

WORK-RELATED STRESS



Promoting · Supporting · Influencing

www.rcm.org.uk/equality



Introduction

The number of employees absent from work due to stress and mental health conditions is rising. The most recent government figures show that the number of days lost to stress, depression and anxiety increased by 24% in the UK between 2009 and 2013.

In this year's Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) Absence Management Survey, 40% of the people who took part in the survey noticed an increase in stress-related absence and mental health problems in the past year. These were given as the most common causes of long-term absence, and workload was quoted as the most common cause of stress. (See note ¹ below.)

The NHS is no different. The 2014 NHS Staff Survey reported that around 38% of staff have felt unwell as a result of workplace stress in the past 12 months. The result was even higher for midwives, with 47% reporting that they have felt unwell as a result of workplace stress in the last 12 months.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimate that 9.9 million days were lost to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2014/15 (see note ² below). Stress is not an illness in itself, but if severe stress continues for a long time it may lead to depression or anxiety, or more severe mental-health problems.

Work-related stress is defined by the HSE (see note ³ below) as:

"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work."

We all sometimes talk about stress, and feeling stressed, usually when we feel we have too much to do, we have too much on our minds, other people are making unreasonable demands on us, or we are dealing with situations that we do not have control over. We can recognise these feelings in maternity units because the NHS is facing more pressure than ever before, and this looks set to continue.

¹ <http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2015/11/26/employers-have-a-duty-to-deal-with-stress-and-mental-health-at-work.aspx>

² <http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2015/11/26/employers-have-a-duty-to-deal-with-stress-and-mental-health-at-work.aspx>

³ Guidance on Prevention and Management of Stress at Work – NHS Staff Council, 2014

Maternity units are overworked and understaffed and many of you will be feeling stressed because of this. In the last few years there has been a reduction in training for midwives and maternity support workers and there has been a significant and continued reduction in band seven posts. This means there are fewer opportunities to progress and there is less leadership on the unit.

Added to this, maternity units are getting busier and dealing with more complex cases so you have to work harder and deal with some difficult issues. Some of you will be relocated to other areas to cover services which may be unfamiliar to you, and your unit may rely on agency staff so you may be working with people who you don't know.

The increased pressure and demands is having a significant effect on well-being and stress levels. There is a high number of reports of bullying, harassment, abuse and discrimination, indicating that you are feeling stressed and you are not feeling valued. But, in tough times people can be more reluctant to raise workplace issues or reveal mental health issues. According to the 2014 NHS Staff Survey, 69% of midwives said they had come into work in the last three months despite not feeling well enough to carry out their duties.

Improving staff involvement can not only improve an NHS trust's financial performance through savings on costs relating to settling disputes and sickness absence rates, it also has a direct effect on patient outcomes. Supportive and open workplaces benefit both NHS staff and NHS users. Nobody should be harmed when caring for others.

People perform better when they are confident and motivated and good mental health supports this. By positively supporting employees' mental well-being, employers can make sure that staff perform to the best of their ability. The strong relationship between levels of staff well-being and motivation and clinical outcomes is well known. Research shows that when staff well-being is not supported, employee involvement reduces, motivation and performance levels drop and the number of staff leaving their jobs rises. According to Mind (see note 4 below), 60% of employees say they'd feel more motivated and more likely to recommend their organisation as a place to work if their employer took action to support mental well-being. As we know, investment in staff is an investment in care for women and their families.

This guidance gives:

- information for you about stress and ways to help you identify your own triggers for stress and how you can handle them better
- information for heads of midwifery about how you can investigate whether there is a problem with stress in your unit and the management behaviours that can have positive and negative effects on health and well-being in the workplace
- information for RCM workplace representatives about ways to work in partnership to improve an organisation's health, safety and well-being policy.

This guide has been prepared for members of the Royal College of Midwives (RCM). For information on becoming a member, please visit www.rcm.org.uk.

This publication is part of the RCM's Equality publications series. If you have any questions about this publication or any other publications in the equality series, please contact Amy Leversidge, by emailing amy.leversidge@rcm.org.uk

We would like to thank TUC Education for their help with this publication.



4 'How To Promote Wellbeing and Tackle the Causes of Work-Related Mental Health Problems' – Mind

Information for you

The first part of this guide helps you recognise the signs of stress, what can trigger stress, and some techniques you can develop to help deal with stress. Every person is different and we will have different triggers for stress.

You may recognise none, some, or all of the signs and triggers of stress listed below. The same goes for the techniques to help with stress – you probably won't find all of them helpful, but hopefully you will find one that works for you.

