



# Making the stress Management Standards work

How to apply the Standards in your workplace



International Stress  
Management  
Association<sup>UK</sup>

acas



# What is stress and why do we need to tackle it?

Many people still get confused about pressure and stress, yet there's a great deal of difference between the two. We all experience pressure on a daily basis, and need it to motivate us and enable us to perform at our best – ask any athlete or actor. However, if we experience too much pressure without the opportunity to recover, we feel unable to cope and stress is the result.

HSE defines stress as, 'An adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them.' Given an excess of pressure, stress can therefore happen to anyone, and should not be seen as a weakness. Instead, an individual needs to be helped to deal with these pressures.

As reactions to stress will vary from one individual to another – and may also vary at different times of our lives – it's important that we learn to recognise stress and understand what to do to reduce it. Tackling personal stress is an individual's responsibility; however, employers have a responsibility to help reduce any stress which may arise in their employees as a result of their work.

Under UK law, employers have a legal duty of care to ensure their employees are not harmed by work-related stress. They also have a duty to assess the risk arising from hazards at work, including stress. To help organisations meet these duties, in November 2004 HSE introduced Management Standards and guidelines on work-related stress. This leaflet, produced by ISMA<sup>UK</sup> for HSE, outlines the Management Standards approach and, based on information from discussions with managers and the analysis of effective case studies in 2004, gives practical advice on how best to implement the standards.



# What is the Management Standards approach?

The Management Standards for work-related stress use a risk assessment approach based on the familiar HSE 'Five steps to risk assessment'. The guidance is based on a collective, proactive approach which research has shown has the most positive effect on worker health.

Note: Jobs are not expected to be risk assessed, because no job should itself be inherently stressful. It is the interaction of a person with their job, and their individual perceptions of this, that can result in stress. A job may be stressful for one person but not another, so the key is matching the individual to the job.

## STEP 1 IDENTIFY THE HAZARDS

According to HSE-commissioned research, major causes of work-related stress can be categorised into six key areas or 'risk factors' – the rationale being that if these are not managed effectively in an organisation then staff are at risk of suffering from work-related stress. In Step 1 it is therefore important that all employees are familiar with and understand these risk factors.

### Major 'risk factors'

- Demands
- Control
- Support
- Relationships
- Role
- Change

## STEP 2 DECIDE WHO MAY BE HARMED AND HOW

Identify which factors are a problem in your organisation or department. To do this you could:

- use existing data such as sickness absence records and staff attitude surveys;
- complete a formal stress audit questionnaire;
- elicit views of staff. This may involve talking to staff at team meetings or running focus groups.

Determining the best approach will depend on the size and type of organisation, and may even be a combination of all three methods.

There are many commercial stress audit tools, but HSE has developed a simple tool which links into the Management Standards attainment targets.



### STEP 3 EVALUATE THE RISK

Use the information assimilated in Step 2 to determine how the organisation is performing in relation to each of the six risk factors. Identify stress hot spots and priority areas. Communicate the results of Step 2 to all staff, and involve staff at all levels in finding solutions through team meetings and/or focus groups. Ask if you are doing enough, what control measures are already in place and what else needs to be done.

To help with this process, HSE has produced Management Standards for each risk factor, including targets for organisations to aim towards.

#### The Management Standards

There is one standard for each risk factor. Demands, for example, covers issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment, and includes guidance on what should be happening in your organisation if the standard is being achieved. As well as helping managers understand the causes of stress at work, the standards process provides a means of assessing how the workplace is performing and gives ideas on how to make improvements. The target is for all organisations to match the performance of the top 20% of employers who are successfully minimising work-related stress.

### STEP 4 RECORD THE FINDINGS

Work with staff to decide on improvement targets and actions. Actions will depend on the information gained in Steps 2 and 3 and will vary between different organisations. Develop action plans in consultation with staff and their representatives.

#### Actions that have so far been popular

- Change in some management procedures.
- Increased communication channels.
- Management development training, eg listening skills, effective feedback, appraisals, delegation.
- Personal stress management training for all staff.
- Providing counselling/Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) for all staff.

### STEP 5 MONITOR AND REVIEW

Look for improvements.  
Communicate successes throughout the business.  
Listen to staff and tackle strategies that are not working.  
Repeat the audit.

### Individual differences

Although the risk assessment process takes a collective, proactive approach, individual differences and problems will exist. Managers therefore need to develop a rapport with staff through regular meetings and informal chats. They need to be familiar with where to go for help and what to do to help an individual if the need arises. Staff also need to be encouraged to raise concerns and need to be informed of where they can go for help.

# What is and isn't working?

To assist you with the successful implementation of the Management Standards approach, the following are some of the typical experiences of the individuals and organisations that are adopting and implementing it.



## 1 Programmes are less successful if there is no senior management commitment

The senior management team should at least be briefed and if possible trained to understand the rationale and business case for stress management, their legal duties etc.

Successful programmes involve commitment from senior management – eg a director being project sponsor, visible support from the boardroom, attendance at stress management training etc - and the introduction of communications about stress-related initiatives.



## 2 Preparation is paramount

Most successful projects first involve the formation of a project group or working party. This should include representatives from all aspects of the organisation, and where possible from Health and Safety, Human Resources, Occupational Health, the trade unions, Communications and general management.

