



Stress at Work

For most people, work is a significant and meaningful feature of life. While work can provide us with structure, purpose, satisfaction, self-esteem and spending power, the workplace can also be a setting of stress and worry

What is work-related stress?

Everyone is under some pressure here. Some external pressures can be a positive factor, helping us to be more productive - you actually need a small amount of stress to function well, especially at work. This is the difference between pressure and stress:

- Pressure is the stimulation and challenge you need to achieve job satisfaction and self-esteem.
- Stress is a reaction to continued excessive pressure or responsibility when you feel inadequate or unable to cope.

Some people actually thrive under short-term added pressure, and our bodies are designed to meet these short-term demands. Hormones, including adrenaline, are released to prepare us for a "fight or flight" response to demanding situations. However, excessive and prolonged stress can take its toll, producing a range of physical and emotional health problems, which have come to be grouped as "work-related stress".

There is no single cause of work-related stress. While stress can be triggered by sudden, unexpected pressures, it is often the result of a combination of stressful factors that accumulate over time. Some people can become so used to the symptoms of excessive stress that it goes unnoticed to their detriment. Most work-related stress is related to management of work, relationships at work, organisational set-up and whether you feel you have power and control in your work.

The experience of stress is different for every person. Some people are affected more than others, so what is stressful for one person may not be stressful for another. It can depend on your personality type and on how you have learned to respond to pressure.

Am I stressed?

Today, these threats could include financial pressures, fear of redundancy, overwork, deadline pressures or an important business presentation. The constant, ongoing pressure resulting from these stressors is different to the more immediate dangers that our stress response was designed to cope with. It's at the point at which our bodies cannot recover from these pressures that we can begin to experience stress.

Stress is an individual response. What causes stress in one person may not cause stress in another. But typically it is the point at which the pressure of dealing with all the issues confronting us gets beyond our ability to cope that stress will be a likely outcome.

Take the Q-active stress test (Fact sheet 2) to see how at risk you are.

Symptoms of stress

Stress can manifest itself in many ways depending on the person. If you are experiencing some of these then take action now!

Physical	Psychological	Behavioural
Palpitations, chest pains	Mood swings	Susceptibility to accidents
Diarrhoea, constipation, flatulence	Panic attacks	Changes in eating habits
Indigestion	Morbid thoughts	Increased smoking
Loss of libido	Low self-esteem	Restlessness, hyperactivity, foot tapping
Muscle tension	Irritability	Over-dependence on drugs and/or alcohol
Menstrual problems	Feeling of helplessness	Changes in sleep patterns
Tiredness	Impatience	Out of character behaviour
Breathlessness	Anxiety	Voluntary withdrawal from supportive relationships
Sweating	Crying	Disregard for personal appearance
Tightness in the chest	Cynicism	Loss of confidence
Skin and scalp irritation, eczema and psoriasis	Withdrawal into daydreams	Sullen attitude
Increased susceptibility to allergies	Intrusive thoughts or images	Clenched fists
Frequent colds, flu or other infections	Nightmares	Obsessive mannerisms
Rapid weight gain or loss	Suicidal feelings	Increased absence from work
Backache, neck pain	Paranoid thinking	Aggressiveness
Migraines and tension headaches	Guilt	Poor time management

Taking control

Stress is an inevitable but complex companion to our working lives. Without challenges and pressures, work would lack sparkle, but we all have the capacity to be overwhelmed by work-related stress and to experience its exhausting effects. You can help manage stress by becoming aware of your individual ways of responding to it and through making effective changes to your lifestyle:

Changes at work

- It is important to deal with the problem as soon as possible. One of the most important factors in reducing stress levels is managing time effectively. Prioritise tasks, delegate where necessary and take care not to take on more than you can handle. Completing one task before going on to the next will help you to feel more in control of work, while varying tasks will help to keep you interested.
- Make time to relax at work by stretching and breathing deeply. This will help you to keep focused and prevent tired muscles.
- Take breaks. Being busy means we can often feel guilty taking breaks. Many of us eat lunch at our desks and spend the whole day looking after others. Try to find at least five minutes during your work day to relax and empty your mind.
- Learn some basic relaxation techniques (see Fact sheet 3 or your Q-active instructors and therapists will show you how). Even some deep breathing whilst locked in a toilet cubicle will help!
- It is helpful to identify which situations stress you most. Practise how you could behave differently in tricky situations. Perhaps you need to be more assertive or you need to learn to "take a step back" in tricky situations.
- It can seem hard to confront the causes of workplace stress and to ask for help. But sometimes, support and advice from your line manager or human resources department is necessary to help you deal with difficulties at work, whether it is to clarify your job role and responsibilities, or to deal with workplace bullying.
- If you find talking about your concerns difficult, it may help to make notes to bring along to the work interview with you. Make these clear and specific.
- Remember that it is in everybody's interest that the workplace is as stress-free as possible.

Lifestyle changes

- Are you exercising on at least five days a week for 30 minutes or more? People who don't achieve this are not fit enough to cope with the demands life throws at them physically.
Running around at work is not enough to challenge your heart, lungs and muscles to keep them fit enough to look after you into your old age. It can be very hard to find the time so be clever and find opportunities – use the stairs instead of the lift, walk or cycle to work once or twice a week, take a lunch time walk, take the kids on a bike ride at the weekend or come to a Q-active class before or after work or in your lunch break
- There is increasing evidence that regular physical activity helps to reduce stress levels. It provides valuable "time out" and can trigger brain chemicals that improve mood. A brisk daily walk is ideal, but the main thing is to choose an activity that you enjoy.
- Your diet also affects your mood, ability to sleep and unwind and productivity at work – if you are relying on caffeine and sugar as 'pick me ups' then you are only harming yourself and should try eating small, regular meals of natural ingredients such as fruits, vegetables, oats and lean protein to provide sustained levels of energy to keep you on an even keel.
- Do you smoke? Although it feels like a cigarette is relaxing you, research shows that smokers tend to be more 'stressed out' than non-smokers so that cigarette is only taking you to a relaxed level that non-smokers enjoy most of the time. Avoid smoking at work and not use smoking to calm you down at work as you will feel worse when the effect runs out (and the smoke ban means it could be a while before you find time for another)
- At the end of the day, reflect on what you've achieved rather than worrying about future work. Don't be too hard on yourself and remember to take each day as it comes.

Seeking further help

- Some people need to seek further help for work related stress, as they may be depressed or have an anxiety disorder that needs treatment. Anyone concerned that they need help should visit their GP for advice.
- There are also courses for stress management and lots of self help resources. Speak to your line manager, Occupational health or Training and development.