While you should try to recognise your triggers for stress and develop techniques to deal with stress, it is important to understand that your organisation has a responsibility too. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, all organisations must reduce the possibility or likelihood of events that may, over a period of time or as a one-off, cause the body to be damaged.

Like with all health and safety legislation, if the risk cannot be removed, it must be reduced or some protection must be placed between the user and the risk. It is not appropriate for your organisation to reduce stress in the workplace by just asking you to 'develop your resilience'. We will discuss how organisations, managers and RCM workplace representatives can work together to improve health, safety and well-being policy in the next two sections in this guide.



What are the signs of stress?

Everyone experiences stress differently. Two people can have very different responses to the same situation. Stress is all about how a person receives and interprets the factors that could cause stress.

The TUC Education guide 'Mental Health and the Workplace' outlines the most typical signs and symptoms of stress as follows.

Behavioural	Mental	Physical	Emotional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty sleeping • Changed eating habits • Smoking or drinking more • Avoiding friends or family • Sexual problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being less decisive • Difficulty concentrating • Memory loss • Feelings of inadequacy • Low self-esteem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiredness • Indigestion or nausea • Headaches • Palpitations • Aching muscles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability • Anxiety • Feeling numb • Hypersensitivity • Feeling drained and listless

What causes stress at work?

According to the TUC Education guide 'Mental Health and the Workplace':

- there are approximately 240,000 new cases of work-related stress every year
- in 2013/14 there were 11.3 million working days lost to stress, depression and anxiety
- one of the most affected groups of workers are health professionals.

The HSE has developed six standards, known as the 'management standards', to help organisations manage stress. If not properly managed, these factors can lead to ill-health, absence and reduced productivity.

The six standards are set out below.

- 1. 'Demand'**
 Employee workload, work pattern and work environment. This can include having too much to do, deadline pressures, work that is too difficult, shift work, physically demanding work, poor working conditions such as high noise levels or equipment that doesn't work, being trapped in a cycle of working harder and harder leading to exhaustion, poor sleep and lack of concentration, and conflicting demands between home and work.
- 2. 'Control'**
 How employees are able to do their work. This can include a lack of control over the type of work you do and the way you do it, unclear expectations and conflicting messages.
- 3. 'Support'**
 Employees receive adequate information and support. This can include a feeling that asking for help is a sign of weakness, a lack of managerial support, a lack of support from colleagues and poor communication at work.
- 4. 'Relationships'**
 Being treated with dignity and respect. This can include bullying and undermining behaviours, not feeling valued by colleagues, managers and the organisation, verbal or physical abuse from service users and working alone.
- 5. 'Role'**
 Employees understand their role and responsibilities. This can include feeling that you are trapped in the wrong job that has limited opportunities to progress or one that has more responsibility than you feel comfortable with but you cannot move roles because of financial commitments.
- 6. 'Change'**
 The stability of the work environment regarding change. This can include uncertainty over the future (for example, redundancy, downbanding, restructuring of services, fixed-term contracts), and poor communication about changes at work.

You may recognise some of the above standards in your working life that can result in you feeling stressed. You may also recognise a combination of these factors, which can also result in you feeling stressed in the workplace. For example, a midwife with a high work demand, with little information or support following recent organisational change, could be experiencing high levels of stress due to the complexity of factors their work involves.

How can I deal with stress at work?

Taking action, however small, can improve your life at work or prevent stress developing in the first place. You may be free to do some things but some of the actions may need you to talk to your manager. You may want to talk to your RCM workplace representative before making a formal change.

The NHS Choices website gives helpful tips about how to deal with stress

1. Acknowledge your problems and try to be positive

Sometimes our lives become a bit chaotic when we are masking underlying problems that we are not facing or dealing with. If this is you, it may be a good idea to talk things through with a professional. Once you start to tackle your problems you will be able to relax more. Also, try to not to dwell on things that have gone wrong. Instead, try to focus on things that are good and that you have done well.

2. Accept what you can't change and take control

According to Professor Cary Cooper (Lancaster University), the feeling of loss of control is one of the main causes of stress and lack of well-being. Try to accept the things that you can't change but if you do have the opportunity to have some input, particularly in decisions that may affect you, take advantage of it. An excellent way to do this is to get involved more with your RCM branch. Going to branch meetings will keep you informed and updated and will allow you to tell someone about your concerns and opinions.

