out what is causing stress in your organisation. You should use several data sources to help with this. Some of these you'll have already such as staff survey results or sickness absence data. You may also choose to follow the Management Standards approach and use our new Stress Indicator Tool to help you identify key areas to focus on.



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## HSE's Stress Indicator Tool

HSE's Stress Indicator Tool (SIT) measures the attitudes and perceptions of your employees towards work-related stress.

Complementing HSE's Management Standards for Stress approach, the tool features a survey of thirty-five questions that ask about six key areas of work that, if not managed properly, are known to be potential causes of workplace stress.

These questions are used at Stage Two, as part of the data gathering exercise, to provide a broad indication to organisations of how well their workforce rates their performance in managing the risks associated with work-related stress.

HSE has developed **new online software** that improves upon HSE's original paper-based 'Indicator Tool' which required manual completion and relied upon Microsoft Excel for its data analysis and results presentation. Working with software developer Snap Surveys, HSE has produced a digital version of the tool that allows the survey to be accessed and completed online. The new SIT saves you time, administration and money and improves upon the paper version because the software:

- provides a quick and easy way to determine the extent to which work-related stress is a problem in your organisation, and the likely root causes;
- allows you to customise the survey configuration to include your organisation's logo, write a personalised introduction, choose the most appropriate demographic responses and tailor the terminology used in the core statements;
- analyses the survey responses for you and automatically generates a useful summary report of the results. The online tool also allows you to generate bespoke reports by your chosen demographics to help you highlight priority areas. The reports also provide suggestions for the next steps that need to be taken to address them;
- makes the process simple, quick and more convenient because the survey can be run at any time from your own secure web account;
- will also provide benchmarking data as soon as it becomes available.

## Part of a process

Although the survey is designed to cover the areas that are known to be potential causes of workplace stress, running a survey in itself will not resolve your issues – it's important that the results are used in combination with other sources of data, and as part of a wider improvement process.

That said, the tool is a useful vehicle for letting your workers express their views and experience - allowing them to contribute to the process - and the results give you quantifiable evidence on which you can begin to build an evidence-based action plan.

Consider each data source you have about work-related stress to be part of a jigsaw puzzle – it's only when the pieces are fitted together that you begin to see the bigger picture.

Data from such staff surveys provide a broad indication of how well your workforce considers your organisation is performing in managing the risks associated with work-related stress. The results should be used as the starting point for obtaining more detail and context.

The results can also be used as a useful key performance indicator (KPI) to measure how your organisation is managing work-related stress on an ongoing basis. It is widely regarded as good practice to use a combination of leading and lagging indicators when monitoring your performance.

Proactively measuring staff attitudes and experiences of work-related stress by conducting a survey and acting upon the findings is an example of a leading indicator for health risk management, and can be a useful metric to measure your progress to achieving excellence in the management of work-related stress.



## Let us help you achieve success

Join the growing number of organisations who use HSE's new online Stress Indicator Tool to help inform and develop their management of work-related stress using the Management Standards approach.

Contact us now for a free online demonstration of the SIT, quoting 'WP Demo'.

Visit our website [www.hsl.gov.uk](http://www.hsl.gov.uk) to see an example online survey and autoreport, to find out about pricing and to order your licence.

## Need a helping hand?

HSE can help you achieve excellence in the management of work-related stress. HSE's website provides a wealth of free information and guidance.

Keep up to date by subscribing to HSE's free eBulletin service via the HSE website.

## Additional support

Our world class experts, based at HSE's laboratory in Buxton offer training for leaders, managers and staff.

They also provide a tailored consultancy service helping you to manage workplace stress in a targeted and cost-effective manner.

Sign up to HSE's laboratory's eBulletin service at [www.hsl.gov.uk](http://www.hsl.gov.uk) to keep up to date with the latest news and offers.

## Resources

HSE website - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/>

HSE Management Standards - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>

Go Home Healthy - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/gohomehealthy/index.htm>

HSL website - <http://www.hsl.gov.uk/>

<sup>1</sup> All statistics taken from Work-related Stress, Depression or Anxiety Statistics in Great Britain 2017 published by the Health and Safety Executive in November 2017 and available from [www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/)

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