The project group can then effectively decide how best to carry out stress management within a framework of what is already in place and the constraints of their organisation and budget.



## 3 Programmes are less successful if the project group making the decisions do not understand stress and the issues involved

Stress management is most effective if the project group is first trained to understand the issues involved. They are then likely to make the most appropriate decisions.

It is also helpful if the staff most likely to be supporting general managers through the process are also trained first, eg Health and Safety, Human Resources, Occupational Health, the trade unions etc.



-  **4 Programmes are not very successful if a survey is carried out without first educating managers about stress and the reason for tackling it**

Most managers do not understand the concept of stress, do not know their legal duties and do not understand the business case for tackling stress. If managers are educated in all these issues, they understand the need to be supportive of any stress initiative. They also understand what they must do when survey results are published. Failure to educate managers means the survey sits on a shelf and no actions are taken. The survey is then a waste of money. An additional benefit is that managers will also learn how they can add to or reduce stress.
-  **5 Programmes are not very successful if a survey is carried out without prior communication with staff**

If staff do not understand why a survey is being done or are sceptical about its motives, they do not return questionnaires. A good return is essential if a representative sample of the organisation is to be obtained. Initial communication is therefore paramount.
-  **6 Programmes work well when different methods of assessment are used**

Quantitative stress surveys produce a lot of useful data, but talking to individuals and running focus groups will give additional and beneficial insights. Existing data is also useful, eg absence data, staff satisfaction surveys, and exit and return-to-work interviews.
-  **7 Programmes benefit from initial benchmarking**

Programmes where existing data is used as a baseline enable project leaders to benchmark progress and effectiveness. The data can then be used to strengthen arguments for intervention and future initiatives.
-  **8 Programmes are less successful if the results of surveys are not communicated effectively to staff**

Once the results have been produced, communication needs to be quick and clear. If results are left on a shelf then momentum is lost and inertia begins. Staff will also be sceptical about further initiatives and less likely to participate.



-  **9 Programmes are less successful if solutions to problems are determined by senior management with no input from staff**
- Solutions to problems need to be discussed by all departments and levels of the organisation. This is best done by holding small focus groups. Often senior managers may think they have the correct solution only to find after consultation that they were wrong.
- In one case study, focus groups were carried out to determine specific departmental action plans, and identify interventions to address issues specific to that group. These were then collected and reviewed by a steering group to enable a final action plan to be developed and communicated to all employees.
-  **10 Programmes are most successful if decisions and policies are first tested on pilot groups**
- This avoids the common problem that decisions made in theory can be difficult to put into practice. Also, different departments may have different problems and these need to be taken into account.
-  **11 Programmes are most successful if support is in place before introducing the stress management approach**
- Once stress management is introduced, staff need to know where to go for support and advice. This may be line managers wishing to know where they can get further help or information to deal with staff; or staff needing to know where to go if they have a problem. These issues need to be identified at the beginning and incorporated into a stress policy or general well-being policy.
-  **12 Programmes are not successful if attention is only paid to educating the individual**
- Personal stress management training is extremely useful and successful as part of an overall strategy – as is offering counselling support. However if organisations only focus on tackling the problem at an individual level it is likely that the actual causes of stress are not identified and managed effectively. It's therefore vital that steps are taken to effectively tackle these problems at their roots.

## Summary

Programmes are particularly successful where attention is given to small changes. Managers need to understand that good stress management is not about a survey but is an ongoing process of continuous improvement. They do not have to devote an unrealistic amount of time to the project and small changes really do make a big difference.



## The International Stress Management Association<sup>UK</sup>

The International Stress Management Association<sup>UK</sup> (ISMA<sup>UK</sup>) is a registered charity (no. 1088103, and company limited by guarantee no. 4079657), whose aim is to promote sound knowledge and best practice in stress management; and set professional standards for the benefit of individuals and organisations using the services of its members. These vary considerably in background, from psychologists, physiologists, doctors and HR professionals, to complementary therapists – all of whom share a common interest in stress.

As many ISMA<sup>UK</sup> members are stress management practitioners, the charity operates a referral register which organisations or individuals can access by calling 07000 780 430 or emailing [stress@isma.org.uk](mailto:stress@isma.org.uk). All ISMA<sup>UK</sup> members on the register are full members – meaning they are of high calibre and will provide a professional service.

More information on ISMA<sup>UK</sup>, the services provided by members, and general advice on stress management, can be found at [www.isma.org.uk](http://www.isma.org.uk).

## HSE

On 3 November 2004, HSE launched Management Standards and tools to help employers and employees work together to prevent excessive work-related stress. The material is available at [www.hse.gov.uk/stress](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress) and will help organisations meet their existing duty of care and their duty to assess the risk of work-related stress. The standards define the characteristics, or culture, of an organisation where stress is being managed effectively. The toolkit consists of a survey and continuous improvement model which enables organisations to measure their progress and effectiveness of interventions.

Guidance can be downloaded from the HSE website which provides clear advice on:

- developing a stress policy;
- securing management commitment;
- using the HSE stress survey;
- using the HSE analysis tool;
- developing a stress policy;
- setting up and running focus groups;
- targets to be achieved;
- action plan template.

## Acas

Acas aims to improve organisations and working life through better employment relations. It works with employers and employees to solve problems in the workplace and improve business performance. It also provides up-to-date information, independent advice, and high quality training. Further information can be found at [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk).