3. Connect with people

Talk to someone you trust. A good support network can ease your work troubles and help you see things in a different way. You can talk to your RCM workplace representatives too, and an RCM branch meeting may be a good way for you and your colleagues to all support each other.

4. Work smarter, not harder

Ask for help if you need it. Say no if you can't take on extra demands and try to be realistic about what you can achieve. Write a list of what needs to be done – it only takes a few minutes and can help you to prioritise, focus and get things in perspective. Most importantly, accept that you will always have things to do so you will never get to the end of your list. Just prioritise and do the most important things first.

5. Have some 'me' time

Workers in the UK work the longest hours in Europe, which means that we often don't have time for hobbies and activities that we enjoy. Professor Cary Cooper (Lancaster University) recommends setting aside a couple of nights a week to make sure we do things we enjoy and that will help us relax. When you are at work, try to take the breaks and holidays you're entitled to and try not to work beyond your hours as regularly working longer than your hours does not generally lead to better results.

6. Get some sleep

Sleep is very important for health, and sleep problems are a common sign of stress. Lying awake worrying about things can make them seem much worse. There are various techniques you can try to help you sleep, including relaxing before you go to bed, sticking to a bedtime routine and keeping a sleep diary. There is some helpful information on NHS Choices website (the link is in the 'Further information' section at the end).

7. Challenge yourself

Setting yourself goals and challenges can be good for your confidence and can help you deal with stress. Ongoing learning can help you to become stronger emotionally. Your RCM union learning representative will be able to organise learning events in your workplace which should help you set goals for yourself.

8. Be active

Exercise won't make your stress disappear but may help clear your head. If you can, try to go for a walk or get some fresh air during the day. Exercise and daylight are good for your mental health as well as your physical health. If you are working nights try to do this in the morning when you finish your shift so you don't take worries about your shift home with you.

9. Avoid unhealthy habits

Don't rely on caffeine, cigarettes and alcohol to cope. Make sure you drink enough water and that you eat healthily during the day to maintain your energy levels.

10. Speak to your RCM workplace representative

You may want to consider having a discussion with your line manager about your workload and your physical environment, and you may want to ask about flexible working. You may find it easier to talk to your RCM workplace representative about how you can approach this with your manager. Remember they are there to help you!

You can read more here:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/reduce-stress.aspx>

You can find links to further information in the 'Further information' section at the end of this document.

Information for heads of midwifery

Work-related stress is becoming more common, so it is essential that heads of midwifery and NHS organisations work in partnership with RCM workplace representatives and staff to reduce the causes and risks associated with workplace stress.

As discussed in the introduction, the 2014 NHS Staff Survey reported that around 38% of staff have felt unwell as a result of workplace stress in the past 12 months. The result was even higher for midwives, with 47% reporting that they have felt unwell as a result of workplace stress in the last 12 months.

It is not just an issue of preventing sickness absence or keeping staff. Presenteeism is also a big issue. Presenteeism is when workers come to work even though they are not well enough. Professor Cary Cooper has found (see note ⁵ below) that the cost of presenteeism is twice that of absenteeism. Professor Cooper has also identified (see note ⁶ below) the issue of 'leavism' in the public sector. This is the practice of the public sector relying on so much goodwill that employees are taking holiday instead of sick leave and using annual leave to do work at home that they can't finish during work hours.

All this damages productivity and can affect outcomes for women. The research paper 'Midwives Overboard!' (see note ⁷ below) states:

"Midwifery care aims to support optimal outcomes in childbearing. If, when caring for women, the potential consequences for midwives are ignored, we risk their capability to provide midwifery care to the high levels they aspire to. This threatens the very eminence of midwifery as a profession."

It also says:

"Ethically, midwives are entitled to a psychologically safe professional journey... when maternity services invest in the mental health and wellbeing of midwives they may reap the rewards of improved patient care, improved staff experience and safer maternity services."

⁵ <http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2015/11/04/annual-cost-of-presenteeism-is-twice-that-of-absenteeism-says-prof-cooper.aspx>

⁶ <http://www.cipd.co.uk/pm/peoplemanagement/b/weblog/archive/2015/11/25/leavism-the-new-public-sector-epidemic.aspx>

⁷ Pezaro, S et al (2015) 'Midwives Overboard! Inside their hearts are breaking, their makeup may be flaking but their smile still stays on' in Women and Birth.



It is important that heads of midwifery see that providing excellent care for women depends on creating a mentally healthy workplace. And strong leadership and a culture that values staff is vital to both these goals. Employers – especially line managers – need to take the first step by sending a signal that they value staff's mental health and that people can feel confident that telling their employer or line manager about a problem will lead to support, not discrimination.

Assessing the rates of stress in your unit

It could be that your whole unit is feeling stressed and under pressure. The signs of stress in a group are:

- poor performance
- more workplace disputes within the unit
- more grievances and complaints
- more sickness absence
- higher staff turnover.

The HSE has developed a stress indicator that organisations can use to measure how well they are meeting the stress standards (the stress standards were outlined in the section 'Information for you'). You should collect information about your unit to assess whether there is a problem with workplace stress in your unit. This is something that you should work on with the RCM workplace representatives.

Here are some sources of information that you could collect to investigate whether your unit has a problem with workplace stress.

- Information about sickness absence – details of sickness absence, including reasons for sickness absence and trends over time.
- Occupational health referrals – you may not be aware of when your staff are referred to occupational health, but you may be able to find out how the maternity department compares with other departments and whether there have been any changes over time.
- Critical incidents or errors – this could give you information about workload and demand.
- Workforce information – such as vacancy rates, statistics on staff turnover, and disciplinary action and grievances.
- Incidences of violence at work – information about verbal or physical abuse from service users.
- NHS Staff Survey data – there is a lot of information available on the staff survey, particularly about stress, violence, presenteeism, management support, appraisal and so on.

You may find you have an issue with stress in your workplace. You should work with the RCM workplace representatives to make sure your organisation has an effective stress management policy.

Management behaviours

As well as an organisational policy on effective stress management, you should also consider the management style and behaviour of staff who are responsible for managing others. Managers can have both a positive and negative effect on health and well-being.

Below is a table that gives some of the recommended behaviour for managers as published by the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group of the NHS Staff Council in 'Guidance on Prevention and Management of Stress at Work'. You can read a full list of the recommended behaviours and download the guidance here: www.nhsemployers.org/HSWPG.

The first table outlines some examples of management behaviour that can have a positive effect on employees' views on support, and the second table outlines some examples of management behaviour that can deal with workplace practices that have a negative effect on health and well-being.

Examples of management behaviour that can have a positive effect on health and well-being	
Supportive management behaviour	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Managers should provide feedback and communicate openly on actions and decisions taken. 2. Managers should use the knowledge, skills and expertise of their staff. 3. Managers should be given the training and time to carry out performance reviews that are high quality, effective and supportive of staff-development opportunities.
Positive relationships between staff	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Make sure all staff are aware of the true value of effective teamwork and the effect that organisational change can have on staff performance. 2. Provide appropriate and tailored team training and teamworking events that include increasing interaction between and within specialities. 3. Wherever possible, make sure policies and procedures are applied consistently.
Positive contribution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use performance appraisal and revalidation sessions to acknowledge positive contributions. 2. Provide more positive feedback to staff. 3. Offer managers training that makes them aware of the critical role they have to play in health and well-being.
Involving staff and keeping them informed	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keep staff up to date and in the picture. 2. Hold regular feedback sessions with staff groups so views can be shared and questions asked and answered. 3. When collecting information from staff (for example through surveys), make sure staff understand how this has benefited them.

Examples of management behaviour to deal with negative workplace practices	
Work overload	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a culture where staff feel confident about raising concerns about their workload. 2. Encourage teamwork. 3. Support staff in prioritising work.
Poor equipment and resources	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve access to resources. 2. Make sure staff are kept up to date with equipment faults, maintenance and repairs. 3. Make sure knowledge and learning is managed across the organisation.
Difficult home-life balance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Monitor staff working hours. 2. Make sure the effect of extra duties or tasks is considered appropriately. 3. Consider the value and benefit of flexible working.
Work-related aggression and violence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase awareness of the organisational response to tackling work-related violence. 2. Assess staff needs for training in managing workplace aggression and violence, and make sure training is available to all staff and is well attended. 3. We have worked with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to produce a toolkit to deal with the challenge of undermining behaviours and bullying behaviour in maternity and gynaecology services. There is a link to the toolkit in the 'Further information' section.

Also, we have many resources for developing the skills of leaders, including their competence and confidence. There is a link to the resources at the end of the document.

You can find links to further information in the 'Further information' section at the end of this document.



Information for RCM workplace representatives

RCM health and safety representatives should work with heads of midwifery and your employer to support improvements in staff health, safety and well-being.

As an RCM workplace representative you are in a unique position to be able to offer valuable insight into working in maternity and the types of improvements that are needed for midwives and maternity support workers.

Negotiating a stress management policy

Your organisation should know that they need a stress management policy. Legally, employers have a duty to carry out a risk assessment of stress in the workplace.

But this is more than just a legal duty. Investment in staff is an investment in care. Looking after staff health and well-being improves clinical outcomes, performance and productivity.

RCM health and safety representatives should support organisations in delivering best practice when managing stress, and carry out workplace assessments and audits to identify possible risks of stress. You should work with the other workplace representatives and managers in designing and introducing an effective stress management policy.

The policy should contain the following details.

- A statement of commitment to tackle the causes of stress and the importance of reducing stress.
- The context and definitions of stress – reflecting the most up-to-date information
- How to identify stress – for example, the HSE stress indicator (as described in the section 'Information for heads of midwifery').
- Identifying priorities to tackle the greatest risk areas.
- How staff will be involved in the process.
- The resources that will be available.
- The responsibilities of the different people involved.
- How the policy interacts with other policies (for example, bullying and harassment policies or flexible working policies).

You can find more detailed information about the types of things that an effective policy should include in 'Guidance on Prevention and Management of Stress at Work' produced by the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group of the NHS Staff Council. You can download the guidance here: www.nhsemployers.org/HSWPG

Also, as a workplace representative you should familiarise yourself with our guidance about standing up for high standards. This gives you information about how you can support members raising concerns at work. There is a link to the guidance in the 'Further information' section at the end of this document.

Representing a member

As an RCM workplace representative, a member may approach you to help with a stressful work situation. They may need you to help them approach their manager about getting some adjustments or working flexibly.

If you do represent a member who is suffering with stress, the priority is to develop positive steps to deal with the main issues they're struggling with. Clear policies on workplace adjustments are crucial to support staff to cope and recover and reduce the length of sickness absence related to their mental health.

These steps are generally quite small and simple adjustments to someone's job role or extra support from their manager. Often the change that is needed is one of attitude, expectations or communications, rather than a major change or significant cost. However, what is effective varies from person to person, so it is vital you have a meaningful conversation with the person about their needs and really listen to them so you know what to ask for from your organisation.

While voluntary and agreed adjustments are supportive, it's important that people are not treated differently or asked to do things that others are not required to (for example, keeping extra-detailed timesheets). Being made to account for all of their time can damage people's self-esteem and can be counterproductive. It may also be discriminatory.

In some cases people may be unable to identify appropriate adjustments themselves so they may need to try different options. You may want to encourage them to read the 'Information for you' section in this guide so they can think about their stress triggers and ways to manage their stress. The best approach here is to decide on positive action and regularly monitor and review this to check it's working, tweaking the approach if necessary.

If you have negotiated a stress management policy with your organisation, here is where your expertise will be invaluable.

You can find links to further information in the 'Further information' section at the end of this document.

Further information

There are a lot of further resources and information available about stress at work. Below is a list of some of the most useful resources.

The RCOG/RCM Joint Statement on Undermining and Bullying in the Workplace (2015) (www.rcm.org.uk)

Standing Up for High Standards (2015) (www.rcm.org.uk)

Leadership Resources (2015) (www.rcm.org.uk)

Good Practice in Workplace Mental Health (2015) TUC (www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/GoodPracticeMentalHealth_0.pdf)

NHS Choices 'Ten Stress Busters' (2015) (www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/reduce-stress.aspx)

NHS Choices 'Better Sleep' (2015) (www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/sleep/Pages/sleep-home.aspx)

Guidance on Prevention and Management of Stress at Work (2014) Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group – The NHS Staff Council (www.nhsemployers.org/HSWPG)

Workplace Health and Safety Standards (2013) Health, Safety and Wellbeing Partnership Group – The NHS Staff Council (www.nhsemployers.org/HSWPG)

NHS Health and Well-Being Review (2009) Independent Review led by Dr Steven Boorman (webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130107105354/http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_108907.pdf)

Work Related Stress – Together We Can Tackle It (2015) Health and Safety Executive (www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm)

Mental Wellbeing at Work (2009) NICE (www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph22/chapter/Introduction)

Stress and Mental Health at Work: A Guide for Trade Union Reps (2014) Labour Research Department (www.lrd.org.uk/)

Stress at Work (2014) ACAS (www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/q/c/Stress-at-work-advisory-booklet.pdf)

Stress in the Workplace (2015) Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/stress-mental-health-at-work.aspx)

How to Manage Stress (2012) Mind (www.mind.org.uk/work)

How to Cope with Sleep Problems (2014) Mind (www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/sleep-problems)

